

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY BOARD
Havering Town Hall, Main Road, Romford
18 October 2021 (7.30 - 9.06 pm)**

Present:

COUNCILLORS

Conservative Group	Ray Best, Sally Miller, Nisha Patel, Christine Smith, Maggie Themistocli and Michael White (Vice-Chair)
Residents' Group	Ray Morgon and Barry Mugglestone
Upminster & Cranham Residents' Group'	Linda Hawthorn and Christopher Wilkins
Independent Residents' Group	Graham Williamson
Labour Group	Keith Darvill
North Havering Residents' Group	Darren Wise (Chairman)

Councillor Joshua Chapman was also present via videoconference.

Officers present:

Patrick Odling-Smee, Director of Housing Services
Darren Alexander, Assistant Director of Housing Demand
Kwabena Obiri, Housing Choice & Applications Manager
Sandy Hamberger, Assistant Director, Policy, Performance & Community
Anthony Clements, Principal Democratic Services Officer

All decisions were taken with no votes against.

The Chairman reminded Members of the action to be taken in an emergency.

21 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Councillors Philippa Crowder, Judith Holt and Natasha Summers.

22 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

There were no disclosures of interest.

23 PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY: HOUSING ALLOCATION SCHEME (2021)

Officers advised that the current scheme framework comprised taking the housing register application and then asking for supporting information. Clients were awarded one of five bands of priority and could, in some cases, wait up to 7 years before being housed permanently. The current bands ranged from emergency priority to the lowest band of reduced priority.

The proposed new scheme would require a six-year continuous residency in Havering other than for exceptions such as members of the armed forces. The financial cap had been increased to £50k per client with £30k of savings.

The proposed new bands with examples of who would be eligible were as follows:

Band 1 – Those at risk of harm, moving as part of a decant or with severe medical issues.

Band 2a – Armed forces personnel, care leavers, disabled households

Band 2b – Foster carers, downsizers

Band 2C – Volunteers, carers

Band 3 – Homeless households, clients with moderate medical needs, clients affected by overcrowding

An Opportunities Register would also be created for unsuccessful applicants to the housing register in order to promote a wide range of alternative housing options including shared ownership, private sale and intermediate rent.

It was confirmed that the new scheme met the residency requirements of recent case law. The new application process would be on-line and be able to provide applicants with an indicative banding. The impact of the new bands had been assessed with for example care leavers likely to experience slightly longer waiting times. Clients awaiting the release of adapted properties would not be greatly impacted by the new scheme.

There would be a low impact on volunteers seeking housing although carers could see some extension in waiting times. It was hoped the new scheme would go live on 28 January 2022.

Councillor Chapman added that the new scheme represented an opportunity to build on the fairness of allocations. The impact of the pandemic on housing was now being seen but priority for housing would continue to be given to armed forces personnel, care leavers (reflecting the Council's corporate parenting role) and disabled people. Housing allocation would take place in an open and transparent way.

Officers emphasised that they had sought to include appropriate exemptions to the residency requirement and to allow applicants with levels of finances to still access the register. The income cap of £50k related to the gross

income of the household seeking accommodation. A residency requirement of 10 years was proposed in the consultation but responses indicated that this would exclude too many people. Hence the proposal was to continue with the existing 6 years residency requirement.

A Member expressed disappointment that the details of the scheme had only come to the Board shortly before the Cabinet meeting. Different views were expressed about what should be the desired length of residency. The establishment of the Housing Opportunities Register was seen as a positive development.

Officers added that the policy sought to manage applicants' expectations and sought to meet the needs of people on the waiting list. A balanced approach such as this would mean that, over time, there was likely to be sufficient supply available to meet the needs of people on the register. Whilst the allocation scheme would not solve the issue of supply of social housing, the regeneration programme would address this. Members asked for more details of how this would work.

Members also raised concerns over the lack of priority given to single parents in the policy and also felt there should be more detail given of the rationale behind the proposed changes. Officers responded that changes to the policy had been made for a variety of reasons including legal and technical reasons. Other changes were made to deal with practicalities and were not a data driven response.

The new bandings had been carefully considered and it was hoped that under-occupiers could release housing to accommodate over-crowded households. Volunteers would continue to get priority access to housing and this had been a legal requirement since 2012. The income cap of £50k applied to a family and so would cover people on lower incomes. Officers added that Council policy was to have an income test for social housing and the current income threshold excluded many people who had chronic housing needs. The introduction of a higher income threshold would address this.

Legal advice was that a residency of 5 years met legal requirements for Travellers. There were currently no housing applications from Travellers on the register.

It was expected that 3.5-4k affordable homes would be built in Havering and more details could be given of housing supply. The savings cap was lower for a couple as they were likely to have a shared bedroom space. The income and savings caps could be reviewed if necessary.

The tenant incentive scheme offered a deposit of up to £33k to people giving up a Havering tenancy in order to buy a property outside the borough. This had not seen a lot of take-up as most applicants wished to remain in the borough. An applicant's previous behaviour was considered when they applied to go on the register. Work would take place with the relevant

Council teams to determine whether for example an applicant had any history of benefit fraud. Evidence would be sought of an applicant owning shares in another property and this would be included in the assessment when applying for the register.

A joint working protocol with adults and children's services had been established from January 2021. This covered homeless applicants and safeguards for e.g. children leaving care. It was planned to expand the housing options for young people in the private sector. Work was also in progress with adult social care on housing options for people with e.g. drug and alcohol issues.

The Board agreed unanimously that the following comments on the report should be passed to the Cabinet Member for consideration:

- The Board accepted the complexity of the decision required around the length of residency in Havering required to access the register.
 - Similarly, the Board also appreciated the complex issues surrounding the level of income cap that was decided upon for potential applicants to the register.
 - It was felt that the report should give more information on levels of housing demand and in particular supply. The Board recommended that a Member Briefing be arranged on housing supply issues.
 - The Board welcomed the Opportunities Register feeling that this was a very positive development. It was suggested that this should be widely promoted as part of the Council's housing service. Other initiatives welcomed by the Board included the downsizing initiative, local lettings plans and the issue of sensitive lettings. The Board recommended that all these should be promoted more widely with both Members and local residents.
 - It was felt that the Allocations Scheme should be integrated into the Council's wider Housing Policy in areas such as new residents coming into the borough.
 - Particular cases of need such as single mothers with young children should be given greater support within the Housing Allocation Scheme.
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Chairman