

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF UNDER ONE ROOF

REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY TASK GROUP

January 2010

CONTENTS

	Pages
Chairman's Foreword	3
Summary	4 - 7
1. Introduction and Terms of Reference	8
2. Method of Review	8 - 9
3. Background	9 - 11
4. Findings	
Communication and Information Sharing	11 - 12
Communication with the public	12 - 14
Fair and Flexible and Local Lettings Policies	14 - 15
Housing Vulnerable Tenants	15 - 17
5. Conclusions	17 - 19
6. Recommendations	19 - 20

Chairman's Foreword and Acknowledgements



Cllr Andy Bowden
Chair of Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure Scrutiny Committee

I am pleased to have the opportunity to introduce this report carried out by the Under One Roof Scrutiny Task Group. As Chairman of the Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure Scrutiny Committee, I have been pleased to lead the Task Group to look at various concerns raised by residents, fellow Councillors and partners of the Borough about the Choice Based Lettings Scheme operated in St Helens, known as Under One Roof.

The Government's approach to housing and homelessness has pushed for change in the quality of housing through the Decent Homes Standard the allocation of housing through the Choice Based Lettings Scheme and massive investment to transform the quality of the housing stock.

The Choice Based Lettings Scheme provides applicants with more choice in bidding for the housing they want and the area they want to live in. However, whilst the scheme is run in partnership with Helena Partnerships, it is ultimately the Council's allocation policy, something not always clearly understood.

This report is the culmination of a four-month enquiry by the Task Group. We have heard from Registered Social Landlords, distributed a questionnaire to all Tenants and Residents Associations and from this feedback held a Focus Group involving residents. This has proved to be invaluable in informing the review and in particular, identifying issues around access and community understanding.

I would like to thank all the Councillors, Registered Social Landlords, Tenants and Residents who participated in this review and special thanks to David Taylor from Helena Partnerships and Stephen Tracey and Samantha Murray for their contribution, also Simon Skidmore from the Community Empowerment Network who was co-opted onto the Task Group. Their input has been highly valued.

It has been a challenging review to work on and I believe we've come up with some challenging recommendations. The recommendations outlined in this report are intended to improve communication and outcomes and support a better understanding of Choice Based Lettings and both Helena's and the Council's role.

But this is not the end of the story; everyone involved has acknowledged the need for this review. How these recommendations are progressed and how our allocations policy is amended and implemented, and how 'Under One Roof' operates is now a matter for the Executive and our partners. I believe this report will greatly assist in that on-going process.

Scrutiny Review of Under One Roof

Summary

What we wanted to do

Local people, Councillors and the Council's partners suggested that the Council's Choice Based Lettings Scheme, Under One Roof was a topic that the Scrutiny Team should look at this year. Feedback from our Ward Committees highlighted that there was a general misunderstanding about the Council's and Helena Partnerships' roles in the scheme and Councillors felt it was important to look how the scheme works, how it impacts on communities and what if anything could be improved.

Who did it

The Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure Scrutiny Committee appointed a task and finish group to look at the topic. The task and finish group consisted of the following people:

Councillors

Andy Bowden (Chairman)
Nancy Ashcroft
Ken Knowles
Steve Topping
Co-optee – Simon Skidmore (Community Empowerment Network)

Officers from the Council and Helena Partnerships who assisted the task group:

Stephen Tracey – Head of Housing and Neighbourhoods
Samantha Murray – Housing Strategy and Policy Development Manager
David Taylor - Lettings and Marketing Manager, Helena Partnerships

Other organisations/witnesses who contributed to the review:

Helena Partnerships
Arena Housing
Housing Options and Advice Service
Liverpool Housing Trust
Occupational Health
Regenda
Riverside Housing
St Helens Tenants' and Residents' Association
Under One Roof
YMCA

How we did it

- We invited Staff from Under One Roof and from the Council's Housing Team to be part of our Task Group and feed into our review.
- We invited the main Registered Social Landlords to our meetings to share their views about how they felt the scheme worked
- We met with the YMCA, the Council's Housing Options and Advice Service and the Occupational Therapist Team to talk about their experiences and what suggestions they had to improve things.
- We attended a meeting of the Community Empowerment Network whereby members of the community discussed their experiences of dealing with Under One Roof and how the scheme impacted on where they lived.
- We sent out questionnaires to all Tenants and Residents Associations in the borough asking for their views.
- We held a focus group meeting whereby randomly selected Tenants and Residents Association members discussed in depth the findings from the questionnaire.
- We received information about good practice elsewhere, legislative requirements, Department of Community and Local Government guidelines and background and performance information of the scheme to date.

What we found out

- The housing stock in St Helens differs from the national average in that there is a predominance of 2/3 bed houses and a shortage of flats and larger properties. This has an impact on the members of Under One Roof who are looking for these property types (i.e. single people and large families).
- All Registered Social Landlords (RSL's) preferred the choice based letting system to the previous points system.
- Members of the public were generally unaware that Helena Partnerships and the Council work in partnership to administer the Under One Roof Scheme.
- The Allocations Policy was approved by the Council and its partners and underpinned the Under One Roof scheme. This was felt to be one of the main sources of frustration to those on the Housing Register.
- The Allocations Policy was reviewed on an annual basis.
- The appeal body for bandings is initially Under One Roof but if these are disputed, the Council has the final say.
- Most of the agencies interviewed were satisfied with the service from Under One Roof.
- Those residents who have successfully been through the allocation process were generally happy with the process.
- Data keeping and information sharing between RSLs could be improved in some cases where applicants may have a history of anti-social behaviour.
- RSLs felt that equal treatment and transparency could be improved.
- The cost of Under One Roof was an issue for some RSLs.
- More use could be made of the existing flexible powers to operate local letting policies.
- Some Tenants' and Residents' Association representatives felt that the scheme was 'faceless' and allocations were made to properties without considering the needs of that community.
- There is a need for more support for vulnerable clients and the use of floating support and other services. This would complement pre-tenancy support services which are available for some vulnerable people as part of the application process.

- More joint pre-tenancy work is required for those who have never held a tenancy before.
- Vulnerable tenants need a lot of support and it would be helpful if more information were shared between agencies in respect of anti-social behaviour/history of offending in pre-tenancy checks.
- There is a lack of available suitable accommodation that is either adapted or capable of being adapted to cater for children with high complex disability needs.
- There are some difficulties within the system for medical bandings – the length of time taken can be excessive for an applicant to be placed in the correct band, particularly for those placed in the A and B medical band. All A and B bands (medical) must be verified by the Community Physician. The Community Physician currently asks for applications in batches, which in turn holds up the process.
- Specialist officers work with the mental health team to discuss what might be the most suitable properties.
- Choice based lettings have helped people to ‘move on’ from supported accommodation, whereas previously they would have been unable to secure a property.
- The length of time between viewing, signing up and the expectation to move was sometimes very tight.
- Tenants are unable to apply for a Community Care Grant until they have taken up a tenancy, however these grants can take up to six weeks to obtain and often tenants move into properties without any means to furnish them etc.
- There are sometimes difficulties around verifying people who have been accepted as homeless. It can be difficult for some people to produce references, as there is often no available independent 3rd party. However, it is recognised that there is a need to ensure that appropriate checks are undertaken.
- Due to the concentration of Town Centre single person accommodation they own, Arena Housing were concerned with the allocation of single young people to their schemes. This was causing problems within communities and was having an impact on residents and the reputation of Arena.
- Anti-social behaviour within communities was a concern for most Tenants and Residents Associations in the borough.

What we recommended

- Quarterly meetings between Registered Social Landlords to improve communications between themselves.
- The development of an Information Sharing Protocol that will improve data collection and retention. There is a need to make sure that all records are kept and shared.
- To review current mechanisms for communicating with tenants to identify potential areas for improvement. The national statutory guidance ‘Fair and Flexible’ identifies that better communication with Tenants’ and Residents’ Associations, service users and other stakeholders can address misconceptions and expel myths whilst helping communities better understand the process of allocations.
- Engaging more with communities when looking at changes to allocations policies/local letting schemes.

- Better use of Local Letting Schemes and the flexibilities set out in the 'Fair and Flexible' Guidance be encouraged and more help and assistance be given to RSL's to promote their use.
- More joint pre-tenancy work and courses be arranged and targeted to help first time tenants and those who are vulnerable.
- To examine options for using the Supporting People Grant be utilised to provide more floating support for vulnerable tenants in communities.
- Listening to local communities better and recognising that they can often provide a valuable source of information about their own areas.
- Department of Work and Pensions' Regulations around the Community Care Grant be investigated to see if this can be released earlier to help new tenants settle into their homes more quickly.
- The current system of the 'batching' medical referrals for verification by the Community Physician be reviewed to speed up the process.
- A more hands on approach between prospective tenants and RSL's be developed.
- The practice, on instruction from the Courts, of deposits being paid by RSL's to allow tenants to move into the private rented sector be discouraged.
- That the possibility of expanding the scope of Under one Roof scheme to include the private rented sector be investigated further

What happens next

Scrutiny will put these findings and recommendations in the form of a report and submit it to the Council's Executive. The Executive will consider the report and will respond to the Scrutiny Committee saying if it either accepts or rejects these. Scrutiny accepts that some of the recommendations are for organisations outside the Council, and whilst it cannot enforce that these are carried out, it can strongly recommend that they are fully considered and acted upon.

Under One Roof Task Group

Report of scrutiny review of Under One Roof

1. Introduction and Terms of Reference

- 1.1 Earlier this year, following several suggestions from St Helens residents we carried out a scrutiny review of the choice based letting scheme Under One Roof. We found that the scheme worked effectively but our findings highlighted a variety of ways in which we could bring about improvements. This was supported by an externally validated audit of Under One Roof which found there to be 'substantial assurance' around the operation of the scheme.
- 1.2 The Under One Roof scheme was originally introduced in February 2006. Scrutiny agreed to look at how it was working and what, if anything, could be done to improve things. We did this by enlisting the help of Housing Officers, Registered Social Landlords and Tenants and Residents. The task group's work began in September 2009.
- 1.3 The Terms of Reference for the review were:
- To gain an understanding of the national and local context of Choice Based Lettings and the legal framework within which it falls.
 - To gain an understanding as to how the Under One Roof scheme is operated in St Helens
 - To establish the original objectives around the implementation of the Scheme at the outset and assess if these objectives are currently being met.
 - To examine general perceptions of fairness, transparency and user satisfaction with the Under One Roof Scheme.
 - To consider the views of key stakeholders within St Helens, in particular Registered Social Landlords, Voluntary Sector, CAB, Housing Options, tenants and residents representatives, users of the scheme and the general public.
 - To assess if the scheme is making best use of adaptations of properties for disabled residents.
 - To assess whether the scheme could be improved and make appropriate recommendations.

2. Method of Review

- 2.1 We looked at written evidence as well as interviewing witnesses and involving local people.
- 2.2 The Head of Housing and Neighbourhoods, the Housing Strategy and Policy and Development Manager the Lettings and Marketing Manager from Under One Roof submitted detailed briefing notes and took part in the meetings to answer Members' questions
- 2.3 Housing Association representatives from Helena Partnerships, Arena Housing, Regenda, Riverside and Liverpool Housing Trust also appeared as 'witnesses'
- 2.4 We met with representatives from the YMCA, the Council's Housing Options and Advice Service and the Occupational Therapist Team and discussed the barriers that they felt were limiting access to Choice Based Lettings and how the service could be improved. This provided the task group with a valuable insight into some of the issues facing users and providers who were assisting clients with accessing CBL.
- 2.5 We considered the impact of the Council's own Allocations Policy and how this contributed to sustainable communities.
- 2.6 We took part in a meeting held by the Community Empowerment Network which invited residents to discuss their experiences of Under One Roof.
- 2.7 We also considered in detail, the Government's new draft statutory guidance 'Fair and Flexible' on social housing allocations for local authorities in England, published in December 2009, and how best this could be utilised to involve local communities in improving allocations.
- 2.8 We devised a questionnaire that was sent to all Tenants and Residents Associations in the Borough.
- 2.9 We held a Focus Group at the CVS with randomly selected tenants and residents.

3. Background

National Context

- 3.1 Approaches to housing allocations have been evolving over the last ten years. In St Helens we now have a system that encourages and reflects tenant choice.
- 3.2 The allocation of housing is becoming more than just about meeting individual housing need. It is increasingly seen as having a wider role to play in neighbourhood renewal and the creation of sustainable communities. Tenant choice is at the heart of this. Where people feel that they have some say over where they live, it is argued that the more they are satisfied, are likely to stay

longer in their homes, pay their rent and look after their homes which in turn leads to more sustainable, viable and inclusive communities.

- 3.3 In England and Wales the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) published a five year housing plan which states that by 2010 all councils must offer applicants a choice in where they want to live and expects them to be operating some form of Choice Based Letting scheme. This was successfully achieved in St Helens in 2006. There is also a national policy objective to develop sub-regional/regional schemes.
- 3.4 Even though the Council no longer manages any dwellings it is still required to operate an Allocations Policy which gives reasonable preference to households in certain categories of need i.e. severe medical needs, homelessness etc, as defined in legislation. This is managed through the nomination agreements with Registered Social Landlords. Currently Helena Partnerships manages a joint Council/Under One Roof housing register and operates a common housing policy.

Local Context

- 3.5 St Helens Council is a non-stock holding local authority. The Council's housing stock was transferred to Helena Housing Association in 2002. Helena Partnerships currently manages and administers the waiting list on behalf of St. Helens Council. However, the Council retains statutory functions in relation to homelessness and meeting housing needs and has to comply with government policy and performance requirements.
- 3.6 St. Helens Council is committed to providing housing choices to all its residents and as such has developed a Choice Based Lettings Scheme in partnership with the social landlords in the Borough. Helena Partnerships administers the Choice Based Lettings Scheme, called 'Under One Roof', but properties from all the social landlords operating in the Borough are included in this scheme. The scheme has been operating since February 2006 and currently over 90% of the Borough's social housing stock is allocated through this scheme.
- 3.7 Under the traditional arrangements, the Council has nomination rights to 75% of Helena Partnerships stock (excluding internal transfers) and 50% of other housing association stock. Other RSLs who advertise their properties include Arena Housing, Riverside, Liverpool Housing Trust, Housing 21, Regenda, Cosmopolitan and William Sutton Homes.

These nomination rights form the basis for the number of properties, which can be allocated through the 'Under One Roof' scheme. However, through the Under One Roof scheme the Council has access to far higher percentages of RSL stock than is allowed for in a traditional nominations agreement. For example, the Council has secured access to 100% of Helena Partnerships properties.

How Choice Based Lettings work in St Helens

- 3.8 Helena Partnerships administers the Choice Based Lettings scheme (Under One Roof) and other housing association partners are invited to join the

scheme. Under these arrangements, all allocations to which the Council has nomination rights are offered through the Choice Based Lettings scheme.

3.9 In the Choice Based Lettings scheme, applicants do not join a Housing Register but become members of the scheme and have their application 'banded' according to their needs. The banding system has been developed to ensure that those in the greatest housing need (e.g., homeless applicants or those with urgent medical circumstances) are able to be re-housed as soon as possible. This reflects legislative requirements that housing should go to those in greatest need. This has recently been re-affirmed in the statutory guidance published in December 2009.

3.10 The system has four bands and your place within the bands is determined by the date you applied so that applicants waiting longer within a particular needs band will have a higher priority for re-housing. The four bands are:

Band A - Urgent Housing Need

Band B - Significant Housing Need

Band C - Single Identified Housing Need

Band D - No housing need other than a preference to move or applicants with a reduction in priority due to anti-social behaviour or a previous housing debt of over £300.

3.11 The scheme is open to anyone aged over 18 to apply, although there are certain people who are not legally eligible to join the scheme (persons subject to immigration control or people with a history of serious and unacceptable behaviour such as anti-social behaviour).

3.12 When a property becomes available it is advertised (by using newspapers, internet, etc) and members of the scheme can submit 'bids' for those properties that they are interested in and eligible for up to a maximum of 3 bids at any one time. There is a closing date for bids, from which a shortlist is produced for each property and the applicant with the highest priority is offered the property. If two applicants from the same banding bid for the property, then it is offered on the basis of date order. Feedback is published for every allocation through Under One Roof which provides information of band, date and number of bids to inform choice.

4. Findings

Communication and Information sharing between Agencies

4.1 Throughout the review it became clear that communication between the Council and Under One Roof is generally very good RSLs and other partner agencies appear to be aware of the key contacts at the Council and Helena Partnerships. Whilst there was a willingness to talk at an individual level, the task group felt that communication between the RSLs, Under One Roof and the Council at a strategic level could be improved.

4.2 Evidence highlighted that meetings between all agencies were held on an infrequent basis. Whilst it was clear that all RSLs were aware that they could

speak with Under One Roof directly, feedback from them indicated that they would appreciate more regular information sharing group meetings. Some authorities have developed information sharing protocols and it was felt that this could be helpful.

- 4.3 When a person is successful in bidding for a property, prior to being formally offered the tenancy a number of checks are carried out. The individual signs a declaration to confirm that the information contained is true and also agrees to the information being shared amongst the different agencies. This is in addition to the checks made at the time an applicant applies to join the scheme.
- 4.4 Records of previous tenancies are checked and where any convictions/legal action is declared, Merseyside Police provide details in accordance with established data sharing protocols. In order for these checks to be carried out, there must be some evidence of criminal related activity.
- 4.5 If inaccurate information is provided and Under One Roof identifies this, depending on the type of the inaccuracy the tenancy can be refused. It is possible that individuals failing for instance to declare an ASBO from a different local authority or police force may be missed. In such cases, a tenancy could be refused.
- 4.6 Undoubtedly, there are more detailed checks that could be undertaken but this would incur significant extra costs. However, a judgement must be made as to the value of this. A fine line must be drawn between ensuring checks are robust and ensuring that the cost is not so great as to place financial pressure on those carrying out the checks.
- 4.7 Currently relevant information is shared between RSLs. The success of this system relies on the accuracy and completeness of the data being shared. Not all incidents are recorded and shared within RSL's themselves and to other RSL's. and records can sometimes be patchy. History about a tenants' behaviour can sometimes be missed and not shared with the relevant RSL. It is critical that RSLs share all relevant information in these circumstances to ensure that accurate decisions are made where anti-social behaviour has taken place.
- 4.8 Communities themselves are a vital source of knowledge within their own areas and this experience is often disregarded. This was one of the main sources of frustration expressed by the Focus group with tenants and residents associations. (See Appendix A). However, it needs to be acknowledged that to act on any information or knowledge must be evidence based, and meet with equality and diversity requirements.

Communication with the public

- 4.9 Throughout the review we became aware there was a distinct misunderstanding of the Council's role and the role of Helena Partnerships in the Under One Roof scheme. Many tenants believed that the scheme was purely Helena Partnerships' responsibility, whilst others thought that Helena Partnerships was just another 'arm' of the council. Feedback from the focus group highlighted this issue. (This can be seen in Appendix A.) The policy is the responsibility of the Council, whilst Helena Partnerships have been tasked with delivering it.

- 4.10 As mentioned previously, although the Council has transferred all its housing stock, it still has the statutory responsibility for meeting housing needs in the Borough and must have a scheme which identifies how housing need will be met. The Council has produced a Housing Allocations Policy. This was agreed in 2002 and amended in 2006 to reflect the jointly developed Under One Roof scheme. Under the terms of the Stock Transfer Agreement, responsibility for managing the Housing Register, making nominations and implementing the allocations policy was outsourced to Helena Housing for five years up to July 2007.
- 4.10 Choice based lettings does not work on a points system but places members in one of four bands dependent on their housing needs. The current system has four bands and priority within the bands is determined by date order so that applicants waiting longer within a particular needs band will have a higher priority for re-housing.
- 4.11 During 2006 when the scheme was introduced, a high quality marketing and communications strategy was undertaken with both existing applicants during the transitional launch phase of the scheme and then with new applicants following the scheme's launch. Significant work to address the transition was undertaken including:
- The development of a new brand and logo for the scheme;
 - draft leaflets and guides explaining the scheme were discussed with a range of focus groups to test readability and understanding.
 - a communication strategy which covered a range of stakeholders including elected members, advocates and support groups, staff and Helena Partnerships Board members and many Tenants' and Residents' Groups.
- 4.12 Since the introduction of the scheme, further developments have included:
- the use of SMS text bidding;
 - an enhanced web service which includes information about previous bidding, etc This allows people to bid for properties 24/7 and has improved informed choice.
- Each applicant receives an information pack and membership card allowing them to bid for properties.
- 4.13 Vacant properties are widely advertised on fortnightly cycles with information about property size, facilities and rent. The advert sets out any restrictions on who will be given priority or who may bid for them e.g. band, family size etc.
- 4.14 Applicants can bid for the property that they want provided they meet any stated restrictions. Automated or proxy bidding can be set up for vulnerable applicants.
- 4.15 Feedback is provided after each lettings cycle to show who got what in terms of band and the date they applied. This helps applicants to make more

informed choices for future bids, provides some realism as to future chances and also makes the system transparent to all.

- 4.16 Whilst it was clear from feedback that applicants understood the process and felt that ways of bidding for properties was clear and user friendly, the most common complaint was the banding which applicants were placed into. Under One Roof is frequently asked why a person had been allocated a particular banding and clients do not always understand why this information cannot be shared.
- 4.17 A full summary of the focus group feedback which covers these issues is attached at Appendix A.

'Fair and Flexible' and Local Letting Policies

- 4.18 The recently published statutory guidance identifies that nationally there are widespread perceptions that the current allocation system is unfair and favours certain groups (such as the unemployed or migrants or teenagers who get pregnant in order to get a house). An Ipsos MORI survey carried out for Communities and Local Government in 2008 showed that less than a quarter (23%) of the public agreed that the way social housing is allocated is fair. One in three (32%) did not agree that it is fair. Just under a half (45%) said they did not know if it is fair or were unwilling to give an opinion and opted for 'neither agree nor disagree'.
- 4.19 In response to these findings the Government has published 'Fair and Flexible' Statutory Guidance on Social Housing Allocations for Local Authorities in England which has been issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government. This guidance reinforces councils' ability to meet local needs and priorities through their allocation policies. In some areas this could mean giving more priority to people who have been on waiting lists for a long time or more priority for people with strong local connections. Elsewhere, there may be a greater need to attract workers with particular skills, or to support people in low paid work.
- 4.20 In brief the revised guidance:
- a) reaffirms the commitment to house those in greatest need;
 - b) retains the existing reasonable preference criteria;
 - c) removes any requirement to have regard to cumulative preference, though local authorities are still encouraged to consider whether they wish to give additional priority to those with more than one type of need or have a particularly urgent need;
 - d) encourages local authorities to make the most of the flexibilities within the legislation to reflect local priorities, e.g., local connections, length of time on list, working households, under occupancy, etc;
 - e) encourages closer working between housing associations and local authorities; and

- f) challenges myths and misunderstandings and encourages the involvement of local people in drawing up priorities.

4.21 For the future, Communities and Local Government is considering how work with the private rented sector can be extended and made more effective as this may potentially be a valuable resource in providing affordable housing and meeting housing need and is often underused by local authorities in meeting their housing responsibilities. However, no timescale is given for the completion of this work.

Local Lettings

4.22 The guidance encourages more local authorities to consider using local lettings policies and suggests they could be used for:

- creating a more balanced, sustainable community;
- attracting key workers into an area;
- enabling sensitive lettings on rural exception sites;
- ensuring that properties that can be made accessible are prioritised for those with access needs;
- setting aside properties for those whose employment requires them to be mobile, such as the armed forces.
- Currently there are three sites in the Borough where local lettings policies have been agreed or are in place. These are at New Street (Helena Partnerships) and two in the Town Centre (Arena Housing).

Prior to implementing local lettings policies, RSLs are required to consult residents, evidence the requirements and seek agreement from the Council about the content of local policies, monitoring and review mechanisms and potential exit strategies. Local lettings policies should essentially be short term in nature and should only be extended with the agreement of all partners. Local Lettings Policies must also be approved by the regulator, the Tenant Services Authority.

Housing Vulnerable Tenants

4.23 Registered social landlords are now more deeply involved in community life than ever before. They understand that family-friendly and community based neighbourhoods will attract people to an area and make them want to stay.

4.24 From the evidence gathered we heard that on some occasions people have been rehoused without sufficient related support services to successfully sustain the tenancies in the long term. This has negatively impacted on the communities in which they live and has resulted in unrest within those communities and high tenancy turnover.

4.25 Young people particularly care leavers and those who have been homeless can be the most vulnerable and marginalised in a community. Most young people can manage to live independently if they have the support of their

family however; we heard that almost all of them would benefit from some form of practical help at the start of their tenancy.

- 4.26 All vulnerable people who cannot rely on friends or family need more planning and long-term support and providing the right type of service can make the difference between the success or failure of a tenancy.
- 4.27 Floating Support schemes, delivered by multi-disciplinary teams, are a cost-effective way of providing flexible support to people with complex or high support needs across the borough. A range of support depending on client's needs is provided to help new tenants manage the start of their tenancy and existing tenants to maintain their tenancies and live independently.
- 4.28 We heard from our partner agencies that Community Care Grants can only be applied for once a tenancy has been agreed. Often this can take up to six weeks, therefore leaving a tenant without any means to furnish the property. Under One Roof does offer tenants accepting a Helena Partnerships property in certain circumstances the option of a furnished or partially furnished property by way of leasing and this is paid for as part of their rent charge.
- 4.29 This support can increase the chances of a tenancy succeeding – just the provision of carpets, curtains and white goods can make a big difference to someone moving into their first tenancy.
- 4.30 During discussions with RSL's, the task group heard that on rare occasions deposits had been paid by RSL's to assist evicted tenants to move into the private rented sector. RSL 's were sometimes ordered by the court to make deposit payments and was not entered into voluntarily by the RSL's. Whilst it was accepted that this was only at the bequest of the court, it was felt that this practice should be discouraged.
- 4.31 There is a growing awareness that current provision for meeting the housing needs of disabled children and their families is not always appropriate or available. According to research carried out by Joseph Rowntree Foundation, at least half of families with disabled children are living in housing which is unsuitable to their needs.
- 4.32 Both tenants and owner-occupiers face problems finding suitable housing to match their needs. Evidence from the Occupational Therapist Team highlighted the need to keep up to date information about the availability of adapted properties so to avoid resources being wasted.
- 4.33 Within RSLs performance indicators can also work against matching need to supply. The pressure to keep empty properties to a minimum can mean that adapted properties are not necessarily always allocated to the most appropriate family.
- 4.34 During a meeting with the Occupational Therapy Team we heard of some difficulties of working with others from different occupational groups or different agencies. These problems are often common in areas where housing and community care services overlap.
- 4.35 Currently some medical referrals from Occupational Therapy must be certified by the Community Physician where cases are complex. These are usually completed in a 'batch', which can have a serious impact on the amount of

time a client is waiting to be placed in the appropriate banding. There appears to be a lack of awareness by the Community Physician of the urgency with which this information is required.

5. Conclusions

Communication and information sharing:

- 5.1 The task group found that relationships between Under One Roof, the Council and Registered Social Landlords were generally good. However, there are areas for improvement in terms of communication at a local and strategic level. More regular information sharing group meetings would be beneficial to all.
- 5.2 We believe that the flow of relevant, specific and timely information about re-housing applicants is an essential tool in creating and sustaining strong tenancies. Good information enables appropriate support needs to be identified and provided and staff with the necessary facts to manage tenancies effectively.
- 5.3 The task group recognised that Community knowledge could be a good resource but was often underused. Feedback from the Questionnaires and the Focus Group highlighted the lack of 'personal touch' and some Tenants' and Residents' Associations felt it was a faceless system. Being able to talk to tenants and having a system that incorporates their views is essential when building sustainable communities.
- 5.4 Good information exchange can help to ensure the 'right' support is put in place and the risk of tenancies failing is reduced. Fewer tenancy breakdowns mean few voids and a more efficient and effective housing service.
- 5.5 During the review it became apparent to the task group that some barriers existed between RSLs and Under One Roof. The task group felt that the development of an information sharing protocol would go a long way towards creating a two way dialogue and trust between agencies. It would assist nominating agencies in providing the correct information as well as understanding the requirements of the receiving landlords.
- 5.6 With regards the verification of references etc, a fine line must be drawn between ensuring checks are robust and ensuring that the cost is not so great as to place financial pressure on those carrying out the checks.

Communication with the public

- 5.7 Housing Minister, John Healey, in his introduction to the statutory guidance on allocations identifies that at a national level it has become apparent that the system for allocating housing is complex and poorly understood by those in the housing system. The demands and pressures on housing in an area are rarely well explained to local people. This contributes to the perception that the system is inflexible and unfair and the recent findings that many people do not feel that housing allocations are fair. This is particularly apparent where authorities operate complex points systems and do not publish results on who is allocated what.

- 5.8 The Fair and Flexible Statutory Guidance places the responsibility on local authorities to ensure effective communication of their own allocations policies and demonstrate engagement with their communities.
- 5.9 The task group believe more need to be done to get the message across about the amount of stock available, who it is currently allocated to, and the number of people waiting. We recognise that Under One Roof are unable to discuss details of particular cases and this is often the cause of the feelings of mistrust. The perception of tenants can be quite fixed and local agencies and local Councillors all have a role in assisting local residents to grasp these complexities.
- 5.10 We feel that it is important that we engage fully with our local community in developing our allocation priorities and drawing up any allocation scheme; and in providing regular, accurate, and generalised information on how housing is being allocated. As discussed above, more work needs to be done to actively to dispel any myths and misperceptions that often arise. Policies which are easily understood and sensitive to local needs and local priorities are more likely to achieve acceptance across the wider community and to be, not just fair, but seen to be fair.

Fair and Flexible and Local Letting Policies

- 5.11 By issuing this new guidance, the Government has set out more clearly the freedoms and flexibilities that local authorities can use when developing allocations policies in their area.
- 5.12 The guidance allows greater scope for St Helens to meet local needs and priorities through its allocation policy. It strengthens the Council's freedom to give greater weighting to specific local needs alongside those households who have 'reasonable preference'. In some areas this could mean giving more priority to people who have been on waiting lists for a long time, or more priority for people with strong local or family connections or it could work to support people in low paid work.
- 5.13 In order to better manage their estates, RSLs appeared keen to hold onto more of their stock and have the freedom to allocate this accordingly. The task group felt that this could be better achieved by greater use of local lettings policies.
- 5.14 From what we learnt during the review the use of local letting policies can go some way towards managing and creating more sustainable communities. However we recognise that the use of these policies can be very complicated and are only a time limited solution. Whilst there are a number of local policies in place in St Helens, more understanding of their possibilities and benefits by RSLs is required. The Council should encourage their use.

Housing Vulnerable People

- 5.15 We recognise that vulnerability is not necessarily permanent and that peoples' needs have to be met in different ways. In St Helens we have a variety of settings such as specialist supported housing, hostels and support from the Housing Options and Advice Service team.

- 5.16 However, we feel there is a strong requirement for more floating support schemes within St Helens for vulnerable tenants within our communities. Throughout the review we heard of problems experienced by communities themselves and those vulnerable people placed into the communities, how not enough support was given to help them remain in their tenancies.
- 5.17 Engaging young people as tenants is increasingly relevant in light of recent research which shows a record 73% of people can no longer afford to purchase a home without financial assistance. Young people are now being priced out of the housing market and social housing may be the only financially sustainable option available.
- 5.18 By simply providing accommodation to young people is often not enough and additional support networks are required to sustain independent living. It is important that young people have an awareness of these support networks and are able to access them easily.
- 5.19 The Task Group has concerns about the re-housing of those in supported accommodation and welcomes the review currently being undertaken on Hostel Accommodation.

6. Recommendations

Communication and Information Sharing

1. That an Information and Retention Sharing Protocol is established between Under One Roof, the Council and Registered Social Landlord partners to underpin all areas of activity.
2. That a programme of regular communication exchange meetings between Under One Roof, the Council and Registered Social Landlords be established.

Communication with the Public

3. That a comprehensive Communications Strategy for Tenants and Residents Associations and residents themselves be developed to address misconceptions and expel myths whilst helping communities to better understand the process of allocations.
4. That a system be developed which allows legitimate views of tenants and residents associations and residents themselves to be considered.

Fair and Flexible and Local Lettings Policies

5. That greater use of Local Letting Schemes and flexibilities set out in the 'Fair and Flexible' Guidance be fully encouraged.
6. That an awareness session be arranged with all Registered Social Landlords explaining how Local Lettings and Flexibilities could be best utilised and what help and assistance they could expect from the Council.

Housing Vulnerable Tenants

7. That options for using the Supporting People Grant be explored to provide additional support for vulnerable tenants in communities.
8. That more joint pre-tenancy work and courses be made available to help first time tenants and those who are vulnerable.
9. That further investigation of the Department of Work and Pensions' regulations around the Community Care Grant be undertaken to establish if the grant could be released earlier to assist vulnerable tenants.
10. That the current system of 'batching' medical applications be investigated and a method to make this process quicker be established.
11. That the practice (instructed by court judgements) of deposits being paid by Registered Social Landlords to allow evicted tenants to move into the private rented sector be discouraged.

General

12. That opportunities for extending the Under One Roof Scheme to include private rented sector properties be investigated.
13. That the Council regularly review the performance of Under One Roof and delivery of the Service Level Agreement.
14. That once completed, the current review of Hostel Accommodation be submitted to the Regeneration, Housing, Leisure and Culture Scrutiny Committee for consideration.
15. That the Service Level Agreement be submitted to a future meeting of the Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure Scrutiny Committee for further consideration.
16. That the following points be considered when revising the Council's current Housing Allocations Policy:
 - Local Connections
 - Disabilities
 - Recognition of good tenants who wish to move to another property
 - Incentives to free up of under-occupied properties.

Rec No.	Recommendation	Responsible Officer	Agreed Action and Date of Implementation
1	That an Information and Retention Sharing Protocol is established between Under One Roof, the Council and Registered Social Landlord partners to underpin all areas of activity.		
2	That a programme of regular communication exchange meetings between Under One Roof, the Council and Registered Social Landlords be established.		
3	That a comprehensive Communications Strategy for Tenants and Residents Associations and residents themselves be developed to address misconceptions and expel myths whilst helping communities to better understand the process of allocations		
4	That a system be developed which allows legitimate views of tenants and residents associations and residents themselves to be considered.		
5	That greater use of Local Letting Schemes and flexibilities set out in the 'Fair and Flexible' Guidance be fully encouraged.		
6	That an awareness session be arranged with all Registered Social Landlords explaining how Local Lettings and Flexibilities could be best utilised and what help and assistance they could expect from the Council.		
7	That options for using the Supporting People Grant be explored to provide additional support for vulnerable tenants in communities.		
8	That more joint pre-tenancy work and courses be made available to help first time tenants and those who are vulnerable.		
9	That further investigation of the Department of Work and Pensions' regulations around the Community Care Grant be undertaken to establish if the grant could be released earlier to assist vulnerable tenants.		
10	That the current system of 'batching' medical applications be investigated and a method to make this process quicker be established.		
11	That the practice (instructed by court judgements) of deposits being paid by Registered Social Landlords to allow evicted tenants to move into the private rented sector be discouraged.		

Rec. No.	Recommendation	Responsible Officer	Agreed Action and Date of Implementation
12	That opportunities for extending the Under One Roof Scheme to include private rented sector properties be investigated.		
13	That the Council regularly review the performance of Under One Roof and delivery of the Service Level Agreement.		
14	That once completed, the current review of Hostel Accommodation be submitted to the Regeneration, Housing, Leisure and Culture Scrutiny Committee for consideration.		
15	That the Service Level Agreement be submitted to a future meeting of the Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure Scrutiny Committee for further consideration.		
16	<p>That the following points be considered when revising the Council's current Housing Allocations Policy:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Local Connections 2. Disabilities 3. Recognition of good tenants who wish to move to another property 4. Incentives to free up of under-occupied properties. 		