

# Briefing for members

## Housing in Harrow

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This is one of a series of policy papers being drafted for new scrutiny Members on areas of policy that fall within the terms of reference of the Sustainable Development and Enterprise Scrutiny Sub-Committee.

A detailed, but concise precis of current development regarding housing in the borough is being provided. This includes national, regional and local information related to the planning, maintenance and monitoring of council housing in Harrow.

### Nationally and regionally

In general policy terms, central Government has committed to a significant home-building programme in coming years. Developments, where being carried out, have mainly been taking place on brownfield sites. Government is also keen to use housing developments to improve social inclusion, and to regenerate communities. Housing development, then, is not purely being linked to bricks-and-mortar improvements, with community-based work being carried out in tandem to create “sustainable communities”.

“Sustainable Communities: Homes for All” is the document which sets out this strategic vision. First steps have been taken as part of the Housing Act 2004.

### Private housing

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is responsible for overseeing matters relating to private housing (which also includes right-to-buy of council accommodation and key worker homes).

There are a number of national schemes being introduced shortly that deserve consideration, including:

Home Information Packs – from June 2007, when homes are bought and sold the seller will need to prepare a Home Information Pack for prospective purchasers. The cost of this will be approximately £500. The aim is that it should eliminate some of the uncertainty of homebuying – it will, effectively, replace the survey and local land charge search currently necessary to secure a successful sale. The government is also introducing a number of other initiatives intended to make the process of buying a house run more smoothly.

Key worker housing – there are government – and Greater London Council – targets to be met for the provision of affordable, key worker housing in new developments. This operates through the planning regime.

### Social housing

Nationally, strategy for local authorities in relation to housing is laid down by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). In January 2005, the ODPM produced its document “Sustainable Communities: Homes for All”, which sets out the actions for ensuring that people, over the ensuing five years would have “the opportunity for a decent, affordable home”. Part of

this is the delivery of the Decent Homes Programme, which will ensure that all social housing is “decent” by 2010.

Definition of “decent home” – fundamentally a decent home should be “warm, weatherproof and have reasonably modern facilities”. Reasonably modern is described as a kitchen no more than 20 years old and a bathroom no more than 30 years old<sup>1</sup>. The government has been clear that the standard represents a minimum, and that work carried out should, where possible, exceed the standard. Consequently, many local authorities – including Harrow – have set themselves more rigorous targets, which are detailed on the following page.

Stock options appraisals - Part of the current arrangements have been to encourage councils to transfer significant proportions of their housing stock to housing associations or registered social landlords (RSLs), in order to secure the necessary investment levels. The ODPM made it clear recently that councils retaining their own stock would have to find the money for the investment themselves, and that no additional money could be made available<sup>2</sup>. However, at the time of writing (February 2006) this is under review and the government have entered into discussions on the provision of assistance for such local authorities.

The ODPM set a deadline of June 2005 for the completion of a “housing stock options” exercise. Councils were to examine the three options with which they had been presented and decide which one they thought would work best for them in meeting the 2010 Decent Homes deadline – or they could choose to maintain their stock in the manner described above.

### **Harrow specifically**

Choice based lettings - Harrow has a large range of housing stock. Management of the lettings process is through Locata, a system established by five West London boroughs to allow “choice-based lettings” to residents. Residents make bids for properties through the Locata Home magazine, published fortnightly.

Stock options appraisal - Initially Harrow decided that an ALMO<sup>3</sup> might offer the best opportunity. Steps were taken throughout the latter part of 2004 and early 2005 to set up such a body. However, it was decided later that this would present too great a risk. Two-star rating for housing services is required to maintain an ALMO and this was by no means secure<sup>4</sup>. In financial terms it was also decided that investing in housing directly rather than using another of the government’s options would present better value for money.

Harrow is on track to meet the Decent Homes Standard by 2010. Currently, about two-thirds of properties are classified as “decent”. Major works programmes are continuing on major estates.

Resident liaison – this was assessed by a case study carried out as part of the O&S Hear/Say Community Engagement Review in 2005. The Rayners Lane estate was examined (where resident liaison is undertaken in partnership with Warden Housing, the housing association who manage the estate). The review concluded that the council recognise and maintain its existing

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<sup>1</sup> In “A Decent Home: Guidance for Implementation” (ODPM 2004), at 3.17

<sup>2</sup> Letter sent by Rt Hon John Prescott to Council Leaders, 29 October 2004. It had been rumoured that a “fourth option” (in addition to arms-length management organisations, stock transfer or private finance) was to be announced to provide additional investment to those authorities who would maintain direct control of their stock.

<sup>3</sup> Arms-length management organisation. All housing stock would be transferred to an independent body which would be linked to the council (the management board would comprise councillors, and strategy would ultimately be defined by the borough). The independence would lead to additional freedoms in terms of raising revenue, contracting and borrowing.

<sup>4</sup> Having opted for an ALMO, some authorities have experienced this problem, with one-star rating making additional investment through the organisation difficult.

responsibilities to tenants, even after a stock transfer to a housing association or RSL, and that performance management frameworks should be put in place to monitor the functioning of tenants' and residents' associations.

Performance reporting and monitoring – the Housing Department reports to the Esub-committee periodically with information on voids (empty council properties), rent arrears (calculated on a weekly or monthly basis) and other information which is required by central government to assess performance.