

**REPORT FOR: OVERVIEW AND
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

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| Date: | 21 March 2011 |
| Subject: | Impact of Housing on Health |
| Responsible Officer: | Alex Dewsnap, Divisional Director Partnership Development and Performance |
| Scrutiny Lead Member area: | Councillor Ann Gate Lead Member - Health and Social Care Councillor Vina Mithani Lead Member - Health and Social Care |
| Exempt: | No |
| Enclosures: | None |

Section 1 – Summary and Recommendations

This report provides a briefing on the housing need in the borough and the current changes and developments in terms of national housing policy which are currently going through in the Localism Bill

Recommendations:

Councillors are recommended to:

- I. Consider and review the information presented and agree a way forward and the next steps to take in planning the review.
- II. Note the changing policy in relation to housing
- III. Consider the remit and scope for a further review

Section 2 – Report

Background

At the scrutiny Leadership group meeting on 27 October 2010, it was suggested by members that the Health Sub Overview and Scrutiny committee should address a key issue for the borough from the perspective of the impact on wellbeing and the impact on health outcomes. The lead members decided that it would be worthwhile addressing the impact of housing on health and wellbeing.

This report provides a briefing on the current situation in respect of the housing need in the borough and the changes to national housing policy which is currently going through in the Localism Bill.

At a health leads meeting in January 2011, the Chairman of the Health Sub Committee, the Adult Health and Social Care lead members and Corporate Director, Adults & Housing further explored what could be the focus of an investigation that would impact of housing on health. There is recognition that although housing and the built environment are key determinants of long term health they have traditionally operated in silos and partnership working to tackle deep rooted health issues are key. With the council's new public health role, this review could be used to raise corporate awareness of the responsibility across council directorates in tackling health inequalities.

It was decided that an exploration of the changes in Government policy and the effects of this on residents could be a way forward. In order to carry out this investigation, a compare and contrast analysis between two areas in the borough with social housing could be carried out, one with good health outcomes and another with not so good health outcomes. The investigation could also be carried out by focusing on a specific area and comparing it with an area that has had a recent re-build.

The link between housing and health

The quality of housing and living conditions has a substantial and proven impact on physical and mental health and well-being. When people are housed in dry and safe conditions this allows them to utilise their homes to the fullest, and not to suffer any effects on their health induced by inadequate living conditions. The connection between housing and health is enforced in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: *'Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care'*. (Article 25.1).

Even in local authorities that no longer have significant housing stock, local authorities' strategic role in housing is an essential tool in shaping the places in which people live. When there are enough affordable homes of varying types, and of decent quality this makes a significant contribution to the wider economic, social and environmental well-being of local communities.

Homelessness poses the greatest risk to health and 80% of homeless people are estimated to have a health problem. A snapshot of the levels of homelessness in Harrow during 2006 showed that there were 1,123 homeless households accommodated by the council and the number of people sleeping rough was expected to increase during this period of economic uncertainty.

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Housing need in Harrow

The councils Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) refresh 2009-2013 identified the main needs of the borough as being to increase the provision of affordable housing units of all sizes. There is a particular need for:

- larger family units
- small units for vulnerable adults
- wheelchair accessible housing
- lifetime homes

Additionally the JSNA exposed a need to also address housing needs of older people, vulnerable adults and diverse communities who require housing advice and signposting and for care and support services to promote choice and independence for vulnerable adults living in all housing tenures. The various objectives will be met through a number of strategies including the following strategies, Supporting People Strategy, Housing Strategy, Accommodation Strategy for Vulnerable Adults, and Harrow Council Adults and Housing Transformation Programme Plan 2008-11.

Harrow's Housing Needs Assessment (2006) estimated that there were 27,318 households in Harrow with 56.3% of households in the borough living in housing not suited to their needs; the highest majority of these were living in private-rented accommodation.

Most houses were deemed unsuitable due to overcrowding and mobility and cost was the additional reason homes were felt to be unsuitable. The electoral wards with the highest percentage of households living in accommodation not suited to their needs were: Headstone South (19.8%), Marlborough (19.5%) and Roxbourne (18.7%). Harrow's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, Source Document, 2009 – 2013

In respect of occupancy on the basis of ethnicity White households were more likely to contain pensioners than the BME households. 70% of the White and Asian households were owner/occupiers. In terms of owner occupiers in the borough, a number of these are older people and increasing numbers of people may need extra care, housing and other housing-based provision. Many older people may be guided towards moving into

privately-owned residential and nursing homes, which can be financially challenging and amongst older people recorded by the 2005 'Review of housing and care needs of Older People in the London Borough of Harrow' it revealed that the majority of older people would prefer to remain in their own home.

The review also revealed that even though older peoples households do not contribute significantly to the need for additional affordable housing, the changing needs of older people may well have a substantial impact on the future provision of specialised social rented accommodation in the future.

BME households were more likely to contain children. The Chinese or Other households were more likely to be living in unsuitable housing, while the White households were least likely. Black and Mixed, Chinese and Other households are also more likely to occupy social and rented housing.

There are clearly demographic and economic variances across the borough along with evidence of varying levels of housing need but whether this has an impact on the health outcomes in the borough has not been quantified.

The London Assembly Investigation

The London Assembly's Planning and Housing Committee is carrying out a review of overcrowding in London's social rented housing and assessing the future of affordable housing in London. The investigation is addressing how the Mayor can meet the targets for delivering affordable houses in a climate where there is less funding and tighter budgets. The work will also be addressing how the Mayor can also cushion the impact of the proposed changes to housing policy.

The work underway has so far revealed that London's homeless families could rise by 5,000 as a result of changes to housing benefits about 9,000 families could be forced to leave their homes, with many pushed outside London by 2012. The changes in housing policy include a proposed £400-a-week cap on housing benefit and as a result the report details that London could see a rise in rent arrears, eviction, homelessness and families needing temporary accommodation.

The results of the investigation so far also reveal that Camden, Hackney, Hammersmith and Fulham, Islington, Kensington and Chelsea, Tower Hamlets, Westminster, Brent, Hackney and Wandsworth, will all become unaffordable.

The results of this work could also be considered as part of the committee's investigation.

Changes to Government Policy

In November 2010, the Government published '*Local decisions: next steps towards a fairer future for social housing*' and in February 2011 the summary of the responses to the consultation and next steps was published.

The reforms are being taken forward in the Localism Bill currently being considered in Parliament. The Key aspects of the reforms are detailed below:

Tenure

Under the Localism Bill local housing authorities will be required to publish a tenancy strategy and landlords will be given the freedom to offer their properties under fixed term tenancies, from a minimum of two years, subject to consulting on publishing a clear policy on how they will use their new flexibility on tenancies. Following the consultation, the Government also set out more details about what landlord policies should contain, including protections for the vulnerable and existing tenants.

Allocations

Under the Localism Bill, local authorities will have a new power to decide who qualifies to join their statutory allocation scheme. Existing tenants who want to move house will no longer have to compete with those on the waiting list unless they have 'reasonable preference'. It is felt this will allow councils and housing associations the flexibility to work with tenants who want, rather than need, to move. This paper states that the government currently does not plan to make any changes to the existing statutory 'reasonable preference' categories which determine who has priority for social housing. The Bill stresses that landlords will have the freedom to make arrangements that best suit the needs of the local area.

Mobility

The Government plans to establish a National Home Swap Scheme, making it easier for tenants who want to move to find someone in a similar position to exchange properties with. Social landlords will be required to subscribe to Internet-based mutual exchange services, giving tenants access to as many properties as possible. In addition, the Government is keen on a payment by results model for exchange of services and plan to launch trial projects of innovative schemes to promote the scheme of which will be published later this year.

Homelessness

The Localism Bill details that there will be greater flexibility for local authorities to make decisions on how best to help people at risk of homelessness at the local level including the opportunity for authorities to discharge their homelessness duties through an offer of a privately rented home. The Government will be investing £400million to prevent homelessness and rough sleeping.

Affordable Rents

From April 2011, a new 'Affordable Rent' tenancy will be offered by housing associations to some new tenants of social housing. Affordable Rent properties will offer fixed term tenancies at a rent higher than social rent - with landlords able to set rents at up to 80 per cent of local market rents.

Tenant Panels

The Tenant Services Authority will be abolished and instead social housing tenants will be able to scrutinise tenant services and resolve disputes at tenant panels which will be supported by Landlords. These plans are detailed in the Localism Bill.

Overcrowding and under-occupation

The government says that the reforms to tenure, allocations and homelessness in the Localism Bill will help tackle overcrowding. £13m has been set out by the Government for the 50 biggest local authority landlords to tackle under-occupation and they intend to establish a new national team of advisers based at the Chartered Institute of Housing to support councils who want to help tenants who wish to downsize.

Questions and issues for members to consider:

- What is the timing for carrying out the review, when will the impact of changes and legislation going through be able to be measured?
- Engaging with residents for such an investigation is paramount along with the statistical information and real thought will need to be given to how it can be done most effectively.
- What is the likely impact of the changes to policy on residents?
- These changes are likely to affect the most disadvantage in the community and may increase homelessness in the borough
- What steps is the council considering to inform members of the changes to policy?
- Poor housing conditions tend to co-exist with other forms of deprivation and social inequality and so it is difficult to isolate specific factors and real problems, how can this be resolved?
- Greater flexibility in principle for local authorities and landlord is very positive but as the changes are being put forward at a time when significant changes to the housing benefit system are also being implemented and there is very little scope for investment in new social homes or grants from the Government, this could prove to be a real challenge

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

Performance Issues

There are no specific performance issues associated with this report.

Environmental Impact

There are no specific environmental implications associated with this report.

Risk Management Implications

There are no specific risk management implications associated with this report.

Corporate Priorities

The council has a priority to 'improve the support for vulnerable people' and 'build stronger communities', the content of this report is relevant to both these priorities and the need to safeguard the interests of residents.

Section 3 - Statutory Officer Clearance

Not required for this report.

Section 4 - Contact Details and Background Papers

Contact: Fola Irikefe, Scrutiny Officer, 0208 420 9389

Background Papers: none