

# Environment and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Board Inquiry into lettings – recommendations

Strategic Landlord response - July 2008



Recommendation	Action	Timescale
<p>1. That the Strategic Landlord considers how best to involve the Scrutiny Board (Environment and Neighbourhoods), or its successor body, as part of the annual review of the Council's Lettings Policy, prior to final approval</p>	<p>Strategic Landlord Group is currently consulting on changes to the lettings policy, and has included Environment and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Board in the formal consultation process.</p> <p>The proposed changes, discussed in the Scrutiny Board Inquiry into lettings, will be considered by Executive Board in October 2008.</p>	<p>June 2008, then ongoing with future lettings policy revisions</p>
<p>2. (i) That, through the ALMOs, the Strategic Landlord ensures that all local ward members are provided with quarterly performance information relating to local housing issues, in particular waiting times and lettings.</p>	<p>Leeds Homes will provide quarterly performance reports on lettings to all ward members.</p>	<p>From Quarter 1 2008/9, ie July 2008</p>
<p>(ii) That, in conjunction with the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development, the Strategic Landlord, as and when appropriate, delivers a series of Member briefing/ information sessions on housing related matters, particularly following any significant changes to policy.</p>	<p>Strategic Landlord will arrange briefing sessions with Member Development to tie in with the revision of lettings policy.</p>	<p>October 2008, then twice annually</p>

<p>(iii) That, to supplement the Member briefing sessions (referred to above), the Strategic Landlord produces and maintains a Members' handbook on the Council's Lettings Policies.</p>	<p>Strategic Landlord Group will produce a Members' Handbook on the lettings policy and key changes to it.</p>	<p>October 2008, then updated in line with future lettings policy revision</p>
<p>3. That, to enhance the openness and transparency in the development of Local Lettings Policies (LLPs), the Strategic Landlord ensures that, through the ALMOs, all local ward members are formally consulted in a timely and appropriate manner.</p>	<p>In future, ALMOs will be expected to consult with local ward members as part of the annual review of LLPs.</p> <p>Leeds Homes will revise the LLP review template for use in the next review scheduled for autumn 2008. Where no evidence is provided that member consultation has been undertaken, the council will not approve the LLP.</p>	<p>From September 2008</p>
<p>4. That, working with each of the Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs) and the Belle Isle Tenant Management Organisation (BITMO), the Strategic Landlord seeks to develop a set of principles to ensure that information on all LLPs in operation across the City are easily accessible by all members of the public, and are presented in a clear and consistent manner, by December 2008.</p>	<p>The ALMOs will provide customer information leaflets to customers about their LLPs.</p> <p>The Leeds Homes website will provide a web link to this information from all properties with a LLP advertised through the Leeds Homes website.</p>	<p>November 2008</p>
<p>5. That as a matter of urgency, the Strategic Landlord reviews all relevant policies and procedures to ensure that each ALMO adopts a consistent approach and takes appropriate legal action when the Council becomes aware that any false and/or misleading information has been</p>	<p>Under the ALMO Management Agreement, ALMOs are already obliged to inform the council of any fraudulent activity they are aware of.</p> <p>Strategic Landlord Group has included a statement on tackling fraud in the revised lettings policy.</p>	<p>Consultation currently ongoing</p>

<p>provided at any stage during the application process.</p>	<p>In addition, Strategic Landlord Group will develop procedures with Legal Services and implement a reporting regime.</p>	<p>August 2008</p>
<p>6. That, by December 2008, the Strategic Landlord review the application registration procedures to ensure that appropriate checks on customers' identities are undertaken at an earlier stage of the lettings process, for example, as part of the housing need assessment process.</p>	<p>A new customer checklist has been included in the revised Leeds Homes Register application form which will require customers to provide additional proof of identity, for example, copies of official documentation (such as a bank statement or driving licence) confirming the name and address of the applicant.</p> <p>The lettings procedures on priority awards will be updated following the lettings policy review, to require staff to make identity checks being prior to awarding any priority.</p>	<p>August 2008</p> <p>October 2008</p>
<p>7. That, within each ALMO/ BITMO, the Strategic Landlord actively promotes the photographing of all main and joint tenants at the time of signing their tenancy agreements.</p>	<p>The 2008 lettings policy review proposes that main and joint tenants are photographed prior to taking up their tenancy, to enable staff to identify the rightful tenant and reduce incidences of subletting. Strategic Landlord will develop detailed procedures to ensure this is done according to Data Protection requirements.</p>	<p>Consultation currently ongoing, Executive Board – October 2008</p>
<p>8. (i) That, by December 2008 and in conjunction with each ALMO and the BITMO, the Strategic Landlord seeks to develop and implement suitable strategies to tackle sub-letting of council properties.</p>	<p>The proposed revised lettings policy includes a statement that the council takes fraud seriously, including subletting (where a tenant sublets the whole of the property to another person), and that all reports of suspected fraud will be investigated.</p> <p>Strategic Landlord Group will encourage ALMOs to publicise reporting mechanisms such as hotlines or online reporting to tackle subletting.</p>	<p>Consultation currently ongoing, Executive Board – October 2008</p>

	Strategic Landlord will develop procedures for ALMOs to follow.	December 2008
(ii) That a review of such strategies is undertaken 12 months after implementation, with a view to ensuring such strategies are and remain fit for purpose.	As above	December 2009
9. That by April 2009, the Strategic Landlord, through the ALMOs:		
(i) Ascertains the level of under-occupancy across all council housing stock.	ALMOs are currently gathering data on the level of under-occupancy in their area. This is being undertaken through the customer profiling process.	April 2009
(ii) Undertakes further research to establish the most appropriate interventions for reducing under-occupancy across council housing stock locally.	<p>In June 2008 Executive Board approved a pilot underoccupation incentive scheme (see point 9 iii below for details). The scheme will be evaluated to establish how successful various interventions are in achieving moves.</p> <p>The Golden Triangle Partnership is planning to commission further qualitative research to evaluate underoccupation schemes, through interviewing underoccupiers who have moved successfully as well as those who have decided against moving.</p>	<p>April 2009</p> <p>2009/10</p>
(iii) Formulate proposals, including the allocation of dedicated resources, aimed at proactively addressing under-occupancy, in the longer-term, across council housing stock locally.	In June 2008 Executive Board approved the establishment of a £300,000 fund for 2008/9 to provide financial incentives to encourage underoccupying council tenants to move to a smaller property. Tenants will receive £1,000 for each bedroom released by a move. The scheme will initially focus on 4+ bedroom properties, but	April 2009

	<p>will be rolled out to 2 and 3 bedroom stock in the autumn, dependent on the take up of the scheme.</p> <p>A further report and detailed action plan will be brought back to Executive Board proposing a longer term strategy and budget once the initial pilot scheme has been evaluated.</p> <p>In addition, the Golden Triangle Partnership is developing a pilot scheme which aims to relocate a total of 50 underoccupying households from across Leeds, Harrogate and York over a two-year period from 2009/10.</p>	<p>February 2009</p> <p>From April 2009</p>
10. That the Strategic Landlord:		
(i) Continues to monitor the use of Leeds Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme, and actively promotes and encourages its use as a mechanism to advertise a range of housing options and opportunities, including private landlord accommodation and affordable housing.	<p>Following a review, the CBL scheme for accredited private landlords was relaunched in March 2008. The scheme is now much more flexible and most landlords are choosing to place freestanding adverts in the Leeds Homes flyer and website with the aim of rehousing more customers from the Leeds Homes Register.</p> <p>Nomination agreements with our Housing Association partners now include affordable housing scheme nomination targets as part of the agreement.</p>	Ongoing
(ii) Ensures that affordable housing solutions are more closely linked to the Leeds Homes Register and CBL scheme by actively identifying appropriate customers and signposting them to relevant schemes in the City.	<p>The revised Leeds Homes membership pack will include a 'Housing Options' customer information leaflet giving details of alternative solutions to their housing need.</p> <p>IT improvements to the Leeds Homes registration process will enable staff from Housing Needs and</p>	<p>August 2008</p> <p>October 2008</p>

	the ALMOs to identify tailored housing solutions for customers, based on the information provided on their membership form.	
11. That, by December 2008, the Strategic Landlord:		
(i) Explores and implements ways in which 'mutual exchanges' are better promoted and marketed as part of the available housing options.	Strategic Landlord Group will develop publicity materials eg posters for housing and one stop offices, articles in ALMO newsletters and the Leeds Homes property flyer.	December 2008
(ii) Considers ways in which a more proactive approach by staff could help provide customers with realistic advice and help facilitate mutual exchanges where such an approach offers an appropriate solution.	Strategic Landlord Group will target mutual exchange information to LCC and RSL tenants with LHR applications registered.  Strategic Landlord Group will develop IT solutions to enable a better mutual exchange matching process for customers using on-line facilities and for housing staff to actively promote potential exchanges between tenants.	December 2008
12. (i) That the Strategic Landlord continues to develop and promote a 'Housing Solutions' approach in order to respond to the changing nature of customers housing needs in the City, including appropriate changes to the Council Lettings Policy.	Strategic Landlord is working closely with Housing Needs Group's Business Change Project to develop a housing solutions approach.  A bid has been submitted to Communities and Local Government's Housing Solutions Trailblazer Programme. If successful the council could receive £240,000 for the Housing Options programme in 2009/10. The council is currently awaiting the outcome of the bid.  As part of the Business Change Programme, the project aims to deliver a housing solutions website. The website specification is currently being	October 2008

	developed, but the site will include information on renting privately, social housing, affordable housing and support available to remain at home.	
(ii) That in considering any proposed changes to the Council Lettings Policy, the Strategic Landlord seeks to undertake a further and more detailed examination of the likely implications of such, and provides this to the Scrutiny Board (Environment and Neighbourhoods), or its successor body, for consideration.	<p>Environment and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Board will be involved in consultation on future lettings policy changes as per recommendation 1.</p> <p>The proposed changes discussed previously as part of the Scrutiny Board inquiry include: action to reduce fraud, eg by photographing tenants prior to sign-up, reducing preference for unsuitable customers and assisted bidding.</p>	
(iii) That, in developing a 'Housing Solutions' approach, the Strategic Landlord develops and implements a robust performance framework, in order to provide meaningful, accurate and timely performance information for all key stakeholders.	A performance framework will be developed covering key areas including: homeless prevention, support to enable the customer to stay in their current accommodation (eg through mortgage advice / rescue, or prevention of eviction), and customer satisfaction.	April 2009
(iv) That the Strategic Landlord provide a 6-monthly report to the Scrutiny Board (Environment and Neighbourhoods), or its successor body, regarding progress in developing a 'Housing Solutions' approach and any available performance data.	Strategic Landlord will submit a further report to Environment and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Board.	December 2009
13. That, within 12 months, the Chief Housing Services Officer establishes and commences a process, involving all key stakeholders, to determine the future customer profile of Council Housing	In 2007 the Strategic Landlord Group published a detailed report on the 'Demand for Council housing'. The main findings was that the future demand for council housing will come increasingly from single and young people, and particularly	May 2009

<p>within Leeds.</p>	<p>from BME groups. In addition, customers with increasing chaotic and complex housing needs are being rehoused. As a result Housing management practices need to respond to the changing needs of this new customer profile. ALMOs are addressing this, for example, WNW have implemented a tenancy support team to provide practical support and life skills training to customers who may be at risk of failing in their new tenancy.</p> <p>It is proposed that a future Scrutiny Board session is held to examine the future profile in more detail. Recommendations would be made on how to widen this debate and to involve future stakeholders.</p>	
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