

# MEETING BETWEEN HARINGEY HOUSING ACTION GROUP & HARINGEY HOUSING ADVICE AND OPTIONS TEAM

3<sup>rd</sup> August 2012 10.30am

**WHO WE ARE** Haringey Housing Group meets regularly to give and receive support on housing problems and campaign for better housing. We are not a service, we are all local residents and work collectively to solve each others' problems.

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## BACKGROUND TO HOUSING SITUATION IN HARINGEY AND OUR CONCERNS

Up until 1988, all tenants in Haringey were protected; landlords were not allowed to raise their rents above maximum rent levels and most tenants had secure tenancies. We are now faced with a situation where LHA rates do not cover rents and landlords are discriminating against people who receive LHA. Private tenants are struggling to pay their rent, but with nowhere else to go to, and faced with eviction, homelessness is a real threat. We need a supportive, open and flexible Housing Hub service in Haringey which can support people with this problem.

**1. HARINGEY HOUSING POLICY 2009 – 2019** Quote from the policy: *'In Haringey a relatively high percentage of households live in the private rental sector (at 22%, against 14% in London and 9% nationally). As such it is an important element in the borough's housing offer and we need to make effective use of available tools, and strengthen our partnership with landlords to ensure that this accommodation is of a decent standard and well-managed. Work to improve the quality of the private sector rental offer will help in meeting the need arising from our work to reduce the numbers in temporary accommodation, and lessen the pressure on the social rented sector'*.

**Q1** You have a regular Landlords Forum, why don't you meet with tenants so you know what they need help with, their problems, what advice and support they need, and how they can access it?

**2. HARINGEY COUNCIL HOUSING BENEFIT HUB (for private tenants)** Haringey council was one of 6 boroughs provided with DWP £1.4m funding. You state: *'A team of three staff in each hub will provide specialist advice, support with rent negotiations and practical assistance where families are forced to move because of a shortfall in the money they receive for their rent'*.

Cllr John Bevan, Cabinet Member for Housing at Haringey Council, said: *"I see this as a vital new service given that we believe at least 16,000 households will be affected across the six boroughs"*.

Lord Freud, Minister for Welfare Reform, said: *"The transitional projects are set up specifically to make sure people who are moving to the new housing benefit rules receive the right support and advice. The North London project shows what can be done to help people with **renegotiating rents finding affordable property** and ensuring they get the support they are entitled to"*.

**Q 2a** How is this being achieved?    **Q 2b** How is The Hub being advertised? If I turned up at the housing office with a shortfall in my rent and unable to pay the difference, and stating that the landlord is starting to harass me as I am now in arrears, would I be referred to the HUB team?

**Q 2c** What support would be given? What are the steps e.g. see below...

**Some things we think should be standard practice or otherwise implemented immediately:**

- i. Details of **how to access the DHP**.
- ii. **A list of letting agents or landlords who are known to accept people on LHA** and have properties within the max rates offered.
- iii. **Support to people faced with eviction due to HB cuts** – real negotiation with landlords to bring rents down as a real option. Or if moving then real practical support for where they can go (not just sending them to buy a local paper, or loot).
- iv. At Landlord Forums **encourage landlords to lower rents** and other methods to ensure no one is evicted due to an inability to pay.
- v. **Encourage landlords to offer longer tenancies** so that tenants have more stability, and

support from family and friends.

- vi. **Be more flexible with how you deal with people facing eviction**, e.g. allow people to move prior to their eviction date, especially those with children.
- vii. **All those who qualify for Council housing or the Homes Letting Scheme to be rehoused locally.** We have been assured that this is the current policy.

### **Some initiatives offered by other councils which Haringey council should adopt:**

Birmingham shows how to negotiate with landlords: Private landlords responsible for more than 500 properties in Birmingham agreed to take a cut in rent in response to Government cuts in housing benefits to avoid mass evictions. The city council, which pays the benefit, contacted 1,697 tenants offering to negotiate reduced rates with landlords.

Newham introduce licensing scheme for landlords

Southwark introduce rent cap: Southwark Council have introduced a rent cap for private landlords to make their homes more affordable to benefit claimants.

Waltham Forest Council: Accreditation schemes for landlords to join to ensure private rented properties are maintained to an acceptable standard for tenants.

**Q 2d** Are you planning to introduce such schemes, if not why not?

**3. DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS (DHP)** Shelter states: *'Each housing/council tax benefit department is given a pot of money each year to help people who qualify for housing or council tax benefit, but are having trouble paying their rent or council tax. DHP can be paid for:*

- *rent deposits*
- *rent in advance rent arrears (but not if you were receiving enough housing benefit to pay all of your rent at the time the arrears built up)*
- **a shortfall between housing benefit and rent**
- *reductions in local housing allowance resulting from changes from April 2011'.*

Who qualifies? People who **'are likely to become homeless if a payment is not made.'**

**Q 3a** When someone enters the housing office and say they are having difficulty paying their rent are they referred to the HUB to see if they can qualify for DHP? If not, why not?

**Q 3b** What is it that qualifies someone and not another?

**Q 3c** How do you advertise this service to private tenants? Most people we talk to have never heard of it, and have not been told about it when they have visited the housing office for help. What can be done to ensure everyone who needs help with paying rent can apply?

**Q 3d** If someone does not qualify for DHP what other support do you give? This is really important and the difference between someone becoming homeless or not.

### **4. HARINGEY COUNCIL TENANCY STRATEGY (Localism Act 2011)**

**Q 4a** Is Haringey in consultation about their Tenancy Strategy?

**Q 4b** Has the consultation been opened up for people to participate yet? – will we and other interested residents be invited to participate?

### **5. HARINGEY COUNCIL RESPONSE TO GOVERNMENT POLICIES**

The Government has created this crisis and through pressure can easily reverse it's policies. The Council condemned these policies when they were proposed.

**Q 5** What is the council doing now to demand these policies are reversed?

### **6. WHAT NEXT?**

**Q 6a** Shall we meet again?

**Q 6b** How we will be kept in the loop?