



POLICY AND INFORMATION BULLETIN

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Issue 07 2012/13**

Performance Improvement Unit

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1. POLICY AND INFORMATION BULLETIN - ISSUE 07 2012/13

The Policy and Information Bulletin is published on a regular basis, to highlight news announcements, and reports, publications and consultation documents issued by the Government and other agencies and organisations, which affect the work of the Council or may be of interest to members and officers. The Bulletin is designed to ensure that relevant matters, which may have corporate as well as service specific implications, are drawn to the attention of the appropriate members, service directors and other officers.

The Policy and Information Bulletin provides a summary of new and emerging issues, and provides website links to the full versions of relevant reports, publications and consultation documents. The document also gives details of forthcoming events and conferences of relevance to the Council's activities, that are facilitated by government departments or local authority organisations. Although members and/or officers may already be aware of issues specific to particular services, functions, responsibilities or interests, the Bulletin is intended to raise corporate awareness of relevant matters and to ensure that nothing of importance to the Council is overlooked.

Website links published within the Policy and Information Bulletin are reviewed when the document is compiled. The Council is not responsible for the reliability or continued availability of links to external websites and, whilst care is taken to provide correct working links, it cannot be guaranteed that these will work all the time. The Council has no control over the availability of externally linked webpages or websites.

If members or officers wish to discuss any of the items published in the Policy and Information Bulletin, or require further information or reports on specific issues, they should contact the relevant service director in the first instance. Feedback in respect of the format and content of the Bulletin can be made to the Performance Improvement Unit at performance@eppingforestdc.gov.uk.

PART A - NEWS ITEMS

2. TENANTS TAKE BACK POWER TO CHOOSE THEIR OWN HOME (20 AUGUST 2012)

Social tenants who have been stuck in homes that no longer meet their needs are seizing the opportunity to up sticks through the HomeSwap Direct scheme, boosting their chances of getting a job, living nearer to family or simply improving their quality of life, Housing Minister Grant Shapps has announced.

The Minister welcomed latest figures showing that there are nearly 6,000 searches a day conducted on HomeSwap Direct, an online scheme that shows social homes available for swaps across the country. The total number of searches since it launched in October 2011 is shortly expected to hit the 1.5million milestone. For the

first time, HomeSwap Direct has allowed tenants to easily look outside the service provided by their own landlord and be given a choice about where they live. With the scheme being online, it has made advertised swaps much more accessible for all tenants and the possibility of moving house just a click away. The scheme has transformed the way in which tenants can look for properties and boosted their prospects of moving, whether for work, to be closer to family or for a property better suited to their needs. Previously, tenants wanting to move were restricted to swapping properties through a scheme chosen by their landlord, effectively meaning only a partial swap scheme existed. HomeSwap Direct gives tenants access to a much wider selection of properties than ever before.

Of interest to:

Housing Portfolio Holder Director of Housing

3. TOWN HALL DOORS UNLOCKED TO SOCIAL MEDIA AND BLOGGERS (23 AUGUST 2012)

New law changes to introduce greater openness and transparency in executive councils meetings, will mean all decisions including those affecting budgets and local services will have to be taken in an open and public forum, Local Government Secretary Eric Pickles has announced.

Ministers have put new regulations before Parliament that would come into force next month to extend the rights of people to attend all meetings of a council's executive, its committees and subcommittees. The changes will result in greater public scrutiny. The existing media definition will be broadened to cover organisations that provide internet news thereby opening up councils to local online news outlets. Individual councillors will also have stronger rights to scrutinise the actions of their council. Any executive decision that would result in the council incurring new spending or savings significantly affecting its budget or where it would affect the communities of two or more council wards will have to be taken in a more transparent way as a result.

Crucially councils will no longer be able to cite political advice as justification for closing a meeting to the public and press. In addition any intentional obstruction or refusal to supply certain documents could result in a fine for the individual concerned.

The changes clarify the limited circumstances where meetings can be closed, for example, where it is likely that a public meeting would result in the disclosure of confidential information. Where a meeting is due to be closed to the public, the council must now justify why that meeting is to be closed and give 28 days notice of such decision. As a consequence of the greater levels of transparency around meetings, the Government is able to remove unnecessary and bureaucratic red tape on forward plans introduced by legislation in 2000.

Of interest to:

Support Services Portfolio Holder
Assistant to the Chief Executive

PART B - REPORTS & PUBLICATIONS

4. GET THE GREEN SPACE YOU WANT -HOW THE GOVERNMENT CAN HELP (26 AUGUST 2011)

This Department for Communities and Local Government document sets out the full range of measures that the Government has in place to support communities who want to get more involved in their local community and get access to the space they need. This replaces the guidance published in August 2011.

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/2203637.pdf>

Of interest to:

Planning Portfolio Holder
Director of Planning & Economic Development

5. PREVENTION IS BEST CURE FOR HOMELESS (16 AUGUST 2012)

A new report sets out a cross-Government approach to ensuring that anyone at risk of homelessness gets help at the earliest possible stage, to prevent them from losing their home.

The 'Making Every Contact Count' report details clear commitments from Government to stop the slide towards homelessness in its tracks and ensure that this country's strong safety net of support for those without a roof over their head remains an absolute last resort. Alongside the report, Housing Minister Grant Shapps has reaffirmed ongoing efforts to ensure no-one has to spend more than one night on the streets, with a further £3.5 million for more homelessness help and to roll out the No Second Night Out initiative across the country. Mr. Shapps said that the report would give councils, charities, health services and the police a blueprint to work together to ensure that families and vulnerable people at risk of homelessness are offered help early, no matter who they turn to first. The report sets out the Government's clear commitment to helping achieve:

- earlier support for young people, former prisoners, and patients with mental health, drug or alcohol problems;
- better cross-service work between the voluntary sector, councils, health services and the justice system;
- financial advice and jobseeking support through the voluntary sector, Jobcentre Plus and the work programme;
- new funding mechanisms, including the Government's innovative new payment-by-results scheme; and

- a new homelessness 'gold standard' that all local services should aim to achieve, setting the benchmark for services across the country.

The Minister said that this early intervention approach is backed up by new statistics which show that 199,000 households were last year given help to stay in their homes or find new places to live. This vital support, such as repossession, tenancy or debt advice and re-housing services, can set many people back on track before they face losing their home. A further £3.5 million to homelessness charities will support help and accommodation schemes for rough sleepers and extend the No Second Night Out initiative to eight more areas. First introduced in London, the No Second Night Out project works with members of the public to quickly identify people sleeping rough locally and provides them with the support they need to get themselves off the streets, and Mr. Shapps wants to see the initiative rolled out across the country.

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/pdf/2200459.pdf>

Of interest to:

Housing Portfolio Holder Director of Housing

6. HOMES AND COMMUNITIES AGENCY - STATISTICAL DATA RETURN (20 AUGUST 2012)

Social housing providers own 2,586,115 homes, a 2.4% increase on the total for 2011 according to the Homes and Communities Agency's (HCA) Statistical Data Return (SDR) which has been published for the first time.

The data comes from an annual survey completed by all Private Registered Providers (PRP) in England and includes data on size and type of home, location and rents over the year. Additional data for providers with 1,000 homes or more include lettings during the year and Right to Buy sales and acquisitions. Key data points from the SDR include:

- PRP reported a total of 2,655,742 homes managed (including management of properties owned by themselves or other PRP), a 1% increase on the total for 2011;
- 1.4% (26,156) of General Needs stock was vacant. This is a slight reduction from the 2011 figure of 1.5%. Vacant Supported Housing and Housing for Older People stock reduced from 5.1% in 2011 to 4.4% in 2012;
- in 2011/12, 34,907 new homes were built and 6,332 were purchased by large PRP;
- a total of 4,114 homes were sold to tenants, 3,989 were demolished and 3,463 were disposed of for non-social housing use by large PRP;
- the average net rent for General Needs stock owned by large PRP was £83.20 per week at 31 March 2012. This represented a 6.3% increase from 2011. The average gross rent (including any service charges eligible for housing benefit) was £86.27 per week; and

- at 31 March 2012, 1.9% of social rental stock owned by PRP did not meet the Decent Homes Standard, including cases of tenants declining improvement works to their property. This was a reduction from the previous year, where 2.4% did not meet the standard.

Data for the Statistical Data Return was collected from all Private Registered Providers between 1 April 2011 and 31 March 2012.

Of interest to:
Housing Portfolio Holder Director of Housing

PART C - CONSULTATION DOCUMENTS

PART D - EVENTS & CONFERENCES

7. FORTHCOMING EVENTS AND CONFERENCES

Details of the following forthcoming events and conferences etc. have previously been published in the Policy and Information Bulletin:

Event	Date	Venue
LGA New Councillor Road Show	7 September 2012	London
LGA Equality Framework Conference	24 September 2012	London
LGA Night-Time Economy Conference	26 September 2012	London
LGA Community Budgeting Event	4 October 2012	London