

WIRRAL BOROUGH COUNCIL

ECONOMY AND REGENERATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 22nd APRIL 2013

REPORT OF THE UNDER-OCCUPATION SCRUTINY TASK & FINISH GROUP

UNDER-OCCUPATION SCRUTINY REVIEW – FINAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides background information regarding the Final Report of the Under-occupation Scrutiny Review.

1. Background

- 1.1 During meetings of the Economy and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee held during 2012, members reported considerable public concern regarding the impact of changes to housing benefit and welfare reforms specifically relating to under-occupation in both the public and private housing sectors.
- 1.2 At the meeting of the Economy and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee, held on 5th September 2012, members agreed to:
“Further scrutiny work being undertaken on the impact of Welfare Reform on both private and social housing sectors and, in particular, on under-occupancy in the social sector”.
- 1.2 All members of the Committee were invited to volunteer to join a Task & Finish Group to undertake detailed scrutiny work of this topic. Subsequently, a number of members attended a meeting held on 18th October 2012 at which the detailed Scope for the review was discussed.
- 1.2 The members who joined the Task & Finish Group were:
 - Councillor Mark Johnston (Chair)
 - Councillor Denise Realey
 - Councillor Jean Stapleton
 - Councillor Mike Sullivan
 - Councillor Janette Williamson

2. Scope of the Review

- 2.1 The Scope Document for the Scrutiny Review was agreed by the Economy and Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee in November 2012.
- 2.2 It was agreed that the Scrutiny Review would focus on the following key issues:
 - The impact of the introduction of the Housing Benefit Cap;
 - The impact of changes to the Local Housing Allowance, with special reference to the Shared Accommodation Rate for under-35s;
 - The allocation process for Discretionary Housing Benefit;

- The impacts of the reforms relating to Under-occupation and how this affects households and communities;
- The impact of the reforms on the Social Housing sector.

3 Evidence Gathering and the Report

- 3.1 The majority of the evidence for this Scrutiny Review was gathered during two Evidence Days held at Wallasey Town Hall. During those days the Members interviewed a series of landlords, tenants, Council officers and representatives of partner organisations.
- 3.2 Following the Evidence Days, members of the Task & Finish Group have reviewed their findings. The Final Report, 'The Implications of Benefit reforms on Under-occupation', which includes eighteen recommendations, is attached for consideration by the Committee.

4. Proposed Follow-up Review

- 4.1 Recommendation 14 of the Scrutiny Report proposes that a Follow-up review of the impact of the reforms should be held in the future. The Members recommend that "An Evaluation Impact Assessment regarding the effect of the reforms on under-occupation will be conducted by the Economy & Regeneration Scrutiny Committee (or successor committee) during spring 2014 to assess the practical impact of the reforms".
- 4.2 In order for any follow-up review to be most beneficial, it would be helpful if statistical measures are put in place to evaluate the impact of the reforms on individuals, organisations and communities. Therefore, thought should be given now to the type of data that will be required for the Impact Assessment. Early identification of the statistical measures will enable the Council and partner organisations to be aware in advance of the requirement to capture the data.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) Members are requested to approve the Under-occupation Scrutiny Report;
- (2) The Under-occupation Scrutiny Report will be referred to the next appropriate Cabinet meeting;
- (3) Further reports will be presented to the Economy & Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee to update members regarding the progress being made towards the implementation of the recommendations;
- (4) Members are asked to highlight any statistical measures that will need to be available prior to the proposed Follow-up Review in Spring 2014.

Report of the Under-occupation Scrutiny Task & Finish Group:

Cllr Mark Johnston (Chair)

Cllr Jean Stapleton

Cllr Denise Realey

Cllr Michael Sullivan

Cllr Janette Williamson