



Tackling Overcrowding in England: Lessons from the London pilot schemes and sub-regional coordination





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June 2008

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Introduction and Summary

1. The Government's plans for reducing the number of people living in overcrowded housing conditions were published in December 2007¹. A key action is the establishment and funding of 38 pathfinder schemes to start in 2008: one each in Birmingham, Bradford, Leicester, Liverpool and Manchester with the remaining 33 in each of the London Boroughs. In advance of the pathfinders, Communities and Local Government allocated specific funds to:
 - (a) support five pilot schemes in London
 - (b) strengthen capacity to address overcrowding in each of the five London sub-regions²
2. This note summarises the lessons learned so far, including identifiable good practice, from both the pilot schemes and the sub-regional coordination activity. Although the pilots are not yet complete, they have generated sufficient information to provide useful material for those planning the pathfinders and for other authorities and housing providers seeking to take action to reduce overcrowding. The achievements of the sub-regional coordinators have also yet to be fully assessed. A summary of their work to date is incorporated into this advice note.
3. The advice set out in the following chapters is based on the experience of the pilots and is not a comprehensive manual on managing overcrowding. Following completion of the pathfinders, the advice will be reviewed and a decision taken then on whether to revise or expand this note.

Key messages

4. The pilots have demonstrated, or confirmed, some key lessons for all those engaged in tackling overcrowding. They are identified in more detail later in the main part of the note, but in brief the key messages are as follows:
 - (a) understanding the scale and severity of overcrowding locally is a necessary part of developing a strategy to tackle it

¹ *Tackling Overcrowding in England: An action plan*, Communities and Local Government, December 2007.

² In the South-East London sub-region, the funding for improving sub-regional capacity was allocated to a defined scheme to engage the registered social landlord sector in tackling overcrowding. This scheme is treated as a sixth pilot.

- (b) freeing up under occupied properties remains an effective way of providing larger properties into which overcrowded households can move, but it is not the only strategy. Enabling an overcrowded household to stay in the same property by making modifications to property and engaging family members with relevant support services can reduce the adverse impacts of overcrowding
- (c) moving from an under occupied property is a voluntary decision, and so deploying the right incentives is essential. Cash incentives appear to have little impact when used in isolation; providing effective personal support with the move is a key success factor
- (d) a case management approach to both overcrowding and under occupation moves, with ample personal targeted advice, has proved to be effective. For overcrowding moves this may take the form of advice on how to find a private sector tenancy or how to bid within a choice-based lettings scheme. For under occupation moves, additional reassurance and handholding leading up to and during the move process, is an essential part of the overall incentive to tenants to move
- (e) given the right encouragements, tenants will take increased responsibility for improving their own housing conditions rather than passive reliance on the authority
- (f) adding to the total stock available by entering into arrangements with registered social landlords (RSLs) – for example by including them in under occupation schemes – and by leasing from the private rented sector is a valuable option for those authorities able to access those sectors. Partnership with RSLs is valuable but requires an investment of effort to develop it. Authorities can find themselves in competition for private rented accommodation
- (g) member-level and senior officer commitment to measures to tackling overcrowding is essential if the work is to secure the necessary priority within an authority. Raising awareness of the issues and developing and presenting an effective evidence-backed business case will help secure this support.

Outline of the pilot schemes

5. The Communities and Local Government funding for each pilot ranged from £90,000 to £270,000, the median being £112,500. These figures are not necessarily the same as the resources applied by each authority to its pilot, since in some cases existing staff and financial resources were also used to develop and operate the pilot scheme.

6. Summary descriptions of each of the pilots are in the box below. Although each authority receiving funding was given the freedom to design the pilot scheme as it judged fit, there were some common characteristics:
- (a) all have quantitative targets, and are on track to achieve most of them
 - (b) all have used all or most of the funding to deploy additional staff dedicated to delivering the pilot scheme
 - (c) without the allocated funding from Communities and Local Government, the initiative would either not have been introduced at all or, if it had, would have come on stream at a significantly later date
 - (d) all are directly addressing a selection of the action points in paragraph 20 of the Communities and Local Government Action Plan.

Summaries of the London pilot schemes

Borough-level

Barnet has recruited the services of Private Lettings Negotiators to acquire family-sized properties in the private sector, both within their boundary and outside of London. An officer visits overcrowded families and discusses the range of housing options available to them and takes forward requests on a casework basis. Since April 2007 the visiting officer has visited over 150 overcrowded households and rehoused 26 of these into suitable private sector tenancies using either of Barnet's two private sector schemes. Households have also been assisted with bidding for an appropriate social rented home. Many households have been prevented from becoming homeless and going into temporary accommodation through this early intervention approach.

Camden has adopted a new approach to mitigating the impacts of overcrowding on local families. The project seeks to develop packages of tailored interventions around space management, health, education, play and parenting and aims to help overcrowded families stay where they are by improving their quality of life or move elsewhere by providing high quality housing advice. By the end of 2008, Camden aim to have helped over 300 families to improve their circumstances, to have engaged 125 families in examining alternative housing options and to have made 125 property improvements to overcrowded homes, ranging from space saving, small adaptations to larger scale works. They are currently working with 251 households, with 40 properties identified for improvements, 56 households engaging with alternative housing options, and 8 household members engaging with a local employment project (as part of an overall strategy to improve the life

and employment skills of their unemployed tenants).

Borough-level

Hackney has given greater priority to under occupiers in the allocations framework. Financial support is offered to cover the costs of moving, whilst amenities in the new home are upgraded. An additional bedroom is also on offer, if required. A bespoke 'handholding' service is provided for elderly tenants throughout the move process. The number of transfers for local authority under occupiers has increased as a result from 136 in 2006-07 to a target (expected to be met) of 200 in 2007-08, with the family homes freed-up through this process ring-fenced for overcrowded families. Of a target to move 25 overcrowded households to the private sector, 20 have been completed.

Kingston upon Thames are procuring 30 large family sized units in the private sector on long leases to offer overcrowded Council tenants some 'breathing space' whilst they bid for appropriately sized social rented homes. Tenants can remain in their Breathing Space home for up to four and a half years and Kingston are seeking to increase the proportion of large family homes on new developments to offer to these families. The 30 private sector leased (PSL) properties are being procured during the year to October 2008 and 15 have already been let, with a further three homes being advertised through choice based lettings and offered to prospective tenants. The first families to move are absolutely delighted with their new Breathing Space homes and looking forward to enjoying a more comfortable 2008.

Tower Hamlets offers enhanced grants to under occupying tenants in properties with three or more bedrooms. There is a dedicated support officer for these households and a packing and removal service for vulnerable tenants. As part of this initiative the scheme also provides intensive support for overcrowded tenants with specific health needs; offering these households appropriate advice and information on their housing options, so that they may secure a move to alternative suitable accommodation. In a similar initiative last year, a significant number of larger size homes was released and 32 overcrowded tenants rehoused to alternative suitable accommodation. So far this year Tower Hamlets has rehoused 90 under occupying families, freeing up these homes for those most in need.

Sub-regional

In the **South-East London** sub-region the Perfect Fit under occupation scheme brings together five boroughs and 12 registered social landlords (RSLs). Starting with a database of under occupying tenants from the participating RSLs, each RSL contributes about five desirable properties (ground or first floor flats and maisonettes, houses or new build properties) to the scheme each year. A designated Under Occupation Officer then matches clients to property, based on priority (who is giving up the most desirable property, bedroom size, medical need, etc). The Under Occupation Officer offers a personal hand holding service including home visits, accompanied viewings, assistance with signing-up, vacation notices, removals and connections. Removals and connections costs and a small financial incentive payment of £200 per bedroom released are offered to each under occupying tenant moved. The property that the under occupying tenant releases is then given to the landlord to allocate to a severely overcrowded household from their own waiting list. The property that is released by the overcrowded household is given to the host authority for them to nominate a client to. Since August 2007, the scheme has achieved 22 moves, with one case under offer and a further seven properties offered to the scheme.

Developing a Strategy

7. The pilots exemplify a set of different strategies to tackling overcrowding, selected to respond to local circumstances. Two base strategies are represented in the pilots:
 - (a) moving overcrowded households into larger properties, which are made available by one of the following methods:
 - (i) increasing the overall supply of properties through arrangements with registered social landlords (RSLs) and private landlords
 - (ii) supporting people under occupying a property to move to a smaller one, whether local authority, RSL or leased from the private sector
 - (b) improving living conditions in the property occupied by an overcrowded household, enabling the household members to remain in the same property, as an alternative to rehousing
8. In each case the development of the strategy was influenced by some or all of the following factors (not in priority order):
 - (a) the aspirations and views of tenants, expressed through surveys, in-depth interviews, or in comments and complaints to authorities
 - (b) the relative sizes of the local authority, RSL and private rented sectors in the catchment area
 - (c) estimates, where available, of (i) the extent and severity of overcrowding, including the length of waiting times for a move, and (ii) the extent of under occupation
 - (d) consistency and conformity with the objectives of other policies and services of the authority. In particular, it is worth noting that focussing resources on tackling overcrowding need not be – as is sometimes argued – at the expense of achieving the 2010 target for halving the number of households in temporary accommodation (see paragraph 32)
 - (e) the likelihood of the selected strategy being able to generate what the pilots have identified as critical success factors:
 - (i) positive reception from tenants
 - (ii) dedicated funding to pay for staff resources and other incentive payments
 - (iii) staff with the commitment, resource and skills to engage with and support tenants

- (iv) member-level commitment
- (v) ready engagement by partners

Identifying the scale of overcrowding and under occupation

Overcrowding

9. Surveys in which individual households are not identifiable, such as the national census, will give a broad-brush measure of the density of overcrowding within an authority's area. All five borough-based pilots had identified a figure for the number of overcrowded households, all but one using local definitions of overcrowding (the exception used the Survey of English Housing's Bedroom Standard).
10. Apart from ensuring an accurate picture of the extent of overcrowding in an authority's area, maintaining a regularly updated database of overcrowded households has two advantages:
 - (a) it facilitates timely and targeted action when rehousing opportunities become available
 - (b) it enables authorities to improve the robustness of their strategies by allowing modelling of 'what-if' scenarios, eg what would be the consequences if the priority of all severely overcrowded households was moved up a band?
11. Measuring the impact, as opposed to the incidence, of overcrowding has proved challenging. Authorities may be able to form a view by collating data in conjunction with other services and agencies about people who present with conditions or behaviours that could arise from severely overcrowded³ conditions, eg ill-health, under-achievement at school, family breakdown.
12. Action to improve the information base has also been taken at sub-regional coordinator level (see paragraph 59). This offers an additional resource with the scope to develop a consistent approach across authorities.

³ The extent to which a dwelling is 'over' or 'under' occupied can be measured by comparing the number of bedrooms currently rented by an existing tenant with the minimum number a local authority would be prepared to offer if they were to let them another property. The Survey of English Housing defines severely overcrowded as two or more bedrooms short of the Bedroom Standard.

Under occupation

- 13.** None of the pilots has an exact number for under occupied households, though all have an idea of the scale of under occupation locally. Exact numbers are not important, since the primary aim will be to reduce overcrowding, with reducing under occupation being a means to the end. But knowing whether there are under occupiers willing to move is an essential factor in deciding on the preferred overcrowding strategy.
- 14.** Authorities do however need to identify those under occupiers to whom incentives can be targeted, as well as to publicise incentives more widely (see paragraph 22 below). This exercise may need to be undertaken on a regular basis as households' circumstances will change.

Implementing the Strategy

- 15.** This section reviews what the pilots are doing to deliver their chosen strategies, identifying practices that work and any pitfalls encountered. Unless explicitly stated otherwise, the experience is assumed to be transferable to comparable authorities.

Moving overcrowded households to larger properties

- 16.** There are, broadly, four issues to be addressed:
- (a) identifying overcrowded households and their preferences for rehousing
 - (b) identifying under occupied households, and the factors that would encourage them to move to a smaller property
 - (c) providing targeted support to households considering a move
 - (d) securing additions to the supply of housing, for both overcrowded and under occupying households to move to.

Identifying overcrowded households and their preferences

- 17.** Apart from surveys, overcrowded households will also self-identify or be identified as such and referred by other agencies that come into contact with them. Alerting tenants to the options for rehousing has been supported by targeted publicity campaigns, for example through advertising in local newspapers, in local authority and registered social landlord (RSL) communications to their tenants, and by word of mouth.

- 18.** In addition, experience from the pilots shows that appointing a dedicated visiting officer can improve the quality of information about overcrowded households at the individual level, for example by:
- (a) identifying overcrowded households on the housing register and transfer lists
 - (b) acting on referrals from housing advice teams, ALMOs and other services, including social services and environmental health
 - (c) visiting identified households to assess the severity of the overcrowding, and to begin a discussion of options for alleviating it.
- 19.** Caution is needed in managing expectations. Many local authorities' ability to rehouse overcrowded tenants will be constrained by the availability of suitably sized properties. They should therefore ensure that information on housing options across all tenures is available otherwise excessive publicity for the scheme can be counter-productive. Local authorities that operate a choice-based lettings scheme may find this allows households to adjust their expectations accordingly about the availability of properties. Central to making this approach work effectively is allocating overcrowded households to appropriate bands or priority levels.
- 20.** Moving out of local authority housing and giving up a secure tenancy has not proved to be a significant obstacle to many overcrowded households. Although the pilot schemes strongly advise tenants to take legal advice before giving up a secure tenancy, tenants have been prepared – to a degree that has surprised some authorities – to do this in exchange for a better quality of housing.

Identifying under occupied households, and the factors that would encourage them to move

- 21.** Encouraging people who are under occupying properties to move to a smaller one is an important means of increasing the pool of larger properties for overcrowded households. Although some under occupiers may take the initiative in seeking a smaller property, many will not perceive any, or sufficient, advantage in doing so. It follows that authorities need to be proactive in identifying under occupiers.
- 22.** This is not a straightforward process, particularly for non-local authority properties. Experience from the pilots and the associated sub-regional coordinators' work highlights several techniques to identify under occupation, including:

- (a) developing a range of incentives (see paragraph 23 below) that would encourage under occupiers to identify themselves as interested in a move
- (b) publicising those incentives, using a variety of techniques including:
 - i) mailshots (included with rent statements)
 - ii) advertising in local newspapers
 - iii) articles and advertising in local authority and registered social landlord (RSL) newsletters to tenants, and in choice-based letting scheme brochures
 - iv) roadshows
 - (v) word of mouth about the benefits of the under occupiers moves scheme

The experience of the pilots is that mailshots have been less effective in attracting responses than the other methods

- (c) asking other services and agencies that visit people at home to be alert for under occupation, particularly where a move to a smaller property could be beneficial to the occupants, and to encourage them to identify themselves to the housing service or refer them direct. Some London authorities (not in the pilots) have adopted a scheme for making reward payments to front-line staff in any service who identify under occupied households in the course of their work.

23. Incentives for under occupiers to move include:

- (a) a supply of properties that are attractive to them. Some schemes incorporate a budget for minor improvements or redecoration to be spent in line with the new occupants' preferences or target new build properties
- (b) increasing the priority for under occupiers within the allocations system so that their chances of securing a suitable property – whether through a bidding system or other means – are improved
- (c) offering an additional bedroom for family visitors or potentially carers
- (d) cash incentive grants, payable on completion of a move, which typically rise either in proportion to the size of the property or the number of bedrooms being given up. The scale of grants varies between authorities, though at present there is an absence of robust evidence to demonstrate a direct link between the size of the payments and the number of under occupier moves achieved
- (e) financial help with removal expenses, and with the deposit and initial rent payments (practice varies to whether the rent payment is recoverable)

- (f) personal support and ‘hand-holding’ through the move process (see paragraphs 24-26 below).

Experience suggests that, where an authority has limited access to incentives to particular groups, for example older people, some degree of flexibility in the eligibility criteria is beneficial in persuading under occupiers to move.

Providing targeted support to households considering a move

- 24.** The experience of all the pilots is that providing effective personalised support (‘handholding’) to assist people to move house is key to a successful scheme. As noted above, this is a particular incentive to under occupiers, whose decision to move is voluntary and who might otherwise be put off by the inconveniences and effort involved in moving house. This approach is also being used to support overcrowded households relocating to the private rented sector.

“I now understand how the system works and bid for appropriate property. Did not realise that if we had rent arrears we may get bypassed” (*Local authority tenant*)

- 25.** The precise nature of the support varies between schemes, and is dependent on whether the moves are of under occupied or overcrowded households, but some or all of the following facilities are offered:

Before the decision to move

- (a) providing access for potential movers to a specialist officer or team more rapidly than they might receive through the ‘mainstream’ transfer service
- (b) ensuring people understand that registering an interest in a move does not commit them to moving
- (c) arranging open viewing days, including group visits by tenants, and ‘swap shops’ (where photographs of available properties are displayed)
- (d) personal advice on the financial issues associated with moving, including one-off and on-going expenses
- (e) highlighting the implications of giving up a secure tenancy, advice on what this means for the tenant’s priority on the authority’s waiting list (if relevant), and encouragement to seek independent legal advice
- (f) where properties are advertised as part of a choice-based lettings scheme, help with understanding how the bidding system works and encouragement/reminders to bid
- (g) accompanying prospective movers to property viewings.

After the decision to move

- (h) continued contact and advice on issues as they arise, as part of an overall case management approach
- (i) completion of forms, managing contacts with landlords or lettings teams, arranging removals, phone, utilities and domestic appliance disconnections and reconnections, and mail redirections, all on the tenant's behalf
- (j) advice and support in resolving Housing Benefit (HB)/Local Housing Allowance (LHA) claims and payments issues (one pilot used some of its funding to pay for overtime to fast-track HB payments to landlords for people on the pilot scheme)
- (k) support on the day of the move.

26. A key success factor in this approach is to appoint officers with the appropriate people skills for engaging with tenants, landlords, other agencies in a supportive manner that achieves results. The approach also facilitates identification of unmet needs, through referrals to other agencies such as adult social care.

“I couldn't believe it, it all happened so quickly. I was offered the property, viewed it and when it was ready we moved in. The whole process was almost painless, it was tiring packing a four bed house and garage but it was an opportunity to have a good sort-out and the results are definitely worth it.” *(RSL tenant)*

Securing additions to the supply of housing

- 27.** The extent to which increasing the availability of overall housing stock is needed as part of an overcrowding strategy will depend on several factors, but particularly on the availability to local authorities of larger (for overcrowded households) and smaller (for under occupiers) properties. Practice varies among the pilots, ranging from increasing reliance on the private rented sector to managing moves within existing local authority stock by better matching of household size to property size.
- 28.** Pilot schemes seeking to increase access to private rented housing are adopting the following approaches:
- (a) drawing on the pool of houses secured by the authority's private leasing team for a range of housing needs, including homeless families. A proportion of the leased stock is negotiated by the overcrowding team for rehousing overcrowded households on a fixed term let

- (b) direct liaison with private sector landlords. One pilot is employing private lettings negotiators - with estate agency backgrounds for credibility – who identify suitable properties and negotiate a lease; they are paid a basic salary plus a commission payment for every property acquired for the scheme
- (c) encouraging landlords to come forward in response to advertisements in local media and word of mouth contacts.

- 29.** Competition between local authorities seeking to lease private sector properties from within the same geographical areas presents a challenge. One sub-region is considering whether some form of cooperation agreement at the sub-regional level would be beneficial, but this is at an early stage.
- 30.** One pilot scheme found that landlords were less likely to come forward with properties if they perceived the market was limited, for example by lack of local authority funds to operate a scheme.
- 31.** The registered social landlord (RSL) sector is a further source of properties for use with overcrowding or under occupation schemes, though it is important that engagement with the sector is well-managed (see paragraphs 43-46 below). Some pilots are already looking to RSLs to improve the supply by extending the scheme benefits available to under occupying local authority tenants to RSL tenants, and others have plans to bring them in.
- 32.** Where reliance is primarily on rehousing overcrowded households within a local authority's stock, schemes are ensuring that either a proportion or all of the property becoming vacant – for example from rehousing under occupiers - is retained for overcrowded families, with the subsequent void becoming part of the general supply of lettings. This 'chain-lettings' style approach has helped the pilots ensure that there has been no adverse impact on the achievement of the 2010 target to reduce the numbers in temporary accommodation, an area which has been of concern. In particular:
- (a) in the majority of cases, and particularly where a new property has been added to the stock, moving an under occupied or overcrowded household creates a void for a homeless household or other household in need
 - (b) in the experience of at least one pilot, assessment of overcrowded households as part of a tackling overcrowding scheme has enabled some households, who may have potentially become homeless, to be helped before crisis point

(c) adopting an allocations policy which gives higher priority to categories other than homeless people sends a clear message that becoming homeless is not the optimum route to obtaining social housing.

- 33.** Tackling overcrowding is prompting some re-consideration of the priority for new build in social housing. In some areas this has so far emphasised the need for more family-sized housing, but there can be advantage in new developments that would be attractive to under occupiers, so freeing up larger properties.
- 34.** Pilot schemes are also being run alongside existing schemes to increase the availability of housing, including Seaside and Country Homes, and home swap schemes.
- 35.** Although not a focus of these pilots, some sub-regional coordinators have sought to increase the larger stock available by emphasising or modifying the extensions and deconversions programme⁴. In this way, lettings becoming available under the programme can be allocated exclusively to rehousing overcrowded households.

Improving living conditions in the current property as an alternative to rehousing

- 36.** One of the pilot authorities has added to its existing suite of options for overcrowded families by trialling a new scheme in which rehousing is not the central objective. Instead, the scheme recognises that improving the well-being of overcrowded households is a valuable response to people who do not want to move to a different area and whose prospects of rehousing in the short or medium term are poor.
- 37.** The key features of the scheme are as follows:
- (a) it is designed to deliver multiple benefits, not to relieve overcrowding in isolation. The process of engaging with tenants to identify improvements that could be made to their homes is managed so as to challenge the perception that mitigation – whether by rehousing or other means – is the sole responsibility of the local authority; instead, tenants are encouraged to develop the skills that will enable them to implement their own solutions, as some tenants are already doing (eg by changing the layout of rooms to create more space, and drawing up rotas for different household members to use the same room at different times). The pilot also aims to highlight the educational, health and emotional impacts of overcrowding and develop responses in partnership with other authority services

⁴ The Greater London Authority has invested £34 million in pilot schemes to test how best to tackle some of the worst problems of overcrowding in London. The schemes include finding ways to build more family homes, extending existing homes, and freeing up larger homes for overcrowded families.

- (b) underpinning this approach is active case management, providing tailored interventions packaged according to a household's needs. These are developed in conjunction with the households by a team of specially recruited and trained advisers – not all from a housing background
- (c) interventions can include:
- (i) *physical improvements* to address pressure points, such as fold-away study desks, retractable partition walls, washbasin in a bedroom. To develop relevant expertise, the team has been working with a local architect who has provided training on the innovative use of internal space, as well as on building regulations and on reading property plans. Tenants are able to use a dedicated website to help them visualise changes and what might be achieved by them
 - (ii) *help with life skills improvement* to address pressure points, by improved use of space, time and activity management
 - (iii) *family support*, such as counselling to reduce arguments and other sources of household tension, and referrals to other services, such as adult social care or children's services
 - (iv) *partnership with other agencies*, as part of the overall approach to improving well-being, including those who help people into paid employment.

38. Initial reactions indicate it would be feasible to extend the scheme to the registered social landlord (RSL) sector, given the necessary resources.

“A client, residing in a one-bedroom property with his wife and three children, could not make the best use of space in his home as he could not afford new furnishings. When an overcrowding adviser carried out her initial visit, the family had all been sleeping in the bedroom each night, with the eldest child on a mattress on the floor, and there was insufficient storage for the family's clothes, which were stored in a bulky, broken cabinet. Following this assessment, the local authority provided the family with bunk beds for the children, a sofa bed for the parents to sleep in the living room, slim-line wardrobes and a space-saving folding dining table. The family now have improved sleep, and space to study and eat together as a family, and are happier now their new furniture has arrived.” (*Local authority caseworker*)

- 39.** An alternative approach to enabling the main household to remain in the property is to focus on facilitating a move for non-dependent children out of the home, so reducing or eliminating overcrowded conditions. This option is a matter of choice for the household but if a realistic option, facilitation can take various forms, including casework-oriented assistance (eg with rent deposits and benefit claims) and policy measures (eg giving non-dependents in overcrowded households a higher priority for bedsits or difficult-to-let properties).

Engaging the private sector

- 40.** Where the private sector is the only significant source of additional properties, as is the case with some of the pilots, incentives may be necessary to persuade private landlords to participate.
- 41.** Options and incentives adopted by the pilots include:
- (a) a non-repayable advance to the landlord of four weeks' rent direct from the scheme
 - (b) ensuring the deposit and initial rent are paid from a cash incentive grant, so reducing delays in making payments to the landlord
 - (c) guaranteed steady income to the landlord, achieved where the property is leased to the local authority rather than direct to the tenant.
- 42.** Potential deterrents to participation by private sector landlords in a private sector leasing scheme include:
- (a) delays in the payment of Housing Benefit
 - (b) the requirement to meet minimum accommodation standards before a property will be accepted for a leasing scheme
 - (c) loss of control over selection of tenants for their properties
 - (d) any perception by landlords that the market for local authority lettings is small due to capacity/budgetary constraints in the authority.

In practice, none of these factors appears so far to have had a significant impact on the ability of the pilots to progress, and only the fourth has been identified as having a potential impact on future delivery.

Engaging the registered social landlord sector

- 43.** One of the pilots has focussed exclusively on harnessing resources in the RSL sector to reduce under occupation as part of an overcrowding strategy. In some areas, RSLs have high levels of under occupation but tenancies remain relatively static. The key incentive to RSLs was the offer of a

handholding service, proven to work in the local authority sector, funded by the Communities and Local Government allocation which would free up under occupied properties and so:

- (a) increase a RSL's ability to move people off its own transfer lists into suitable accommodation
- (b) demonstrate improved utilisation of its housing stock.

44. Other pilots have included RSL tenants within their schemes; and the remainder are considering extending their schemes to RSLs in the future.

“We have felt ‘at home’ from the day we moved in. It has been a life changing experience for us, our neighbours are lovely, and the park behind us is great for our foster son who is autistic. We can park the car outside; bring our shopping in without having to climb two flights of stairs and best of all less housework! Our family think it is the best thing we’ve done – and so do we!” (*RSL tenant*)

45. Some techniques for engaging RSLs are:

- (a) establishing a joint board to include RSL representatives, to deal with such issues as publicity, allocations policy, nomination rights, and measuring progress
- (b) a willingness of at least a minority of RSLs to show leadership on behalf of the sector
- (c) building on common housing register arrangements, where these exist
- (d) availability and offer of tried-and-tested processes to reduce RSL nervousness, including – at least initially – the ability to offer additional services (eg publicity for the scheme) at no cost to the RSLs
- (e) the engagement needs to be at a defined geographical level: it seems unlikely that engagement at a level any higher than a London sub-region would be feasible, principally because of the number of partners that would become involved
- (f) local authorities selecting as development partners only those registered social landlords (RSLs) willing to participate in an overcrowding or under occupation scheme.

- 46.** One pilot has developed a ‘three-part lettings chain’ to overcome the situation in which RSL properties are allocated direct to a local authority which then moves a single household into it. Under the three-part approach, an under occupying household moves from a three or four bed RSL property (A) into a one or two bed (B) offered by a RSL. An overcrowded household from a one or two bed RSL (C) then moves into the vacated property A. The local authority then nominates tenants to move into C. The benefit is that the overcrowded household have a greater chance of securing a move, and the local authority still gains a property.

Measuring the Impact

- 47.** All the pilots have quantitative targets and all are on track to meet all or most of them. The types of target include:
- (a) reduction in number of overcrowded households in the borough per year
 - (b) reduction in number of severely overcrowded households in the borough per year
 - (c) number of overcrowded households transferred to the private sector per year
 - (d) number of under occupied households rehoused per year/during the pilot
 - (e) number of properties improved to reduce impact of overcrowding during the pilot.
- 48.** There are also examples of intermediate targets, including:
- (a) number of clients seen per week by visiting officer/project team
 - (b) number of properties secured for use by the scheme per month
 - (c) number of households engaging with the housing options service.
- 49.** Softer measures, particularly tenant feedback on satisfaction and well being, and numbers of complaints or improved perceptions of the authority, are also monitored.
- 50.** Robust evidence of achieving desired results, with measurable outcomes to be achieved in exchange for future funding, presented effectively to senior officers and members and linked to an authority’s priorities and objectives (eg the local area agreement (LAA)), should improve the chance of obtaining additional funding for overcrowding initiatives. One of the pilots has secured substantial additional funds by using this approach.

Sub-Regional Coordination in London

Introduction

- 51.** Sub-regional coordination has been developed in London in recent years as a means of managing certain housing issues more effectively than would be possible at either individual borough level or at the Greater London level. In order to strengthen sub-regional coordination activity on tackling overcrowding, Communities and Local Government allocated £100,000 funding to each of the five sub-regions in London for developmental work.
- 52.** At the time of writing (March 2008), progress across the sub-regions is varied. In particular, sub-regional coordinators specifically addressing overcrowding issues have in most cases not been in post long enough to be generating significant results, and in two sub-regions the funding is being applied to purposes other than strengthening coordination capacity. Details are in the box below.
- 53.** A key test of the effectiveness and value of the sub-regional coordination arrangements will be the extent to which they can make a positive impact on the pathfinder schemes (see paragraph 1)⁵.
- 54.** Consequently, this note reflects work in progress, and is drawn from a limited evidence base. Some references reflect an informed estimate of the potential of effective sub-regional coordination rather than evaluated good practice.

⁵ Note that the sub-regional coordinators will not be accountable for the performance of the pathfinders. Each local authority will account individually to Communities and Local Government.

Tackling Overcrowding: Sub-regional coordination in London. Position at March 2008

West London. The sub-region has had a dedicated coordinator for overcrowding and under occupation issues in place since January 2007, funded by Communities and Local Government. He has invested considerable time in building relationships with authority officers across the sub-region, enabling him to move quickly to develop initiatives once the *Communities and Local Government Action Plan* was published. Several initiatives have been taken across the sub-region, including working with registered social landlords (RSLs), development of a best practice guide for managing under occupation, refocusing the extensions and deconversions programme, and plans for information improvements.

North London. The sub-region has not appointed a dedicated coordinator for overcrowding and under occupation issues. A survey carried out on behalf of the sub-regional coordinator established that the differences in approaches currently in place in each borough were such that joint initiatives would be of limited value. The bulk of the Communities and Local Government funding is therefore being allocated to each borough so that it can pilot practices that it is not currently using but which are in use elsewhere in the sub-region, as a means of bringing all the boroughs to a similar level of activity and increasing the number of moves from under occupied properties. These pilots are expected to run for two years from November 2007.

East London. The sub-region has had two dedicated coordinators for overcrowding and under occupation issues in place since September 2007, funded by Communities and Local Government. One post focuses on developing strategy and plans, the other on operational issues (information collection, website, etc). A paper has been produced summarising current approaches to tackling overcrowding and what is known about the scale and nature of the problem; it proposes a set of sub-regional actions with targets.

South-East London. The sub-region decided to use the Communities and Local Government funding for a pilot scheme to engage registered social landlords (RSLs) directly in managing under occupation rather than add to the existing coordination machinery. A description of the pilot is in the earlier part of this advice note (see paragraph 43).

South-West London. The sub-region has had a dedicated coordinator for overcrowding and under occupation issues in place since January 2008, funded by Communities and Local Government. She was appointed only after extensive consideration within the sub-region about the purposes and outputs of such a post. As the overcrowding/under occupation project manager, her objectives include supporting performance improvements across the boroughs, developing a housing options approach across the sub-region, and examining the feasibility of introducing a scheme involving RSLs similar to that in the south-east sub-region.

Benefits of sub-regional coordination

- 55.** The most obvious benefit to date is that the sub-regional work on overcrowding has provided boroughs with an additional resource to support their own work as local housing authorities. Although it is difficult to say with certainty that the initiatives would not have happened without the support, and even leadership, of the sub-regional coordinator, it seems clear that coordinators have had some impact on borough activities.
- 56.** Not all of the actions enabled or facilitated by this resource have been put into effect in all sub-regions, and many have been limited so far to only one or two sub-regions. However all are in principle capable of being replicated in each sub-region, and in sub-regions outside London, modified to suit local circumstances.
- 57.** Enhanced sub-regional coordination has impacted on the following:
- (a) greater *awareness* of the need to tackle overcrowding
 - (b) increased *understanding* of the nature of the problem
 - (c) *collaboration* on strategies and schemes
 - (d) improved *performance* in using resources
 - (e) creating new opportunities for partnership working to deliver solutions.

Awareness

- 58.** There has been an increase in awareness among political leadership and senior management in authorities of the importance of tackling overcrowding. This awareness is seen as a pre-requisite for effective action, which needs to be sustained over time. Sub-regional coordinators have worked with authorities to raise awareness, for example by:

- (a) building relationships with key individuals in authorities and partner organisations
- (b) giving presentations to members and senior officers
- (c) keeping the issue as a regular agenda item for key committees and working groups
- (d) engaging the RSL sector at a sub-regional level
- (e) conducting surveys of what authorities are already doing
- (f) maintaining dedicated websites as an information resource.

Understanding

59. Having a clear understanding of the nature and extent of overcrowding – and of under occupation where reducing it is an element of an overcrowding strategy – is critical to selecting the most effective approach. Sub-regional coordinators have offered a research facility and have worked with authorities and London Councils to improve the information base, in particular by:

- (a) coordinating and facilitating a survey of the ways in which individual authorities are measuring overcrowding, focussing on definitions used and data collection and reporting, with the aim of identifying differences and drawing conclusions about the robustness of current information systems
- (b) supporting authorities to make better use of available data, including tapping into unused sources such as information held by choice-based letting schemes. One sub-regional coordinator has developed and secured agreement to a common protocol which ensures consistent recording of overcrowding data in the choice-based lettings scheme used by the majority of boroughs in the sub-region. This allows the sub-region to map the prevalence of overcrowding by one, two or more bedrooms, adapt the system to assess need according to any change in definition and to have a more informed discussion on possible amendments to the banding scheme to take more account of severely overcrowded households
- (c) demonstrating the value of ensuring that the necessary focus on gathering and analysing information and evidence is not crowded out by the pressure to take visible initiatives and actions. One sub-regional coordinator is funding boroughs to map at least a proportion of their largest properties, as an alternative to a full-scale survey of under occupation. This followed the findings of one borough where at least 59% of all five bed and over properties were under occupied

- (e) encouraging good practice and sharing techniques for improving the information base. One sub-regional coordinator produced a guide on good practice in identifying under occupied properties
- (f) arranging workshops and seminars to discuss issues and disseminate examples of what has worked.

Collaboration

60. Although individual authorities retain the responsibility for deciding on their strategies and schemes for tackling overcrowding, there is evidence of value in collaborating at sub-regional level on specific issues. Examples of such collaboration where the sub-regional coordinator is taking a lead role include:

- (a) mapping current initiatives and practices across the sub-region (eg on new build, allocation policies, securing additional properties, and so on) with a view to identifying good practice and to discouraging individual authorities from reinventing the wheel. In one sub-region, the mapping work led to a change in the original plans for sub-regional activity once a clearer picture of borough activities and plans was available
- (b) seeking agreement on which individual authorities will pilot specific schemes or practices, so eliminating duplication and spreading the risk of initiatives failing: this is of particular importance in the use of the pathfinder funding. One sub-regional coordinator has developed a pilot under occupation scheme covering three boroughs, using joint marketing material
- (c) bringing authorities together with registered social landlords (RSLs) at a sub-regional level to promote common approaches, recognising that RSLs do not operate along authority boundaries. For example, one sub-region (see paragraph 43) has developed a partnership with RSLs to apply tried-and-tested techniques for managing under occupation in local authority properties to RSL properties, thus increasing the supply of properties in the sub-region. Another is working with RSLs to find solutions to overcrowding, including rehousing for adult children at home and incentives to move into the private sector
- (d) developing sub-regional strategies for tackling over-crowding as a basis for:
 - (i) influencing the allocation of sub-regional funding programmes: in one sub-region, all new lettings from the extensions and de-conversions programme are being reserved for overcrowded households
 - (ii) encouraging individual authorities to identify tackling overcrowding in key policy documents such as Local Area Agreements

- (iii) the development of authority-level action plans
- (e) providing a bridge between the strategic/policy and operational levels: many authority officers are for obvious reasons very focussed on operational issues; identification of issues sub-regionally has assisted escalation to more senior policy levels
- (f) creating economies of scale, for example by bringing together front-line staff involved with overcrowding from across the sub-region for joint training sessions.

Performance

61. The sub-regional coordinator can act as a ‘critical friend’ to authorities by applying acquired expertise to support improvements in the performance of initiatives to tackle overcrowding. For example:

- (a) in one sub-region the coordinator identified that three authorities were anticipating underspends on the extensions and deconversions programme. Through negotiation with the boroughs and the Greater London Authority, agreement was reached to apply extension and deconversion funds to improve empty properties in the three authorities with the underspends, so bringing more properties on stream at a smaller cost per property
- (b) mapping different approaches to tackling overcrowding and evaluating their effectiveness, either by benchmarking against national good practice or by comparing authorities across the sub-region, can stimulate performance improvements, and some sub-regions are adopting this approach.

Partnerships

62. The challenges posed by lack of alignment between local authority boundaries and other public or third sector operational boundaries can be addressed at the sub-regional level. Sub-regional coordinators have facilitated links with and between:

- (a) Registered Social Landlords
- (b) Primary Care Trusts
- (c) London Councils, and Greater London Authority
- (d) Housing Corporation
- (e) Non Government Organisations.

Further potential

- 63.** The assessment of the benefits identified above is provisional, pending further experience of sub-regional coordinator work. Two particular issues will, if they arise, test the limits of sub-regional influence:
- (a) proposals to pool funding between authorities, with the aim of maximising the effectiveness of the spend
 - (b) proposals for common policies across the sub-region where these conflict with the existing policies of some authorities (progress to date has largely been by 'working with the grain' of authority policies).
- 64.** In theory, sub-regional coordination could offer scope for procurement savings, if authorities can agree on specifications, etc.

Mechanisms for sub-regional coordination

- 65.** Where a dedicated coordinator specifically addressing overcrowding issues is in place, the post operates as part of the broader sub-regional coordination machinery. Reporting arrangements vary, though typically the coordinator will report to the overarching sub-regional coordinator and to a sub-regional officer group (which may be lettings managers, overcrowding policy officers or other representatives of each of the boroughs).
- 66.** A close working relationship with the sub-regional coordinator responsible for homelessness issues has been found to be valuable.
- 67.** In terms of giving focus to the work, some sub-regions have found it useful to establish an overcrowding project board, with representation from the boroughs and key partners. Others have found that progress can be made using existing structures, including member-level and officer meetings, if the sub-regional coordinator attends to present and discuss key issues.
- 68.** The sub-regional coordinators have a variety of objectives in their work plans. These include:
- (a) securing better use of housing stock by mapping allocations policies and modifying them in the light of best practice
 - (b) mitigating the effects of overcrowding, by working with other agencies
 - (c) developing a 'housing options' approach to reducing overcrowding
 - (d) raising the performance of the boroughs in managing under-occupation
 - (e) arranging seminars and events to share best practice and challenge authorities to improve.

69. The sub-regional coordinators meet among themselves on a regular basis. Although all the dedicated overcrowding coordinators are located within the housing service of a host borough, some have questioned whether this is the optimum arrangement and that co-location to provide peer support and test out ideas informally with one another might be a more productive option.
70. It is evident from experience to date that the skills and personality of the sub-regional coordinator are more important than the formal reporting structures. Being able to build relationships and influence activities are central to the role.
71. Some pilot scheme managers considered that earlier and structured engagement between the pilots would have been beneficial in eliminating duplication and facilitating shared learning. This is a point for consideration by the pathfinders and the sub-regional coordinators.

Further Information

72. Local authorities seeking further information about individual pilot schemes in this note can obtain further details from Communities and Local Government (Nicki Goddard 020 7944 0592 or Caroline Williams 020 7944 3492). Additional information on overcrowding is available on the Communities and Local Government website: www.communities.gov.uk

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