



SCRUTINY FORUM

Report of the

SCRUTINY PANEL

into

**LIAISON ARRANGEMENTS BETWEEN
AREA HOUSING OFFICES AND
THE BENEFITS SERVICE**

11 April 2000

HIGHWAYS SCRUTINY PANEL

MEMBERS:	Councillor A Palfreeman (Chair) Councillor A Smith
LEAD OFFICER:	Stephan Brown (Head of Service - Catering, Caretaking and Cleaning Services)
COMMITTEE ADMINISTRATOR:	Darren Tones (Tel. 01484 221709)

The Panel held open public meetings at 9.30 a.m. on Monday 13 December 1999, Monday 17 January 2000 and Wednesday 2 February 2000.

The Panel received submissions from Kirklees Housing Service and Revenues and Benefits Service together with KAFTA and the CHAS Housing Aid Service. At all "open meetings" it benefited from the presence of the Lead Officer, **Stephan Brown**, and Officers of the Housing Service and Revenues and Benefits Service as required by the Panel.

This report was prepared as part of the standing work programme of the Panel. The Terms of Reference were:

"To review liaison arrangements between Area Housing Offices and the Benefits Service in relation to Local Authority tenants who transfer from one Council property to another, and the effects of that transfer on benefits arrangements."

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 An ad hoc Scrutiny Panel has been set up to review the current liaison arrangements between Area Housing Offices and the Benefits Service in relation to Local Authority tenants who transferred from one property to another, and the effects of that transfer on Benefit arrangements.
- 1.2 The reason for the Review had followed on from two Review Board cases involving disabled claimants who had been identified suitable alternative accommodation but had been unable to move immediately into the properties due to them requiring adaptation. This results in both claimants incurring rent arrear liabilities as a result of taking a tenancy on two dwellings.
- 1.3 The Panel have investigated the cause of the problem and have provided recommendations to resolve such issues, recognising the need to identify a practical solution without causing any disruption to services.
- 1.4 The Panel, during the review, recognised that the Housing Benefits Service had to accept the information provided as "fact" and, in accordance with the Benefit Regulations, a determination would be made with regard to Benefit entitlement. It was noted that when the dual liability had been "unavoidable" on both old and new properties then Benefit would be payable.

1.5 The Panel identified the flexibility which was required throughout Housing Services within current working practices to use the discretion available to delay the take-up of tenancies whilst adaptation work was being undertaken in order to prevent dual liabilities from occurring.

2. PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS:-

2.1 That Housing Services introduce flexibility in their current working practices and use the discretion available to delay the take up of tenancies whilst adaptation work was being undertaken in order to prevent dual liabilities from occurring.

2.2 The Panel expressed concern regarding the level of expertise within the Area Housing Offices with regard to Benefit advice. The Panel advises that clear and concise guidance should be issued to Area Housing Offices to recognise when enquiries needed to be referred to the Benefits Service. In order to address this issue, the Panel recommended that a Benefit Telephone Helpline should be introduced at each Area Housing Office to enable tenants to receive expert advice on benefit matters.

2.3 The Panel recognised that the restructure of the Benefits Service has established the post of Policy Officer and Training Officer(s). In recognising the importance of training for staff dealing with Benefit, the Panel supported the establishment of these posts.

2.4 The Panel recommended that the guidance document prepared by the Benefits Service and issued to other Service areas should be continually updated to prevent it becoming out-dated.

2.5 The Panel, whilst undertaking the review, have identified the difficulties and potential misunderstanding which could occur with the public misinterpreting the Benefit Regulations. The Panel recommended that all literature and instructions issued to the public and other Services should be in plain language.

2.6 That the formal Benefit Application Forms should be reviewed to provide examples and include details to notify claimants when a tenancy could commence on a new property (i.e. once decorations had commenced) in order to prevent dual liabilities from occurring.

3. CONSULTEES

3.1 The Panel have consulted with the CHAS Housing Aid Service, Kirklees Metropolitan Council's Benefits Service and Housing Services, and the Kirklees Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations.