

SUMMARY OF REPORT ISSUED BY THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN ON 7/8/2007 AGAINST THE LONDON BOROUGH OF HOUNSLOW

Allocations

London Borough of Hounslow (06/A/14980)

Maladministration causing injustice

'Miss Russell' (not her real name) complained about the Council's handling of her application for housing. She was initially a waiting list applicant. She became homeless in December 2005 and the Council effectively treated her as a new applicant. When she was moved to long-term temporary accommodation she did not recover the priority (waiting time) she had previously on the waiting list, contrary to the Council's allocation policy.

The Council operates a choice-based lettings scheme for allocating housing, called 'Locata'. It failed to deal properly with Miss Russell and other homeless applicants by assigning priority dates to their applications that were not in line with the terms of its published allocation policy. It also failed to recognise the need to make changes either to its allocation policy or to its practice of treating homeless applicants as new applicants until after Miss Russell complained to the Ombudsman, even though its actions were contrary to the terms of the Housing Act 1996. Also, between December 2005 and June 2007 the Council failed to assign to Miss Russell's homelessness application the priority date it was entitled to under the stated practice.

The Ombudsman finds maladministration causing injustice to Miss Russell, who suffered anxiety and delay, and had to take time and trouble in pursuing her complaint. The Council has agreed to pay Miss Russell £500 compensation. In view of the wider implications of Miss Russell's complaint and the fact that it has highlighted widespread errors in the assignment of priority dates for homeless applicants, the Council has also

- made changes to its allocation policy;
- revised the procedures for its homeless persons unit and arranged officer training; and
- agreed to identify and correct the errors made in the priority dates of other applicants.

The Ombudsman has also asked the Council to:

- confirm when these tasks have been completed and say what action it takes in relation to any applicants who have missed the opportunity of securing permanent accommodation as a result of its errors; and

- carry out further sampling with a view to identifying applicants in similar circumstances to Miss Russell in order to establish whether the Council's stated practice has been applied consistently.

Other local authority partners* within the same choice-based lettings scheme with similar if not identical policies may also be following practices that are not in line with those policies. The Ombudsman will therefore send his report to those local authorities* and invite them to consider taking similar action to that being taken by the London Borough of Hounslow.

* Ealing, Hillingdon, Harrow, Brent, Hammersmith & Fulham Councils.

7 August 2007