

Community Select Committee,
Emerging Recommendations for Housing Allocations Review

At the meeting of the Community Select Committee on 26 September 2017 Members flagged some potential areas for possible recommendations for the review these including the following issues:

- Provision of Direct Debit forms for movers
- Confirm the position regarding the provision of a chronological checklist for tenants that transfer between properties, especially those that transfer from Sheltered Accommodation to General Needs or vice versa
- The ongoing need for robust communications with tenants at all stages of the process
- 18 year olds living at home signing onto the housing waiting list
- The priority given to under occupiers wishing to downsize their properties
- A review of the local connection criteria for persons moving into areas such as Great Ashby whilst on the housing waiting list
- Communication with tenants concerning their position on the waiting list, particularly after an unsuccessful bid through the Choice Based Lettings process.

Following this meeting the Scrutiny officer met with the Empty Homes Manager and the Graduate to discuss the above issues.

RECOMMENDATION 1 – Provision of Direct Debit forms for movers

Reason – During the interview with a tenant from a sheltered scheme who was moving to a general needs property there did not appear to be a smooth transition between the ending of one tenancy and the start of a new one, which included not providing a direct debit mandate for the new tenancy when officers met with the tenant. This issue needs to be tested with officers to see if this is a common feature, a one off case or one that occurs when tenants are moving between sheltered and general needs.

Update – 12 October 2017 – It is now recommended that this recommendation be removed in its current form, as the example given by the resident moving from Sheltered to General Needs appears to be an isolated case as evidenced by the Lettings Advisor and with the check list (see attached) The Empty Homes Manager has stated that, with regards to help with removals that the resident raised at the interview, there is help available in cases of hardship, if the resident has a disability and if they have no family to help them.

RECOMMENDATION 2 – Confirm the position regarding the provision of a chronological checklist for tenants that transfer between properties, especially those that transfer from Sheltered Accommodation to General Needs or vice versa

Reason – Linked to recommendation 1, a chronological check list for the tenant could help the tenant avoid receiving letters from the Council informing them of arrears. It appeared that there such lists were in place for tenants that were

staying in each Housing need but was perhaps not available when moving from Sheltered to General Need and vice versa.

Update – 12 October 2017 – It is now recommended that this recommendation be removed in its current form, as the example given by the resident moving from Sheltered to General Needs appears to be an isolated case as evidenced by the Lettings Advisor and with the check list (see attached). Sheltered Housing Support Workers and Independent Living Workers (who have been reminded of this important checklist) should already be providing the attached check list. The scenario provided should be handled better under a Housing Under One Roof service.

RECOMMENDATION 3 - 18 year olds living at home signing onto the housing waiting list should be considered by officers as to whether this should be allowed under a revised Allocations Policy.

Reason – Members were concerned that 18 year old Stevenage residents who are living at home with their parents and do not have an acute housing need, were using the rules of the bidding system to bid for properties that they knew they would not be successful in bidding for, in order to keep a place on the allocations list, thus increasing their likelihood of building up time on the list and in time moving up the bands. The current Allocations Policy does not discriminate on the age of the bidder.

Update – 12 October 2017 – The Empty Homes Manager has suggested that this item be discussed again with the Committee to provide more context to this issue, especially as the changes to the Benefits Cap in 2019 to under 35s is likely to have a significant impact on this group.

RECOMMENDATION 4 – The priority given to under occupiers wishing to downsize their properties

Reason – currently under-occupiers are effectively unable to bid under the current scheme as they are classed as ‘no priority’, A potential policy change would recommend considering a priority banding for under occupiers to incentivise them to bid for smaller properties more suited to their needs. There are currently 155 Band F applicants seeking to downsize who could benefit from a change to the banding as well as a further 70 applicants in other bands who are also wishing to downsize. There are 270 SBC tenants in overcrowded conditions.

Changing the policy regarding under occupiers opportunity to bid could be the most influential recommendation and have the biggest impact on freeing up stock and moving people on the list into much needed larger accommodation.

RECOMMENDATION 5 - A review of the local connection criteria for persons moving into areas such as Great Ashby whilst on the housing waiting list

Reason – It was felt that for persons who had been resident in Stevenage and then moved out into private rented into very close neighbouring areas such as Great Ashby should not be penalised by losing their local connection points. Currently the criteria state that applicants require a residency qualification of 5 years. There are situations where applicants take up a Private Rented Sector let

just outside of the Borough as there is no suitable accommodation in the Borough but they are then penalised by being taken off the register even if they are outside of the area for just a few months. To alleviate this it was felt that officers should consider introducing a change to the criteria to allow people to be considered over a period of years which would allow a break in their local residency, for instances introducing a period of 5 out of 7 years.

RECOMMENDATION 6 - The ongoing need for robust communications with tenants at all stages of the process to include communication with tenants concerning their banding, particularly after an unsuccessful bid through the Choice Based Lettings process

Reason – Members were of the view that it was necessary for clear communications to be maintained throughout the allocations process. Members were concerned that regarding tenants position on the waiting list this was informally being communicated to tenants following an unsuccessful bid on Choice Based Lettings. This was misleading as each bid was different depending on the unique bidding circumstances, so a resident might be very close to successfully bidding for one property depending on who else was bidding but the next bid they could be less close depending again on what property they bid for and who else was bidding.

Update – 12 October 2017 – The Empty Homes Manager has suggested that this be brought back to Committee to discuss this further. There is a way that bidders can currently see where their bid was within the top 50 bids on the Locator software on the Council's website. This shows bidders where their bid was in bands as follows: 1-5, 6-10, 11-20, 21-30, and so on up to position 50. Officers are suggesting that is not practical to individually communicate with each bidder on a weekly basis and could be more counterproductive.

RECOMMENDATION 7 – That officers make alternative use of hard to let sheltered accommodation, using this to alleviate pressure on SBC stock as temporary or emergency housing for homeless households.

Reason – There is currently extra capacity in sheltered accommodation with bedsits that are unpopular with potential tenants who would otherwise be suitable for sheltered accommodation but who are not keen to take the available bedsits. The use of these units would need to be sensitively handled to accommodate emergency housing for homeless households but it would alleviate pressure on SBC stock if used for this purpose and could only be achieved following a full decant out of a sheltered unit when a new unit became available, but this could potentially save the Council extra costs in avoiding bills for accommodating emergency homeless households in the private sector.

Update – 12 October 2017 – The Empty Homes Manager has advised that there is scope to utilise underused hard to let studio stock but it is not simple. There are two scenarios possible. 1. Use the capacity in the decants of Asquith and Walpole Court for a limited period following the decant and before the demolition and rebuild, which is currently an option being considered, but this is for a limited timescale of a few months. 2. The conversion of seven of the current hard to let studio apartments stock across to one bed flats, currently underway, will make

them more popular and therefore lettable. Previous conversions have shown to make the units more lettable. Not all studios are suitable for conversion, and each one is assessed as they become void, subject to funding availability.