

**Meeting** Executive  
**Portfolio Area** Housing and Housing Development  
**Date** 18 July 2023



## HOUSING UNDER OCCUPATION POLICY REVIEW

### KEY DECISION

#### 1. PURPOSE

- 1.1. This report provides an update on the Under Occupation Policy which suggests various amendments and incentives to encourage those living in homes that are too large for them to downsize into more appropriate accommodation that may better serve their needs, if they wish to do so. A separate policy applies to under occupying successors.
- 1.2. Downsizing into more appropriate homes benefits residents by providing a home that is more manageable both physically and financially. Larger homes can lead to higher energy costs and bedroom taxes.
- 1.3. This policy will also help the Council make best use of its housing stock by freeing up larger homes for families.
- 1.4. The review of the policy is in line with the Allocations Policy review which will be presented to the Executive in September 2023.

#### 2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1. That the reviewed Housing Under Occupation Policy, as attached at Appendix A, be approved and adopted.
- 2.2. That the results of the Downsizing pilot be noted.

2.3. That Executive note that the budget for the Downsizing Officer role has been factored into the 2023/24 budget. Beyond that, a growth bid will be submitted for the 2024/25 HRA business plan to maintain this role.

### **3. BACKGROUND**

- 3.1. Under Occupation formed part of the review of the Allocations Scheme in 2008. The need to consider the Council's approach to under occupation was also highlighted by the Audit Commission in February 2009. This was used to inform the report to the Executive in November 2009.
- 3.2. The Under Occupation Policy was adopted in November 2013 to respond to Welfare Benefit changes which introduced the Social Size Criteria and to address the needs of under and over occupying tenants.
- 3.3. The 2013 Under Occupation Policy offered further incentive such as the extension of the removal scheme to under occupying tenants, financial incentives and additional points per spare bedroom as per the Allocation Policy.
- 3.4. A light touch review of the policy was made in April 2018 which introduced the Home Choice Scheme which allowed incentive payment to be used to pay arrears, if applicable.
- 3.5. The Housing Development team Housing Development have delivered a total of 396 homes to date. There are a further 303 currently in development, 153 in the Planning process and over 400 in the Design Development phase. This provision will support the Under Occupation policy's ambitions. The Downsizing Officer role was reintroduced in May 2022 to address the growing Housing Register numbers and the need to make best use of the Council's housing stock. It provides tailored support to tenants wishing to downsize. This role was previously divided across colleagues and supported tenants on an ad-hoc basis.
- 3.6. In June 2022, prior to the Downsizing Officer commencing, 622 properties were registers as under occupiers while 304 were registered as over occupiers wishing to move into homes with more bedrooms. Of the 304 over occupied properties, 63 are currently in one bed, 181 in two beds, 59 in 3 beds and 1 in four beds.
- 3.7. The responsibility of the Downsizing Officer is to:
  - 3.7.1. identify tenants who are under occupying and supporting them to downsize if they wish to do so via one-to-one help and assistance.
  - 3.7.2. match tenants to suitable properties based on their choices to ensure best use of stock and maximum benefit to those waiting to move on the Housing Register.
  - 3.7.3. contribute to marketing and the allocation of new developments.
- 3.8. The Downsizing Officer role has resulted in the following outcomes:
  - 3.8.1. 197 under occupation tenants were contacted by the Downsizing Officer. 16 have been referred to the Independent Living Schemes, 3 have already moved into various schemes.

3.8.2. 41 tenants have chosen to bid for suitable accommodation (4x 4 Bed houses, 3 x 3 bed maisonettes, 21 x 3 bed houses, 5 x 2 bed houses and 8 x 2 bed flats). 5 are on hold whilst debt issues are resolved. Of the 41 tenants bidding, 6 require Aids and Adaptions as they have them in their present property.

3.8.3. 7 tenants have successfully downsized into more appropriate accommodation. These moves resulted in five x 3 bed houses, one x 4 beds and one x 2 beds becoming available. The tenants moved into three x 2 bed houses, one x 2 bed bungalows (housing association), one x 1 bed bungalow, one x 3 bed house and one x 1 bed flat.

3.8.4. The following properties are awaiting the Voids process:

- Three x 3 bed houses waiting to move into two x 1 bungalow and one x 2 bed house
- One x 2 bed flats wait to One x 1 bed bungalow
- One x 5 bed house waiting to one x 1 bungalow
- One x 2 bed flat waiting to move to one 1 x bed flat.

#### **4. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS**

4.1. The Under Occupation Policy:

- was benchmarked against comparable Local Authorities and informed by internal and external best practice to ensure that the policy offers the right incentives for residents. The policy aims to increase awareness and uptake of downsizing benefits, make larger homes available for over occupiers and generate churn in the housing stock.
- offers tenants one additional bedroom than their basic need, subject to an affordability assessment, and an uplift in the financial incentives
- will be reviewed in June 2025 where an assessment on its effectiveness and impact will be evaluated
- will have no impact on the Allocation policy Review.
- was reviewed by the Portfolio Holder's Advisory Group which was held on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2023 and supported the above recommendations and recognised the benefits of the approach.

4.2. The Downsizing Pilot was launched in September 2022. It offers tenants who are downsizing one additional bedroom than their housing need according to our Allocations Policy. Tenants can already move into a property with one bedroom more than their need by mutually exchanging. This can lead to out of area exchanges and doesn't always assist those most in need. The Downsizing Pilot is proving to be very successful and approval is recommended. The Downsizing Pilot was successful as 8 tenants registered their interest in having an additional bedroom.

4.3. The Downsizing Officer will:

- work with the Accommodation and Complex Needs team to provide bespoke support to downsizing tenants. This includes, understanding their accommodation requirements, supporting with removal costs and connection services. This has proven to reduce the anxiety levels which can prevent residents from moving
- promote the policy through physical and virtual advertising, one to one support and events (such as the Mutual Exchange event).
- Work with the Resident and Estates team to deliver a Mutual Exchange event later in the year that will bring together people who wish to move into size appropriate homes.

4.4. The Downsizing Officer provided the following Case Studies:

Case Study One	“2 bed house to a one bed bungalow within the Independent Living Scheme: Established good communication with the tenant and worked with the Independent Living Scheme to manage this move. The tenant was blind and had a guide dog. The tenant needed to be able to walk to work which was difficult with her previous accommodation. The tenant is really happy in their new home. Two adults and one child have now moved into the property that downsized from a 3 bed property.”
Case Study Two	“3 bed house to Independent Living: “A 60 year old lady was living in a 3 bed property. Her husband had passed away, leaving her unable to afford the rent. Worked with the relevant teams to ensure that assessments and procedures were carried out. The tenant has now moved to an Independent living property near her son.”
Case Study Three	“In the property there was an elderly woman living in the 3 bed maisonette on her own. She slept in a chair downstairs and had only been as far as the shop under the maisonettes for years. This case was originally referred by the Compliance Co-ordinator when they had to get a warrant to enter a property to complete electrical works/checks. Currently working with Income, Debt Advisor, Adult Care Services and the Independent Living Scheme. Work is underway to find her a suitable accommodation and to ensure that her move is as seamless and stress-free as possible.”
Case Study Four	“3 bed house to 1 bed bungalow: The tenant became unwell and was on life support over Christmas and did not return home until March. Established regular contact with her family. There were benefit issues to resolve with the tenant. This was resolved and tenant moved into the property and is happy with it. We have now let this property to a family of four who were in temporary accommodation due to homelessness.”

## 5. IMPLICATIONS

### Financial Implications

5.1. The incentives will be increased from £750 per bedroom downsized. The new incentive is as follows:

Number of bedrooms downsized	Incentive payment
First bedroom downsized	£1000
Each subsequent bedrooms	£850

5.2. Payments will be off-set against any rent arrears or recharges incurred. It is possible for people to have more than one incentive in the same financial year should they downsize more than once. Assistance for removals is paid separately.

5.3. No additional funding will be required for the incentives or removals as both will be paid from existing budgets. The budget has been underspent in previous years. As a result, the underspend was used to recruit an additional staffing resource.

5.4. The Downsizing Officer role has proved beneficial in supporting people to move into more appropriate homes. The cost of maintaining this role would be £38,880 including on costs per annum, excluding annual salary increases. The budget for the Downsizing Officer role has been factored into the 2023/24 budget. Beyond that a growth bid will need to be submitted to for the 2024/25 HRA business plan.

5.5. This policy may have an impact on the Voids team as more moves are made. The ongoing Voids Improvement Plan and the recently recruited Empty Homes Coordinator will mitigate this as it seeks to improve the process.

### Legal Implications

5.6. The Council is entitled to provide advice and incentives to tenants to move to smaller accommodation as part of its housing management powers under the Housing Act, 1985.

5.7. The Under Occupation policy is associated with the following legislation and guidance:

#### 5.8. Legislation:

- Localism Act 2011
- Welfare Reform Act 2012
- The charter for social housing residents: social housing white paper

#### 5.9. Guidance:

- Communities and Local Government – A plain English guide to the Localism Act

- Communities and Local Government – Allocation of accommodation: guidance for local housing authorities in England

### **Risk Implications**

- 5.10. Age-based bias: It is recognised that a high percentage of older tenants are under occupying which can prove to be a longer term challenge. It is further recognised that specialist support is being offered to people over the age of 55 as they can be referred to the Accommodation and Complex Needs Officer who will promote the benefits of independent living. To mitigate this, officers will ensure that people over the age of 55 are given the choice whether or not they wish to explore independent living accommodation options including any future developments.
- 5.11. Debt/Financial risk: It is recognised that downsizing is an opportunity to relieve the financial strain on those affected by the cost-of-living crisis and those with arrears. The Council will consider allowing tenants in arrears to downsize; on the basis that smaller accommodation will not only be cheaper to rent and it will be cheaper to run. An affordability assessment will be carried out with the Downsizing Officer to identify the financial benefit and/or impact of downsizing.
- 5.12. Downsizing people who have had home adaptations: The Council will work closely with colleagues in the Aid and Adaptations and Lettings team to downsize people into properties with suitable adaptations where possible.
- 5.13. Downsizing people from/to Housing Associations: Housing Associations manage movement within their stock according to their own policies. Housing Association tenants wishing to downsize will be advised to contact their housing provider to agree their downsizing options. Incentive payments will not be available to existing Housing Association tenants. For Council tenants downsizing to a Housing Association property, the incentive payment will be made available.

### **Policy Implications**

- 5.14. This policy does not apply to under occupying successors.
- 5.15. The Under Occupation Policy is impacted by several SBC housing policies and strategies such as:
- [The Allocations Policy](#)
  - [Empty Homes Policy](#)
  - [Adaptations Policy](#)
  - [Lettable Standard](#)
  - [Housing for Older People Strategy](#)
- 5.16. The policy also responds to the Council's emerging transformation agenda focussing on effective advice and guidance to prevent future demands to the Council and other agencies.

### **Staffing and Accommodation Implications**

- 5.17. Officers would like to seek continued funding to retain the Downsizing Officer post as it is proven beneficial in supporting people to move into more appropriate homes.

### **Equalities and Diversity Implications**

- 5.18. Whilst this policy will promote specialist housing and the active ageing environment it brings, the Council aims to ensure that older people do not feel pressured to move from their existing homes and this project recognises that 'staying put' may be the right option for some people. Additionally, the Council seeks to support older people in overcoming the barriers they may associate with a move to specialist housing, to ensure they are not excluded from accessing the housing options on offer.

### **Service Delivery Implications**

Promoting and utilising the policy effectively will be dependent on the continuation of the Downsizing Officer role.

## **BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

- 1.1 All documents that have been used in compiling this report, that may be available to the public, i.e. they do not contain exempt information, should be listed here:**

- BD1 [The Allocations Policy](#)  
BD2 [Empty Homes Policy](#)  
BD3 [Adaptations Policy](#)  
BD4 [Lettable Standard](#)  
BD5 [Housing for Older People Strategy](#)

## **APPENDICES**

- A Under Occupation Policy 2023  
B Under Occupation EqIA 2023