

**Meeting** Executive



**Report** LOCAL LETTINGS POLICY FOR  
SPECIALIST ACCOMMODATION (OLDER  
PEOPLE)

**Portfolio Area** Housing and Housing Development

**Date: 18 July 2023**

## 1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 This report presents the Local Lettings Policy for the allocation and letting of Independent Living, Flexicare (also known as Extra Care) and designated Older People accommodation.
- 1.2 The policy will work alongside Stevenage Borough Council's Allocations scheme and is designed to support the sustainable letting of Independent Living, Flexicare and designated Older People accommodation.
- 1.3 Independent Living, Flexicare and designated Older People accommodation is also known as Independent living accommodation with the aim of maintaining older residents' independence in their own homes with the support of the Specialist Support team and the commissioned on site care provider (in Flexicare). The schemes are a mixture of properties either 'all under one roof' where the front door leads to an internal corridor or dispersed out in the community e.g., small flat blocks or bungalows.

## 2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the Local Lettings Policy for Specialist Accommodation (older people), as attached at Appendix A, be approved and adopted.
- 2.2 That Executive note that the budget for the Specialist Support Officer (Lettings) role has been factored in until December 2023. Beyond that, a growth bid will be submitted for the 2024/25 HRA business plan to maintain this role. This is in addition to the Accommodation and Complex Needs Officer post.

## 3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Local Lettings Plan follows on from implementation of the Housing for Older People Strategy (HOPS) in November 2020 which sets out our joint approach with Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) to improve housing options for older people in the town. One of the strategic objectives is to enable healthy ageing for older people in Stevenage through the provision of a new housing and support offer. One of the four key themes of the strategy is support and assistance to help people move. The strategy action plan outlines the actions below;
- Review the allocations policy and lettings plan to include older people's housing.
  - Develop a local lettings policy for older people's housing to ensure that age friendly housing is available to older people and to allow family or other housing to be released for families or younger people in housing need.
- 3.2 Currently the Lettings team are responsible for advertising properties; the bidding platform is open for seven working days. Applicants bid on the system themselves on available properties of their choice.
- 3.3 During the Covid-19 pandemic 2020, and the closure of choice based lettings (CBL) for three months, specialist accommodation's letting team was able to continue letting Independent Living, Flexicare and designated Older People housing and complete essential moves. They adopted the principles of allocating a property laid out in the Local Lettings policy (see Appendix A). This was successful in reducing the void length of time. See table 1 below.

Year	Number of Void Weeks	Average Days to re-let	Number of properties let	Average time taken to receive keys after termination
2018	236	45	93	6

2019	190	83	89	3
2020	137	47	72	2
2021	91	69	107	-4
2022	33	95	103	4

Table 1

Table 1 also shows the increasing volume of properties let each year since 2018. Through this work, the number of days it takes to receive keys after the termination of the tenancy has been reduced.

- 3.4 Customers are referred to specialist support services team by a professional, self-referral or from a family member/friend of the applicant or identified through reviewing the housing register. They are assessed by the specialist support services team. The assessment identifies the support needs and any specific property requirements such as level access shower for each customer. The assessment will also take into consideration the customer's choice of where they would consider living within Stevenage. The assessment may result in a change to their current banding due to the identified circumstances.
- 3.5 From the assessments it has been established that customers in general family rented stock are not always aware of the type of accommodation they place their bids on and do not have the specific knowledge of the Independent living housing stock. This can result in a delay in securing the right property as they may bid on something that is unsuitable for their needs.
- 3.6 There is also a high proportion of customers each week bidding on Independent living accommodation that are not eligible, being under the age of 55 years. These customers are reducing their chances with the three allocated bids each week of securing a property in general needs housing. The Local Lettings Plan would mitigate that.
- 3.7 The Lettings team will shortlist the suitable applicants and advise the outcomes. Bids placed by the Accommodation and Complex Needs Officer are likely to have a higher acceptance rate than those who bid themselves due to the suitability of the property.

## 4 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION

- 4.1 Developing a local lettings policy for older people's housing is to ensure that age friendly housing is available to older people and will enable general needs housing to be released for families or younger people in housing need which is one of the actions in the HOPS action plan.
- 4.2 The Council recognises that we have an increasing older person's population and as part of the HOPS commitments, the Local Lettings Policy ensures that:
- the Council meet the needs of older people and complex cases requiring specific property types
  - the Council puts in place support for older residents who wish to move to Independent Living, Flexicare and designated Older People accommodation.
  - specific property requirements are met in the shortest possible timeframes, reducing void rent loss and
  - Reduce waiting times
- 4.3 The policy will work alongside Stevenage Borough Council's Allocations Scheme and its aims are underpinned by:
- Excellent management
  - Consistency
  - Continuous improvement
  - Maintaining good community relations and
  - Providing satisfaction to stakeholders
- 4.4 Adopting this policy and the principles it sets out, will improve service delivery in the following ways:
- improve the customer journey for those who wish to move by making it easier and less stressful
  - by removing Specialist Accommodation from CBL it will make best use of housing stock.
  - reduce the waiting time, from the assessment through to identifying the most suitable property, to the successful letting.
  - To reduce the void rent loss by direct offering properties to customers outside of a seven-day bidding cycle
- 4.5 The Local Lettings Policy will apply only to a small proportion of the Council's total housing stock. The Local Lettings Policy applies to around 830 Independent Living, Flexicare and designated Older People accommodation, compared to over 8,000 homes in the total Council housing stock (excluding homes owned by leaseholders, which are not available for allocation).

4.6 There are proposals to increase supply of this type of accommodation with the first development of 88 properties (Brodie House) expected early 2024 which consists of wheelchair accessible 1 and 2 bed properties. The Council is looking to develop and increase Older People accommodation.

4.7 The policy sets out:

- principles and the process of allocating and letting Independent Living, Flexicare and designated Older People accommodation. It outlines the criteria and reasons of allocating this type of property and the size, whether one or two bed property is allocated.
- Exceptional circumstances in which applicants below the age of 55 and 60 are considered depending on the property types such as if there is a diagnosed long-term illness or disability and demonstration of a support need where they would benefit from the support provided from the Specialist Support Team.
- Circumstances under which allocation is made to out of area applicants without a local connection e.g., family living in Stevenage, where the applicant would benefit from the support of family and the Council's services to support them, will be considered for a low demand property subject to the outcome of the suitability assessment.
- When consideration will be given for management moves for existing residents within the Council's accommodation by recommendation of the Specialist Support Services Team.
- There is a support charge for living in Independent Living and Flexicare accommodation which covers the support provided by the team including the 24/7 emergency response service. This is subject to a review in line with the rent and service charging policy.

4.8 During the implementation of the HOPS, extensive consultations and surveys were carried out between 2019 and 2020 both with residents and both internal and external stakeholders such as Adult Care Services, Integrated Accommodation Commissioning Team, age concern and Alzheimer's Society. Overall the feedback was that older residents preferred older person's housing against intergenerational living schemes with the emphasis on support. This informed the Local Lettings Policy. Furthermore, a Portfolio Holder Advisory Group (PHAG) held on 30th March 2023 supported the above recommendations and recognised the benefits of the approach.

## **5 IMPLICATIONS**

### **5.1 Financial Implications**

The Specialist Support Officer (Lettings) role has proved beneficial in supporting people to move into more appropriate homes. The cost of maintaining this role would be £43,600 per annum including on-costs, excluding annual salary increases. This provision would be factored into the HRA Business Plan as a growth bid.

## **5.2. Legal Implications**

5.2.1 The Local Lettings Policy is associated with the following Legislation;

- Localism Act 2011
- Housing Act 2004
- Welfare Reform Act 2012
- Care Act 2014
- Social Housing Regulation Bill

5.2.2 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

5.2.3 Local authorities are obliged, under the Housing Act, 1996, to have allocation schemes. Council are obliged to give reasonable preference to the following:

1. people who are statutorily homeless (including those who are intentionally homeless and those not in priority need)
2. people who are owed a housing duty by any housing authority under homelessness provisions
3. people occupying insanitary or overcrowded housing or otherwise living in unsatisfactory housing conditions
4. people who need to move on medical or welfare grounds, including grounds relating to a disability, and
5. people who need to move to a particular locality in the district of the housing authority, where failure to meet that need would cause hardship (to themselves or others)

## **5.3 Risk Implications**

5.3.1. There are several risks associated with failure to effectively and efficiently manage the allocation of Specialist Accommodation as outlined below:

- reputational risk by failure to meet the Council's performance standards and older person's strategy commitments.
- high number of voids.
- unmanaged under-occupation level where older persons are in larger properties that they can no longer manage.
- failure to make best use of the housing stock.
- increasing waiting time for customers
- poor customer journey
- failure to maximise income from Specialist Accommodation.

5.3.2. There are measures put in place to mitigate all risks identified as far as is reasonably possible. The risks will be monitored regularly through operational

risk registers. This policy along with an efficient, effective and consistent allocation process will contribute to mitigate these risks.

## **5.4. Policy Implications**

5.4.1. This policy is aligned to the following policies

- The Allocations Policy
- Empty Homes Policy
- Adaptations Policy
- Lettable Standard
- Housing for Older People Strategy
- Under occupation policy
- Rent and Service Charges Policy

5.4.2. The policy outcomes will be measured across a range of key indicators such as:

- service standards
- customer satisfaction
- Letting and voids performance
- tenancy sustainment
- any innovative new approaches

## **5.5. Staffing and Accommodation Implications**

See section 5.1 financial implications

## **5.6. Equalities and Diversity Implications**

5.6.1 An Equalities Impact Assessment is attached

5.6.2 Older people will be supported in overcoming the barriers they may associate with a move to specialist accommodation and to ensure they are not excluded from accessing the housing options on offer.

5.6.3 Applicants with any of the protected characteristics will not be disadvantaged in respect of decisions made about the allocation of available homes. Homes will be allocated strictly in accordance with this LLP and the Council's Allocation policy criteria.

## **5.7 Service Delivery Implications**

Adoption of this policy will enable the council to meet its wider objectives and commitments of the Older Person's strategy whilst putting in place the required support for older people. The policy will help to minimise voids turnaround, void loss and maximise income move.

## **5.8 Review Process**

The Council is positive about the principles of the Local Lettings Plan and is keen to see successful long-term lettings achieved for this type of property.

It is intended to review the local lettings plan bi-annual. The review may consider:

- Turnover of vacancies
- Any failed tenancies and the reasons why
- Households accessing/needing support services
- General tenant satisfaction
- Any changes to Council's policies

## **BACKGROUND DOCUMENT**

Housing for Older People Strategy (HOPS)

## **APPENDICES**

- A Local Lettings Policy (LLP) for Specialist Accommodation (Older People)
- B Equality Impact Assessment