

**Meeting:** **COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE**

Portfolio Area: Housing, Health and Older People

**Date:** **7 FEBRUARY 2018**

## **REVIEW OF HOUSING ALLOCATIONS POLICY**

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### **1 PURPOSE**

- 1.1 To consider the draft report and recommendations of the Community Select Committee's scrutiny review into the Housing Allocations Policy.

### **2 BACKGROUND AND SCRUTINY ISSUE IDENTIFIED**

- 2.1 The issue of scrutinising the Housing Allocations Policy was agreed by the Select Committee as a scrutiny review item when it met on 1 March 2017 to agree the Committee's work programme for 2017/18.

#### **2.2 Scope and Focus of the review**

- 2.2.1 The Committee met on 13 July 2017 and agreed a scope for the review of the Housing Allocations Policy, which it agreed should focus on Sheltered Criteria and Under-Occupiers, in particular:

- How are allocations into sheltered housing schemes and the flexi care schemes working in practise?
- Introduce priority categories for under-occupiers, with an options paper outlining the relevant choices for tenants

- 2.2.2 The overall aim of the review is that the committee is satisfied that the allocations policy is being implemented effectively and serving the people on the waiting list according to the expectations of the Council. To achieve this overarching aim, it will:

- Establish whether the allocations policy is effective in housing residents according to the premise that members of each band and group are being given the opportunity of housing.
- Establish whether the letting process is dealing accordingly with housing needs – evidence should be presented to the Committee to show where the process is effective and where it is not.
- Establish whether all housing is priority need - in 2014/15, the Council promised the residents, if they remained on the list, that every section of the list should expect to be housed and anyone who wasn't going to be housed was taken off of the list. Has this happened?
- Establish whether the housing offered is fit for habitation and meets the needs of the resident (including sheltered housing – i.e. is sheltered housing being used appropriately).
- Establish whether owners have moved into council housing through the scheme which allows people to do so.
- Identify any additional problems with allocations in order to inform changes needed to the policy.

## 2.3 **Process of the Review**

2.3.1 The Committee met formally on three occasions in 2017 to undertake the review. The Committee met on 13 July to agree the scope and receive an officer presentation on the service; on 26 September to interview a tenant on the process of moving from sheltered housing to a general needs bungalow and a lettings advisor, to get evidence about the situation; and on 1 November to consider the emerging recommendations together with officers and the Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health and Older People.

2.3.2 As well as through the formal meetings of the Committee, officers supporting the review have met in a series of parallel private meetings with the Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health and Older People to consider all potential amendments and additions to the current Allocations Policy, which officers are currently consulting on and these meetings have helped to feed into the Scrutiny review process.

2.3.3 The Committee received written and oral evidence from the following people:

- Walter Oglina, Empty Homes Manager
- Jaine Cresser, AD for Housing
- Theo Addae, Interim Housing and Homeless Manager
- Peta Caine, Housing Operations Manager
- Jeannette Thomas, Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health and Older People
- Mrs Pam Lambourne (a tenant who had recently moved from sheltered accommodation to a general needs bungalow)
- Elayne Crisp, Lettings Advisor

### **3 REVIEW FINDINGS**

#### **3.1 Conclusions of the Community Select Committee**

3.1.1 Based on the input provided to Members conducting the review by Officers supporting the review, the Committee has made the following conclusions in the following areas:

#### **3.2 Case Study - failure to provide a direct debit form - are processes being consistently followed?**

3.2.1 The Committee heard evidence from a tenant who had moved from sheltered accommodation to general needs housing. The way her case was dealt with opened up a number of areas for potential improvement. One process issue that occurred was the non-provision of direct debit forms to support her in setting-up payments for her new home.

3.2.2 However, post discussion with officers it became clear that this had been due to an oversight in this case, rather than a systematic issue. It was concluded that, in this case, there was clearly a lack of consistency in the application of the process and a difference between the expected standard and tenants' experiences.

3.2.3 Members discussed the need for a checklist for staff to ensure that everyone knows what is expected of them, and the service that tenants can expect is clear and consistent across the board. Officers later confirmed that there is a checklist that fulfils this purpose though it clearly had not been utilised effectively in this case.

3.2.4 Recommendation 1 therefore evolved (see below) to reflect the need to improve the way in which existing tools are used by staff to ensure consistent application of systems and processes to improve tenants' experiences.

#### **3.3 Robust communication with tenants is required at all stages of the process**

3.3.1 The evidence of the tenant demonstrated that communication through the process had at times been lacking, causing concern to the tenant, including examples of several phone messages having been left for officers, with no response.

3.3.2 Through discussions, it became clear that it's important to consider the balance between clear and responsive behaviours, and the limitations of officers in terms of capacity when it comes to communication.

3.3.3 There was a discussion around current perceived miscommunication around 'where people are on this list.' Some Members believed that people were being told they were 'close to the top of the list.' Officers clarified that people do not have a position on the list as such, but if they bid for a property, they can be informed of how close they were to securing that particular property.

Anyone who comes in the top 50 for a particular bid will be informed of this automatically by the Locata system software.

3.3.4 Given the potential confusion in this area, options were considered for ways of clarifying this process and reducing the potential for misunderstandings. Officers made it clear that communications with all unsuccessful applicants would not be feasible, but proactive 'myth busting' communications could be developed to make the process clearer and ensure people understand that they do not have a number on the list, just a rank for a particular bid. Hopefully, this would reduce misunderstandings amongst bidders.

3.3.5 There was also a need for improved messaging around the 'Direct List' as there was a perception at large that this list allowed people to 'jump the queue.' Officers advised that the purpose of this list was to make best use of the stock by prioritising cases that met certain criteria. Members suggested that the name 'Direct List' should be changed to an alternative phrase with different connotations and this could be another area that could benefit from proactive communications campaigns to potentially prevent rumours and misinformation about alleged queue jumping.

3.4 18 year olds living at home are signing onto the housing register before they intend to leave home

3.4.1 It was highlighted that 18 year olds are often signing onto the housing register when they aren't seriously intending to move, to make it easier to get a home in the future. This means they often bid on properties that they have no chance of getting. They bid just regularly enough to remain on the register. However, Members are aware that residents of this age have a legitimate right to bid for properties albeit that they are less likely to be successful and that it was agreed that this form of bidding was legitimate and within the rules. The introduction of the Housing Benefit Cap for single under 35s will have a detrimental impact for this group on affordability, so the conversion of a number of properties to shared accommodation, which would be more affordable for the under 35s who will be affected by the cap, will be a helpful improvement for this group.

3.5 High band priority should be given to under occupiers wishing to downsize

3.5.1 It was suggested that there would be benefits associated with enabling under occupiers to bid. Under the present system, under occupiers have no priority and so stand no chance of securing a property under the Choice Based Lettings System. At present, the staff do perform some direct lets for under occupiers, but there isn't enough capacity to make this work as the sole means of increasing mobility in the stock.

3.5.2 Members agreed that it would be positive to increase mobility in the stock. Officers believe this could help to address some of the imbalance between over-occupying and under-occupying in the system. Members were of the view that when negotiating with older people in this scenario the provision of clear and realistic timescales for a move to the tenant would greatly help and

may stop tenants pulling out of moves because of stress and insecurity. See Recommendation 3 for further details.

3.6 The local connection criteria for persons moving into local adjacent areas outside of the Borough whilst on the housing waiting list should be reviewed

3.6.1 There was discussion about the unfairness of the present policy, which means that if you move out of the borough, even for a short period, and even to areas that are very closely adjacent to the Borough, you will cease to be eligible due to the 5 year local connection rule.

3.6.2 There was agreement that something should be done to address this matter. See Recommendation 4 for more detail.

3.6.3 Members questioned the ability of people who are new to the Town to access the housing register in a revised allocations policy with regard to the current qualifying period, which officers confirmed could be waived dependent on the circumstances of the individual concerned.

3.7 Tenant Leaseholder Customer Scrutiny Panel

3.7.1 The Scrutiny Officer met the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Scrutiny Panel on 4 January 2018 to sense check the issues that the review had identified and provide an opportunity for this group to have input into the review. The Customer Scrutiny Panel subsequently confirmed that it supported the draft recommendations which was reported to the Committee at its meeting on 8 January 2018.

## **4 EMERGING RECOMMENDATIONS**

4.1 That the Community Select Committee considers the findings of the review, contained within this report and the recommendations below be presented to the Executive Portfolio Holder for Resources and the Strategic Director, Matthew Partridge and that a response be provided from these and any other named officers and partners within two months of this report being published.

4.2 RECOMMENDATION 1 – Staff training be arranged and adhered to, to ensure consistency of service with regards to advice when moving between properties, with more support offered to tenants with literacy needs or language problems or limited access to online services.

4.2.1 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 the non-provision of a direct debit mandate for the new tenancy when officers met with the tenant. This issue was tested with officers to see whether it was a common feature, or a one-off case. With further investigation, this did appear to be an isolated case as evidenced by the Lettings Advisor and the check list which shows what is expected from staff. Given this, we are keen to ensure that all staff are made aware of the

correct procedures and receive the appropriate training to support them to provide a consistent and high quality service to customers.

4.3 RECOMMENDATION 2 – Consider the provision of shared accommodation for the under 35s who will be impacted by the Housing Benefit Cap

4.3.1 Reason – Members were concerned about the impact of the Housing Benefit Cap on under-35s. The introduction of the Housing Benefit Cap for single under 35s will have a detrimental impact for this group on affordability, so the conversion of a number of properties to shared accommodation which would be more affordable for the under 35s who will be affected by the cap will be a helpful improvement for this group.

4.4 RECOMMENDATION 3 – Priority should be given to under occupiers wishing to downsize their properties, with a review of the Bands to identify customers wishing to downsize and that when a move is possible, a realistic timeframe be established

4.4.1 Reason – At present 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. At the time of this report being written there were 270 SBC tenants in overcrowded conditions. By reviewing and potentially amending the bands with perhaps a ribbon through a band this could provide greater flexibility. It would further help in the cases of older people moving from a larger family size property to a smaller property if, when a possible move is being negotiated, a realistic timescale is established to help the resident by giving them greater security around the move.

4.4.2 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.

4.5 RECOMMENDATION 4 - A review of the local connection criteria for persons moving into areas close to the Borough whilst on the housing waiting list

4.5.1 Reason – It was felt that for persons who had been resident in Stevenage and then moved out into private rented property into very close neighbouring areas 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 instance introducing a period of 5 out of 7 years.

4.6 RECOMMENDATION 5 – That officers make alternative and improved use of hard to let sheltered accommodation

4.6.1 Reasons – 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. It's important to make better use of this accommodation.

4.6.2 The use of these units would need to be sensitively handled – but consideration can be given to accommodating emergency housing for homeless households in certain circumstances. For example, it will be possible to use sheltered accommodation at Asquith and Walpole for this purpose for a limited period of approximately 2 months, following the decants and before the demolition and rebuild. This should be considered where redevelopment is occurring to reduce costs associated with accommodating emergency homeless households in the private sector.

4.6.3 There is also the option to convert current hard to let studio apartments stock across to one bed flats. This process is currently underway in seven flats, which will make them more popular and therefore lettable, as previous conversions have shown. Though not all studios are suitable for conversion, we should be looking to do this wherever possible and continue to assess each one as they become void, subject to funding availability.

*Members are aware that this recommendation has already been in part actioned by officers but wish to keep the recommendation as it was a key finding of the review and it will also help monitor progress in the future when the review recommendations are revisited.*

4.7 RECOMMENDATION 6 – (i) That officers arrange a communications campaign to help 'myth bust' and liaise with Members and revisit the terminology used in all forms of communication with bidders to be clear and help manage expectations (ii) that officers specifically look at amending the terminology regarding the 'Direct List' to be replaced with another term with different connotations to help with perceptions of 'queue jumping'.

4.7.1 Reason – to make the bidding process as clear as possible to people so that they are not under the impression that they have a place in 'a queue' or that certain groups are 'queue jumping'. Bidders can currently see where their bid was within the top 50 bids on the Locata software on the Council's website. Residents who have access to the internet should be further encouraged to access this information via the website. Alternatives to viewing this via the internet should be explored for residents who don't have easy access.

- 4.7.2 The review had found that there was a need for improved messaging around the 'Direct List' as there was a perception at large that this list allowed people to 'jump the queue.' The purpose of the list was to make best use of the stock by prioritising cases that met certain criteria. Therefore, amending the wording from 'Direct List' to an alternative phrase with different connotations may help address perceptions.
- 4.8 RECOMMENDATION 7 - That officers should stop the current practise of automatically informing housing bidders where their bid was within the top 50 bids.
- 4.8.1 Reason – Members were of the view that automatically informing tenants where they were in the bidding process was perhaps perpetuating the misconception that the tenant would be very close to securing a property or had little or no chance with their next bid, depending on where they were with their last bid. It was acknowledged that this could result in more calls to the officers but these callers could be directed to the Locata software on the web site and also officers could verbally explain the process to respective bidders.
- 4.9 RECOMMENDATION 8 - In all cases of a new tenancy, an up-to-date gas check be completed on the property before the new tenant moves in and the gas to be approved and fully working prior to the tenant moving in.
- 4.9.1 Reason – The Committee want to avoid the possibility of safety being compromised in this area. When a property is let, as the landlord the Council should have confidence that the gas service to the property is safe. It is therefore recommended that a gas safety check be carried out on all properties prior to a new tenant being offered the property. Tenants should not be put in a position that this test has not been carried out prior to them taking on the tenancy.

## **5 IMPLICATIONS**

### **5.1 Financial Implications**

- 5.1.1 A number of the review recommendations may have a financial implication in terms of further officer time and training to address the issues raised and a number of recommendations could have a capital and revenue implication, including recommendations 2, 5 and 7 but these are as yet undefined including remodelling properties and carrying out further gas checks. Depending on the Executive Member response to the recommendations, these implications would need to be fully costed by officers and brought back to the Executive Portfolio Holder before any spending was agreed.

### **5.2 Legal Implications**

There are no direct legal implications for the scrutiny review report and recommendations. Any changes to the current Housing Allocations Policy would be



subject to current housing legislation, but this would be covered in a separate report to the Executive.

### **5.3 Equalities Implications**

- 5.3.1 Although the review did not directly address the Protected Characteristics groups within 2010 Equalities and Diversity Act, there are definite impacts on people based on their socio economic background and their need to access social housing. The revised Allocations Policy will revisit the existing equalities impact assessment for the policy and provide a refresh to the new policy. Officers, in conjunction with the Executive Portfolio Holder with responsibility for Housing, will also have Equalities and Diversity considerations in mind when preparing a response to the review recommendations and how they will be taken forward.

### **BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

Minutes of the Committee meetings held on 13 July, 26 September, 1 November 2017 and 8 January 2018 are available for inspection.

### **APPENDICES – Appendix A - Copy of the Scoping Document**