



CABINET: 9 January 2018

**EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW &
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE:
25 January 2018**

Report of: Director of Housing and Inclusion

Relevant Portfolio Holder: Councillor J Forshaw

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SUBJECT: DRAFT HOUSING ALLOCATIONS AND PET POLICY 2017

Wards affected: Borough wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To consider and agree the Housing Allocations Policy subject to statutory consultation.
- 1.2 To consider and agree the introduction of a Pet Policy for Council tenants.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET

- 2.1 That the Draft Housing Allocations and Pet Policy 2017 attached to Appendix 1 & 2 of the report be approved for consultation.
- 2.2 That the Director of Housing and Inclusion, in consultation with the relevant Portfolio Holder, be given delegated authority to make any minor changes to the Draft Housing Allocations Policy and Pet Policy 2017 where appropriate following public consultation, and to implement and deliver the policy.
- 2.3 That the call-in procedure is not appropriate for this item as the report will be submitted to the meeting of the Executive Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 25 January 2018.

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS TO EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

- 3.1 That any agreed comments on the draft Housing Allocations Policy and Pet Policy 2017 be submitted to the Director of Housing and Inclusion.

4.0 BACKGROUND

- 4.1 The Housing Allocations Policy was last updated in 2013. Since then the Policy has provided a fair and transparent way of allocating housing. Whilst there are no significant changes proposed in terms of assessing housing need the revised Draft Policy aims to make the best use of council housing stock, address issues of affordability and reduce the impact of hard to let sheltered housing. It will also help to address the high proportion of allocations made to council tenants who wish to transfer with no housing need.
- 4.2 The Draft Allocations Policy, attached at appendix 1, sets out the criteria for acceptance onto the Councils Housing Register and also the priority band in which applicants should be placed.
- 4.3 The Draft Policy will be subject to external consultation for a period of 12 weeks. A copy of the Draft Policy will be available on the Councils website and views will be sought from both Homefinder applicants and members of the public. Copies of the Draft Policy will also be sent to our RSL partners and other agencies such as Lancashire County Council Social Care, Liberty Centre, Birchwood Centre.

5.0 SUMMARY OF MAIN CHANGES

- 5.1 The implementation of the Welfare Reform Act, now means that prospective tenants may either be no longer entitled to welfare benefits, or are eligible only to receive housing related benefits that are not sufficient to cover their full rent liability. The Allocations Policy therefore needs to be updated to deal with these emerging challenges.

The revised Draft Policy includes the following key changes for consideration:

- Under 18s - will only be accepted onto the Councils Housing Register if they are leaving care or are statutorily homeless, (i.e. where the Council has accepted that they are homeless within the terms of the homelessness legislation, they have been found to be in priority need and not intentionally homeless and the council therefore has a duty to offer accommodation), as they will only be eligible to claim housing costs in these circumstances. In addition to the changes to housing costs eligibility this also aims to address the high risk of tenancy failure associated with under 18s and the fact that they cannot legally hold a tenancy.
- All applicants will be expected to provide information regarding their finances at the point of application. This will support an affordability assessment to be carried out with all applicants, where this indicates that a tenancy is not affordable to the applicant their application will be rejected.

- Applications and subsequent tenancy offers may be conditional on accepting tenancy support or completion of pre tenancy training where there is an identified vulnerability or following a risk assessment a high risk of tenancy failure.
- 5.2 In order to reinforce the message that tenants need to meet their obligations in terms of payment of rent, the rules on Housing Register eligibility for those former or current tenants owing housing related debts to the Council have been strengthened. The proposed criteria is also more concise and easier to interpret for both staff and customers.
- 5.3. The Draft Policy includes the following minor changes to the priority banding criteria,
- A large proportion of allocations are made to existing council tenants, and as this has a financial impact in terms of Health and Safety checks, the Draft Policy aims to limit transfers for those with no housing need. To this end an additional priority band, Band E, has been introduced and some of the categories previously listed in Band D have now been downgraded to Band E. This better reflects and prioritises the reduced security of tenure experienced by those in the private rented sector compared to social housing tenants.
 - Given the low demand for some of the Councils sheltered housing schemes, it has been possible for tenants to move to similar flats within or between schemes without there being any associated housing need. The Draft Policy aims to address this by refusing like for like moves in lower demand sheltered schemes unless there is a housing need to do so. Secure tenants would still however have the option to carry out a mutual exchange if they wished to move.
- 5.4 The Draft Policy updates the Borough/Local Connection eligibility Criteria to improve consistency and comply with the Right to Move (Statutory Guidance on Social Housing Allocations for Local Housing Authorities in England March 2015), which have been introduced since the last Policy was updated. The changes now include
- Parent's needing to be near their young children who do not reside with them.
 - Requirement for relatives to have lived in the area for a set number of years has been increased from 2 years to 5 years to make it more consistent with personal residency criteria of 3 years out of the last 5 years.
 - In light of Right to Move Regulations 2015 those needing to move to the Borough for work will also be considered to have a Borough connection.
- 5.5 The operation of the current Local Connection criteria is complex, difficult for customers to understand and results in properties being allocated to applicants with no housing need simply because they reside or have family living in a particular area. This can disadvantage those applicants in most urgent housing need.

To address these inequalities the Draft Policy will

- Remove the current 50% local connection areas from the Local Lettings criteria.
- For applicants satisfying the 100% local connection criteria preference will still be given over those applicants in the same priority band who do not have a local connection. They would however no longer have priority over those applicants in more urgent housing need in a higher priority band.

To put this proposed change into context some historical lettings data for the Local Connection areas is shown in Appendix 5.

5.6 The Draft Policy aims to address some of the difficulties associated with letting the Councils low demand sheltered housing stock. The Draft Policy will now

- Reduce the age limit from 60 to 55 for communal sheltered housing schemes and bungalows.
- Reduce the age limit to 50 and over for sheltered flats not in communal schemes.

In addition the associated Draft Pet Policy, at Appendix 2 outlines a more relaxed approach to pet ownership in the Councils sheltered schemes, which is hoped will generate more demand and reduce the number of offers refused. This has been piloted successfully in one of the sheltered schemes in Tarleton and feedback from both customers and staff is positive.

5.7 To assist expectant parents in securing suitable accommodation prior to the birth of their child, households with an expectant mother will now be treated as though the child has been born at 30 weeks of pregnancy.

5.8 The current letting criteria has resulted in many families being registered for 2 bedroom properties than for 3 bedrooms. Given that the Council has limited 2 bedroom stock those applicants will therefore wait longer to be housed. To address this imbalance, the revised Draft Policy will allow those households with two children to now bid on both 2 and 3 bedroom properties, however all offers would subject to an affordability assessment.

5.9 At present properties on Homefinder are advertised on a weekly basis from midnight every Thursday until 23:59 on the following Tuesday. It is proposed to move to a rolling daily lettings cycle meaning properties would be advertised on any day of the week with the advertising cycle for each individual property running for 6 days. This will ensure that where properties are refused they are then re-advertised immediately and let as quickly as possible, thereby reducing rent lost.

6.0 IMPLEMENTATION

6.1 Implementing the Draft Policy once approved will require a number of actions. Firstly the existing list of housing register applicants will need to be re-assessed in line with the new Policy as some applicants will be impacted by the changes. Additionally the existing Choice Based Lettings IT system will need changing

6.2 Subject to approval the new Policy will take effect following wider consultation and consideration of any comments received. All affected applicants will have to be informed individually of any changes to their application and would need sufficient time to exercise a right to appeal against the decision.

7.0 SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS/COMMUNITY STRATEGY

7.1 There are no significant sustainability impacts associated with this report and, in particular, no significant impact on crime and disorder. The report has no significant links with the Sustainable Community Strategy.

8.0 FINANCIAL AND RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

8.1 There are some financial resource implications arising from this report in respect of updating the Choice Based Lettings software, however these will be met using existing resources.

9.0 RISK ASSESSMENT

9.1 The actions referred to in this report are covered by the scheme of delegation to officers and any necessary changes have been made in the relevant risk registers.

Background Documents

There are no background documents (as defined in Section 100D (5) of the Local Government Act 1972) to this Report.

Equality Impact Assessment

There is a direct impact on members of the public, employees, elected members and / or stakeholders, therefore an Equality Impact Assessment is required. A formal equality impact assessment is attached as an Appendix 3 to this report, the results of which have been taken into account in the Recommendations contained within this report

Appendices

1. Draft Housing Allocations Policy
2. Draft Pet Policy
3. Equality Impact Assessment
4. Scenarios to demonstrate effect on individual applicants
5. Local Connection data
6. Minute of Landlord Services Committee (Cabinet Working Group) held on 3 January 2018 (Cabinet only) – to follow
7. Minute of Cabinet 9 January 2018 (Executive Overview and Scrutiny Committee only) – to follow

