

SEVENOAKS DISTRICT HOUSING REGISTER ALLOCATIONS SCHEME 2022-2027

Cabinet - 7 July 2022

Report of: Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer People & Places

Status: For Comment

Also considered by:

- Housing & Health Advisory Committee - 6 June 2022
- Council - 19 July 2022

Key Decision: No

Significant in terms of its effects on the communities living or working in an area comprising of 2 or more wards in the District.

Executive Summary: As a Local Housing Authority, Sevenoaks District Council has a statutory duty to publish a Housing Allocations Scheme for assessing and prioritising applications for social housing to determine who can join the housing register and the criteria to determine the priority banding of each application. Making changes to the Housing Allocations Scheme requires a period of consultation. This report presents a second draft of the Housing Register Allocations Scheme 2022-2027, which has been refined in light of feedback received from the recent public consultation. The final Housing Allocation Scheme document will require approval by Full Council so that it may be adopted.

This report supports the Key Aim of:

Caring Communities - to help people live safe, independent and fulfilling lives and meeting the needs of vulnerable and low income households - by helping those in housing need to have fair and proportionate access to suitable homes in the social housing sector.

Sustainable Economies- provide a good mix of decent and affordable housing - by ensuring local people have priority for social housing in the District and awarding high priority to social housing tenants who wish to downsize, thereby freeing up family size housing for others in housing need.

Portfolio Holder: Cllr. Kevin Maskell

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Recommendation to Housing & Health Advisory Committee:

- (a) To note the feedback received from the public consultation;
- (b) To consider and recommend to Cabinet to recommend to Council that the second draft of the Sevenoaks District Housing Register Allocations Scheme 2022-2027 be adopted;

Recommendation to Cabinet:

- (a) To note the feedback received from the public consultation;
- (b) To consider the draft Sevenoaks District Housing Register Allocation Scheme 2022-2027;
- (c) To recommend to Council that the Sevenoaks District Housing Register Allocation Scheme 2022 - 2027 be adopted.

Recommendation to Council:

- (a) To note the feedback received from the public consultation;
- (b) That, subject to any amendments by Cabinet, the Sevenoaks District Housing Register Allocation Scheme 2022-2027 be adopted.

Reason for recommendation: To ensure the District Council has a Housing Register Allocations Scheme that complies with statutory provisions, and which treats all applicants for social housing in a fair and equitable manner.

Introduction and Background

- 1 Housing, health, wellbeing and life-chances are inextricably linked. A comprehensive, fair, transparent and flexible allocations scheme enables the Council to manage expectations, make the best use of current housing stock and plan for future housing supply across all tenures to meet the needs and aspirations of its current and future residents.
- 2 Covid-19 has brought into sharp focus the need for key workers to ensure the local economy and local services continue to function. Many key workers have families with young children or are single people, often on low incomes, at the start of their career or are returning to work and need affordable local housing to sustain employment and deliver essential services in the district. A key element of the policy is a revised local connection, to enable homes in the district to be prioritised for local residents with a housing need, who can demonstrate continued residency and employment within the Sevenoaks district.
- 3 The Sevenoaks District Housing Register Allocations Scheme enables the Council and its partners to work together to ensure we prioritise those in most need of affordable housing. The Council operates a Choice Based Letting Scheme and the Housing Register Allocations Scheme sets out a framework that describes how to register, the assessment process and property allocation process.
- 4 The recommendations within this review have all been subject to a comprehensive two-stage public consultation exercise which included; bite-size briefings, webinars, workshops, surveys, on-line questionnaires, small meetings and one to one conversation.
- 5 The Council is legally required to consult with Housing Providers operating within the district, but it has also been important to seek views and feedback from other partners, stakeholders and residents. The feedback received has enabled amendments to be considered for inclusion within the policy ahead of a final version being considered by Cabinet and full Council in July 2022. The consultation feedback also enables the completion of a thorough equalities impact assessment.
- 6 The draft Sevenoaks District Housing Register Allocations Scheme 2022-2027 was subject to public consultation between 14 February and 18 April 2022. Over 500 responses were received and the results are summarised, by question, below. NB. "In agreement" refers to those respondents who either strongly agreed, or agreed.
- 7 What we asked - Question 1.

We want to offer greater support to local people.

We are proposing to give priority to housing register applicants who have lived or worked in the Sevenoaks District for a minimum of three years.

Currently applicants are given priority if they have lived or worked in the District for a minimum of six months.

The response was - **In agreement 78.9%**

Recommendation: It is recommended to approve this proposal, as the 3 year local connection period was broadly supported in the public consultation. A revised local connection will enable homes in the district to be prioritised for local residents with a housing need, who can demonstrate continued residency and employment within the Sevenoaks district.

8 What we asked - Question 2.

As there is not enough social housing to help everyone, we need to prioritise the most urgent cases. We propose to rank applications on the Housing Register into four Bands. Band A will be the highest and will include:

- *People with an urgent medical need;*
- *Those living in hazardous housing;*
- *Tenants who want to move out of a home that has become too large for them;*
- *Tenants who want to move out of a home that is adapted for someone who uses a wheelchair.*

Applicants in Band A will have the greatest chance of being allocated social housing, with Bands B to D having less opportunity.

The response was - **In agreement 61%**

Recommendation: It is recommended to approve this proposal, as the banding and outline for Band A (urgent need to move) was broadly supported in the consultation.

9 What we asked - Question 3.

Social housing is provided for those who cannot afford to buy or rent a suitable home on the open market. We want to set income caps so that only those with limited incomes are eligible to join the Housing Register. We are proposing to set a higher income cap for families and a lower income cap for applicants without children.

The response was - **In agreement 62.5%**

Recommendation: It is recommended to approve this proposal, as the proposed increase to the income cap to reflect local housing costs and their impact on different sized households, was supported in the public consultation. The revised thresholds will be as follows:

Up to and including 1 bedroom need - £40,000 (current: £30,000)

2 bedroom need - £50,000 (current: £40,000)

3 or more bedroom need - £60,000 (current: £40,000)

10 What we asked - Question 4

Because of the high number of people seeking our help and the very limited supply of social housing, we intend to maintain a “one offer only” policy for most applicants. This means applicants who successfully bid for a property that meets their needs, cannot bid for another.

The response was - **In agreement 53.6%**

Recommendation: It is recommended to maintain our current policy, due to the demand for social housing being much higher than the numbers of suitable properties being available.

11 What we asked - Question 5

We want to help people who receive care and people who care for others. This could include where the carer and person receiving care need to live together in a larger home. It could also include when a carer needs to live in a home that is close to the person they are caring for. Care can mean many things and can be given in many forms. Housing Register applications under this category can be very difficult to assess in a fair and consistent way. Therefore, to ensure clarity and consistency with other local housing authorities, we are proposing that people who provide care must claim a ‘Carer Allowance’ or be providing unpaid care of at least 35 hours per week. Either the person receiving care or the person giving support, must be currently living outside the District.

The response was - **In agreement 55.7%**

Recommendation: The public consultation was broadly supportive for applicants who undertake formal care of dependents and are in receipt of Disability Living Allowance at the higher rate for care or its equivalent, or are in receipt of Carers Allowance. The consultation supported unpaid carers providing at least 35 hours unpaid care per week, which would need to be evidenced by a medical assessment of the dependent. The consultation also broadly supported ‘in District’ applications, where the one-way journey time is over 1 hour’s duration. This would make the position equitable with those located outside the District.

12 Overall, the consultation shows there is positive public support for the draft revised Scheme, which is attached at Appendix 1.

13 General comments

- A few respondents commented on the difficulties faced by young people who wanted to move to their first independent home, but are impacted by high property prices and rents combined with low wages/zero hour contracts. As currently drafted, people sharing facilities (e.g. young people still living at home with their parents and sharing cooking and bathing facilities, who want to live independently), are not classed as having a housing need and are not eligible to join the Housing Register. It is recommended that an additional category be added in Band D (low priority) and create a Local Lettings Plan to give an element of priority, which will be agreed on a site by site basis, to this category of applicant on selected schemes.
- The current scheme does not require applicants to disclose whether they are staff or Members of the Council or related to, partner of, or living with staff or Members of the Council. It is recommended that this requirement be introduced to protect the Council's interest and that of its employees and elected Members. It is recommended that their status will be flagged on the Council's computer system, and failure to disclose this information may result in the application being suspended or cancelled as determined by the designated manager
- It is recommended that applicants for vacant pitches on the Hever Road traveller site are required to join the Housing Register, in the same way that all other applicants requiring housing assistance are required to do. It is suggested that a bespoke allocations policy is prepared for the letting of pitches on Hever Road.

14 It is considered that a broad range of participants responded to the consultation, including approximately 20% of respondents who were already on, or in the process of joining, the Housing Register. Access to the consultation did not discriminate against any group or section of society. However, it is noted that 79% of respondents were female. From the comments received, it can be seen that:

- there are lots of “carers” (31% of all respondents, look after or give support);
- there are a number of references to domestic abuse;
- there are also references to overcrowding and adult children still living at home not being able to access their own accommodation

Without stereotyping, it is not unreasonable to think that there will be more women than men who have an interest in the Allocations Scheme, as they belong to, or identify with, one or more of the categories above.

Subsequent to the consultation, it remains the case that officers believe the draft Sevenoaks District Housing Register Allocations Scheme will help to

address the housing needs of local people, whatever their background. An equality impact assessment is attached at Appendix 2.

- 15 Periodic reviews of the Scheme are allowed for, whereby minor amendments (which do not represent a major change of Scheme), may be made. This is delegated to the Chief Officer (People & Places) in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing & Health. Through this mechanism, it is intended the Scheme will retain its relevance and robustness throughout its five year lifespan.
- 16 The proposed changes ensures that the Scheme works to make the most effective use of the social housing that becomes available. This is important because the supply of homes is limited and the district can only meet a small amount of the demand each year

Other options Considered and/or rejected

None.

Key Implications

Financial

There will be a cost for updating the Kent Homechoice Locata system as well as overtime costs for staff as detailed above. It is anticipated that this can be covered from existing grant funding.

Resource (non financial)

The new Allocations Scheme will assist the Accommodation Team in making and defending decisions, thereby freeing up officer time for other duties. When first implemented, the Accommodation Team will encounter additional work when transferring applicants over. It is felt this work can be managed through agreed overtime, ensuring the new Scheme is up and running by 30 September 2022.

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement.

The District Council is required to have a Scheme that complies with the statutory provisions contained in the Housing Act 1996 (as amended). Failure to have a lawful scheme will lead to legal challenges that the authority would not be in a position to defend.

Equality Assessment

Members are reminded of the requirement, under the Public Sector Equality Duty (section 149 of the Equality Act 2010) to have due regard to (i) eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act 2010, (ii) advance equality of opportunity between people from different groups, and (iii) foster good relations between people from different groups. The decisions recommended through this paper directly impact on end users. The impact has been analysed and varies between groups of people. The results of this analysis are set out in Appendix 2.

Net Zero Implications

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the council's ambition to be Net Zero by 2030. There is no perceived impact regarding either an increase or decrease in carbon emissions in the district, or supporting the resilience of the natural environment.

Safeguarding Children and Vulnerable Adults.

The new Allocations Scheme will be operated by the Accommodation Team who are fully conversant with our responsibility to safeguard children and vulnerable adults. If the Team has any concerns, the District Council's policy of, "if you see it, say it", will continue to be followed and taken up by a Safeguarding Designated Officer.

Human Rights

Section 5 of the new Allocations Scheme recognises the needs of those seeking our help due to humanitarian and human rights abuses.

Wellbeing

The new Allocations Scheme will promote wellbeing by assisting applicants into homes that are best suited to their needs, including homes that are accessible to those with disabilities and housing with support.

Conclusions

The District Council is required to have an Allocations Scheme that complies with the statutory provisions contained in the Housing Act 1996 (as amended). The current policy has identified deficiencies, which the new Sevenoaks District Housing Register Allocations Scheme 2022-2027 will rectify.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - second draft of the Sevenoaks District Housing Register Allocations Scheme 2022-2027

Appendix 2 - Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

Background Papers

None

Sarah Robson

Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer - People & Places