

## **MAKING BEST USE OF THE SOCIAL HOUSING STOCK - UNDER OCCUPATION INITIATIVE**

**Housing and Health Advisory Committee - 22 November 2022**

**Report of:** Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer - People and Places

**Status:** For Decision

**Also considered by:**

- Cabinet - 8 December 2022

**Key Decision:** No

**Executive Summary:** The Housing Strategy 2022-2027 highlights the importance of making the best use of existing social housing. Approval is being sought to introduce an under occupation initiative which, is open to all Registered Provider partners with family sized housing stock located in the District. The proposed initiative can be funded from available S106 affordable housing monies for an initial 2 year period, from April 2023 to March 2025, subject to Portfolio Holder approval for the use of these funds

**This report supports the Key Aim of:** Housing Strategy 2022-2027

**Portfolio Holder:** Cllr. Kevin Maskell

**Contact Officer:** Sharon Donald, Housing Strategy Manager, Ext.7131

**Recommendation to Housing and Health Advisory Committee:**

To consider the proposed under occupation initiative and make a recommendation to Cabinet; and

**Recommendation to Cabinet:**

That

- a) subject to comments from Housing and Health Advisory Committee, Members, approve the introduction of a new under occupation initiative
- b) The Housing Strategy Manager, be delegated authority, following consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing & Health, to finalise details of the initiative in collaboration with Registered Provider partners and to make any minor amendments.

**Reason for recommendation:** The implementation of an under occupation initiative with Registered Provider partners will ensure the best possible use is made of existing family sized social housing. This will help address the needs of the Housing Register and assist the Council in carrying out its statutory housing function.

## Introduction and Background

- 1 In 2012, the Council adopted an Under Occupation Strategy. To deliver this Strategy, the post of an under occupation officer was created and additional funding was provided to the West Kent Housing Association under occupation cash incentive scheme, “Small is Beautiful.” These measures were joint funded with West Kent Housing Association, and open to West Kent Housing Association tenants only. The District Council used Section 106 affordable housing monies to fund its contribution.
- 2 Over the ensuing 5 year period, 119 under occupying tenants were helped to downsize. The freed up family sized homes were allocated to applicants from the Council’s Housing Register.
- 3 The post of under occupation officer came to an end in March 2019. However the Council has continued to contribute to the Small is Beautiful cash incentive scheme, which remains in operation until 31 March 2023. Within the Council’s group of Registered Provider partners, only West Kent Housing Association offers an under occupation incentive scheme to its tenants.
- 4 The Housing Strategy 2022-2027 and the Older Persons’ Housing Study 2022 confirm the importance of making the best use of existing social housing. The Sevenoaks District Council Housing Register Allocations Policy 2022-2027 gives highest priority (Band A) to under occupying social housing tenants seeking to downsize. In addition, under occupying tenants who are of state retirement age, are eligible to bid for homes with 1 additional bedroom to their housing need. All freed up under occupied homes are offered to the Council for allocation via the Housing Register. This helps alleviate Housing Register pressures and assist the Council in moving homeless applicants out of costly nightly paid temporary accommodation.
- 5 An analysis (see table below) was carried in March 2022 to assess under occupation initiatives offered in other local authority areas. It can be seen the level of cash incentive currently offered under Small is Beautiful is in line with neighbouring authorities.

| Organisation   | £ per bedroom given up | £ other payment (removal costs, carpets, decorating, etc) |
|--|------------------------|---|
| Sevenoaks District Council/ West Kent Housing Association - Small is Beautiful | 500                    | 1,000   |
| Medway Council   | 500                    | 500   |
| Gravesham Borough Council  | 500                    | Removal costs paid if going to sheltered housing          |
| Dartford Borough Council   | 500                    | >500  |
| Tandridge District Council   | Fixed grant of 2,000   | 500   |
| Oxford City Council  | 1,000                  | 1,500   |
| London Borough of Lambeth  | 500                    | 500   |

|                             |                     |  |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|--|
| Westminster City Council    | 3,000 for over 65's | 2,000  |
| London Borough of Greenwich | 350                 | All removals and disturbance costs covered   |
| London Borough of Southwark | 1,000               | Unspecified allowance to help with utilities |

- 6 The potential for releasing family sized social housing is excellent. As at April 2022, the main stock holding Registered Provider partners had the following 2 plus bedroom stock in the District:
- West Kent Housing Association = 3,764
  - Moat = 394
  - Orbit = 80
  - Places for People = 97
- 7 Following positive conversations with Registered Provider partners, we are seeking approval to implement an under occupation initiative which, will include all Registered Providers who are interested in participating. It is proposed the initiative would be in operation for an initial 2 year period.
- 8 Under occupation cash incentives work most effectively when they are offered with a “hand holding” service. A new post of Tenant Support Officer (under occupation) is therefore proposed under the initiative.
- 9 To comply with funding rules, the Tenant Support Officer would have to be employed by a Registered Provider partner (as was the case with the under occupation officer with West Kent Housing Association), but the Tenant Support Officer would be part of the Housing Accommodation Team and managed by the Team Leader.
- 10 The proposed initiative can be funded by Section 106 affordable housing monies. It represents an eligible project under the Affordable Housing Supplementary Planning Document 2011.
- 11 If supported, we will work with the Registered Providers to finalise who will participate, how the initiative will operate, what the initiative should be called and the level of funding each Registered Provider is willing to contribute. It may be that a Registered Provider is willing to participate but is unwilling/unable to contribute funds. Our view is that Registered Providers should contribute funding, but that this should not be made a condition to participation. It is considered the benefit to the Council (and Housing Register applicants) of securing family sized social housing outweighs the cost to the Council funding the initiative, whether wholly or in part. The proposed initiative offers excellent value for money compared with the cost of delivering new build family sized social housing.
- 12 Subject to agreement with participating Registered Providers, it proposed the cash incentive should be maintained at the levels applying to the Small is Beautiful scheme, with the exception of an additional £500 payment to any tenant downsizing to 1 bedroom designated older persons’ housing.

- 13 The Service Level Agreement applying to the Small is Beautiful scheme set a target of 20 under occupation moves each year. It is therefore not unreasonable to anticipate up to 40 under occupation moves could be achieved under the proposed initial 2 year programme.
- 14 Subject to approval, an under occupation initiative Service Level Agreement will be put in place with the participating Registered Providers for an initial 2 year period, from April 2023 to March 2025.

### **Other options Considered and/or rejected**

None.

### **Key Implications**

#### Financial

Estimates show the proposed initiative can be funded from available Section 106 affordable housing monies for an initial 2 year period. Subject to Cabinet approval, Portfolio Holder approval will be sought to secure Section 106 monies. Subject to positive outcomes from the initial 2 year period and further Section 106 affordable housing monies being available, the initiative could be extended beyond 31 March 2025.

#### Resource (non financial)

The Tenant Support Officer would undertake the additional work required.

#### Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement.

None.

#### Equality Assessment

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

#### Net Zero Implications

The decision 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.

### **Conclusions**

Implementing an under occupation initiative, which is open to all Registered Provider partners, will ensure the best possible use is made of family sized social housing. However, it should be noted that the delivery and success of the initiative is subject to being able to recruit a Tenant Support Officer (under occupation) via a Registered Provider for the two year delivery period.

**Appendices**

None

**Background Papers**

None

**Sarah Robson**

**Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer - People and Places**