

HOUSING ALLOCATIONS POLICY REVIEW

Council – 25 July 2024

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

Status: For Consideration

Also considered by:

- Housing and Health Advisory Committee – 4 June 2024
- Cabinet - 18 July 2024

Key Decision: No

Executive Summary:

As a Local Housing Authority, the Council has a statutory duty to publish a Housing Allocations Policy 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 Policy requires a period of consultation. This report presents a revised draft Housing Allocations Policy 2024-2027, which has been refined in light of feedback received from the recent consultation exercise.

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

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Perry Cole

Contact Officer: Alison Simmons, Head of Housing, Extension 7272

Recommendation to Housing and Health Advisory Committee:

- To note the feedback received from the consultation exercise.
- To consider the revised draft of the Housing Allocations Policy 2024-2027.
- To approve the draft of the Housing Allocations Policy 2024-2027 being presented for consideration by Cabinet on 16 July 2024 and, subject to any final changes, for the Housing Allocations Policy to be considered for adoption at Full Council on 25 July 2024.

Recommendation to Cabinet:

- To note the feedback received from the consultation exercise.
- To consider the revised draft of the Housing Allocations Policy 2024-2027.
- To approve the draft of the Housing Allocations Policy 2024-2027 being presented for consideration by Cabinet on 16 July 2024 and, subject to any final changes, for the

Housing Allocations Policy to be considered for adoption at Full Council on 25 July 2024.

Recommendation to Council:

- g) To note the feedback received from the consultation exercise.
- h) To consider the revised draft of the Housing Allocations Policy 2024-2027.
- i) To adopt the draft of the Housing Allocations Policy 2024-2027.

Reason for recommendation:

The Housing Allocations Policy sets out the Council's priorities for how social housing in Sevenoaks District is allocated and the guidelines that determine entitlement and eligibility to join the Housing Register.

The demand for housing from people in need of social housing in Sevenoaks, or wishing to move to Sevenoaks, is significantly higher than the number of homes available. There is an insufficient supply of social housing owned by Registered Provider/Registered Social Landlord/Housing Association to offer a home to everyone who would want it, or even to everyone who needs a home.

The proposed changes arising from the review will ensure that the Housing Allocations Policy 2024-2027 makes the most effective use of the social housing that becomes available across the District.

Introduction and Background

- 1 Housing, health, wellbeing, and life chances are inextricably linked. A comprehensive, fair, transparent, and flexible Housing Allocations Policy enables the Council to manage expectations, make the best use of the housing stock across the District and plan for future housing supply across all tenures to meet the needs and aspirations of its current and future residents.
- 2 The Housing Allocations Policy 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 Allocations Policy sets out a framework that describes how to register, the assessment process and property allocation process.
- 3 The recommendations within this review have all been subject to a comprehensive consultation exercise which included briefings, workshops, surveys, small meetings and one to one conversations.
- 4 The Council is legally required to consult to seek views and feedback from other partners and stakeholders. The feedback received has enabled amendments to be considered for inclusion within the Housing Allocations Policy.

- 5 The draft Housing Allocations Policy 2024-2027 was subject to public consultation between 28 November 2023 and 17 March 2024, through the following forums and the completion of surveys:

Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy Forum

- 28 November 2023
- 9 February 2024

Staff Focus Group

- 7 March 2024

Councillors Focus Groups

- 5 March 2024
- 11 March 2024

Outcome of Consultation

- 6 The results are summarised, by question, below.

Question 1

To ensure applicants bid for available and suitable properties we are proposing to introduce the following for Band A applicants:

If an applicant has been placed in Band A they are able to exercise choice and place bids for properties on Homechoice for an initial period of 6 weeks. If a Band A applicant does not bid for suitable properties that are advertised during the initial 6 weeks, the Council will place the applicant on autobid, and one offer of suitable accommodation will be made.

If an applicant refuses an offer of suitable accommodation their application will be reassessed and moved down to Band C.

In agreement – Subject to, if during the 6 weeks period there are no suitable properties for applicants to bid for, they will be given a further 6 weeks to bid before being placed on autobid.

However, if the applicant is a Homeless applicant and they refuse an offer of suitable accommodation, their Homeless Duty will be ended, and they will be removed from the Housing Register

Recommendation: It is recommended to approve this proposal subject to the above caveat.

Question 2

To ensure applicants bid for available and suitable properties we are proposing to introduce the following for Band B applicants:

If an applicant has been placed in Band B they are able to exercise choice and place bids for properties on Homechoice for an initial period of 8 weeks. If a Band B applicant does not bid for suitable properties that are advertised during the initial 8

weeks, the Council will place the applicant on autobid and one offer of suitable accommodation will be made.

If an applicant refuses an offer of suitable accommodation, their application will be reassessed and moved down to Band C.

However, if the applicant is a Homeless applicant and they refuse an offer of suitable accommodation, their Homeless Duty will be ended, and they will be removed from the Housing Register

In agreement – Subject to, if during the 8 weeks period there are no suitable properties for applicants to bid for, they will be given a further 8 weeks to bid before being placed on autobid.

However, if the applicant is a Homeless applicant and they refuse an offer of suitable accommodation, their Homeless Duty will be ended, and they will be removed from the Housing Register

Recommendation: It is recommended to approve this proposal subject to the above caveat.

Question 3

Where Homeless applicants have accepted an offer of a suitable property and are yet to sign their Tenancy Agreement, the Council is considering suspending applicants from continuing to bid. Do you agree with this proposal?

In agreement – Subject to, in exceptional circumstances the Head of Housing will consider where there is good reason for an applicant to continue to bid.

Recommendation: It is recommended to approve this proposal subject to the above caveat.

Question 4

Where Housing Register applicants have accepted an offer of a suitable property and are yet to sign their Tenancy Agreement, the Council is considering suspending applicants from continuing to bid. Do you agree with this proposal?

In agreement – Subject to, in exceptional circumstances the Head of Housing will consider where there is good reason for an applicant to continue to bid.

Recommendation: It is recommended to approve this proposal subject to the above caveat.

Question 5

Housing Register applicants in Band C who have bid and been offered the property will be suspended from the Housing Register for up to 6 months in the following circumstances if they:

- Do not respond to a suitable offer of accommodation, and/or

- Do not attend an arranged viewing, and/or
- Refuse an offer of suitable accommodation?

In agreement – Subject to, in exceptional circumstances the Head of Housing will consider where there is good reason for an applicant to continue to bid.

Recommendation: It is recommended to approve this proposal subject to the above caveat.

Question 6

Social housing is provided for those who cannot afford to buy or rent a suitable home on the open market.

We are proposing to set a higher cap for capital assets or savings of £20,000 or more, except where the applicant is applying for designated older persons' housing, in which case the total capital assets or savings threshold is £85,000.

In agreement

Recommendation: It is recommended to approve this proposal

Question 7

For applicants who are residing in Social Housing and do not hold the tenancy and following a bereavement do not have the rights to succeed to the tenancy, should the applicants be assisted through the Housing Register to secure alternative accommodation if they are freeing up family sized accommodation.

In agreement – The Changing Spaces Officer will provide support to secure alternative accommodation.

Recommendation: It is recommended to approve this proposal.

Question 8

In the current Policy, a Band D is awarded to a single concealed households (including young people who live in the family home), who meet the definition of Local Essential Worker, should this be opened up to include couples?

In agreement

Recommendation: It is recommended to approve this proposal

Question 9

Should an exemption be included in the Local Connection criteria for applicants who are residing in an institution such as prison or secure unit, rehabilitation centre, refuge, hostel support accommodation scheme or semi-independent accommodation scheme and who did have a qualifying local connection through residence in settled accommodation within the Sevenoaks district immediately before they moved into their current accommodation?

In agreement – Subject to the removal of prison or secure unit.

Recommendation: It is recommended to approve this proposal with the removal of prison or secure unit.

7 General comments arising from the consultation exercise include:

- Demand outstrips available supply
- Housing not available in the areas that residents have work, built up a support network and have family ties
- Households with school children, reschooling is a problem
- Applicants should remain on the Housing Register until a suitable property is found
- Social Housing is seen as a home for life
- If applicants have assets between £20k and £85k, then surely, they should be expected to buy or rent
- Suspend applicants even longer for refusing suitable accommodation
- Automated process before implementation

8 The Intermediate Housing Protocol gives priority to certain categories of applicants for Low Cost Home Ownership and other Intermediate Housing tenures. One such priority category is Local Essential Workers. The definition of Local Essential Workers is contained within the Housing Allocations Policy and currently requires Local Essential Workers to have been employed within the District for 3 years continuously at the point of application.

To encourage and assist Local Essential Workers to access Intermediate Housing, we have reduced the 3 years requirement to 1 year. This will apply to Intermediate Housing only.

9 The Sevenoaks District Housing Register Allocations Scheme July 2022–June 2027 included the allocation of vacant pitches on the Council's Hever Road Traveller site. Following the approval of the Sevenoaks District Gypsy and Traveller Allocation Policy, Romani Way, Edenbridge in July 2023 the reference to the allocation of vacant pitches at Hever Road has been removed from the draft Housing Allocations Policy.

10 Periodic reviews of the Housing Allocations Policy will continue on an annual basis, whereby minor amendments (which do not represent a major change of Housing Allocations Policy), may be made. This is delegated to the Chief Officer (People and Places) and Head of Housing in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Health. Through this mechanism, it is intended the Policy will retain its relevance and robustness throughout its remaining 3 year lifespan.

11 The proposed changes ensures that the Housing Allocations Policy 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 are no financial implications.

The new Housing Allocations Policy will assist the Housing Options and Solutions Team in making and defending decisions, thereby freeing up officer time for other duties.

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement.

The Council is required to have a Housing Allocations Policy that complies with the statutory provisions contained in the Housing Act 1996 (as amended). Failure to have a lawful Policy 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.

Climate Change Implications

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the council's ambition to tackle the challenge of climate change. 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

As a Local Housing Authority, the Council has a statutory duty to publish a Housing Allocations Policy 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.

The proposed changes ensure that the Housing Allocations Policy 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.

It is believed that the proposed changes as set out in the Housing Allocations Policy 2024-2027 will ensure the policy retains its relevance and robustness throughout the remaining years of its lifespan.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Draft Housing Allocations Policy 2024-2027

Appendix 2 – Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

Sarah Robson

Deputy Chief Executive, Chief Officer – People and Places