

Report to the Report to the Economic Development and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee

3rd September 2014

Report on Joint Housing Allocations Policy Review



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Introduction

The Scrutiny Committee Members are requested to consider a review of the Joint Housing Allocations Policy. This report has been prepared to provide information on the reasoning behind the policy review.

Background

Under Part VI of the Housing Act 1996 local authorities are required to have an Allocations policy and procedure in place to allocate social housing and under Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by Homelessness Act 2002) to make provision for homeless households.

The Joint Housing Allocations Policy is the partnership between Newcastle Borough Council and Aspire Housing Group. It is used alongside the newly implemented Homes Direct, Choice Based Lettings (CBL) to determine how social housing is allocated.

The Joint Allocation Policy has been operating effectively with Aspire Housing since 2010. The Joint Allocation Policy allows for 75% of Aspire Housing Stock to be made available through the CBL system. This agreement has followed from the large scale voluntary transfer of homes to Aspire Housing Group in 2000. The Joint Allocations Policy has had regular reviews, more recently following the introduction of the Localism Act in 2011. There are, however, some areas of the Joint Allocation Policy that now need reviewing in the light of changes to the joint working arrangements with Aspire Housing and Midland Heart who administer the Newcastle Housing Advice (NHA) service on behalf of Newcastle Borough Council, along with recent additional recommendations from government guidance regarding the allocation of social housing.

Questions to be Addressed

Proposed revisions within the Joint Allocations Policy

The new CBL system Homes Direct was introduced from 1st August 2014 and in parallel Aspire Housing introduced their own Housing Letting Policy, allowing customers access to the remaining 25% of available homes to let within their stock that are not available through the Joint Allocation Policy. Aspire Housing are using the HomeHunt system to enable their tenants to access available homes.

The principle of Aspire Housing Letting Policy is that their own customers will be given priority to a transfer, if they match certain criteria, together with increased priority to customers who offer a community contribution to the place that they live. The policy supports maximising better use of available housing stock. A copy of the Aspire Housing Letting Policy is attached to this report as an appendix.

Consultation with Aspire Housing on the introduction of Homes Direct and their own Housing allocation policy has provided for the review of the “Joint” Allocation Policy and Aspire Housing have requested withdrawal from the principle of a joint policy. This principle has also been enhanced following the award of the NHA service contract to Midland Heart and the migration to the Homes Direct Choice based lettings system.

Based on the above information, Aspire Housing has recommended the removal of enhanced priority given to Aspire customers in the current policy. These are highlighted as follows:

- ❖ Aspire Housing customers who are under occupying their accommodation by two or more bedrooms or who have an adapted property that they no longer need
- ❖ Aspire Preference System customers with enhanced banding
- ❖ Aspire Housing customers who have been assessed and notified at the end of their fixed term tenancy due to inappropriate size of accommodation
- ❖ Aspire Housing customers who are under occupying their home by one bedroom
- ❖ Aspire Housing households with children under 5 occupying a 2nd floor flat (or above)
- ❖ Aspire Housing customers with no housing need – removal of band 7

If the above changes were made, the policy would still enable an existing Aspire Housing customer in housing need to apply to the revised policy and be given reasonable preference; however they would not be given any additional priority and would be banded like any other existing Registered Provider customer, for example, an existing Staffordshire Housing Association customer needing a new home.

The removal of the right for Aspire tenants not in housing need from Band 7 aligns to the Aspire preferred approach to managing their stock effectively and prioritising those in need, but would mean that tenants were treated differently from other landlord tenants. Through consultation officers will ascertain if other Registered Landlords also wish the policy changes to include their tenants.

Members are asked to consider the above proposed changes to the joint housing allocation policy. Members are also requested to consider these changes with the

implementation of the Aspire Housing Allocation Policy and be minded that priority will be given to Aspire Housing customers within their lettings policy.

Proposed changes to administering the Housing Register

Since awarding the NHA contract to Midland Heart prioritisation has been given to the migration to the Homes Direct, Choice Based Lettings system.

Officers are currently working with partners and stakeholders to ensure that the Nomination Service Level Agreement is also effectively working, together with the current working policies and procedures for NHA that are in place. Officers have previously developed with partners a range of complementary policies and protocols to ensure that vulnerable people are supported to access housing, housing is allocated to those in housing need and allocations contribute to balanced communities. The review of the Joint Allocation Policy allows the opportunity to also review these documents and consider if any amendments are required or if there is still a requirement to have them in place.

The Homes Direct CBL system has been introduced in consultation with customers registered with Newcastle Borough Council. The existing joint allocations policy was built within the system, allowing a seamless transition for existing customers registered with Newcastle Borough Council, to re-register to the new system. Midland Heart worked to ensure that customers have had the support to enable them to bid for properties and access the additional benefits the system allows, including access to the regional pool of 1900 available properties each year, and access to the Mutual Exchange register of 6000 potential swaps.

The Homes Direct system does have some differences that will mean changes to the administration processes of the Housing Register. These differences make changes to the policy in the following areas:

Reviewing and updating applications. Housing Register applications within Homes Direct will be reviewed annually, on the anniversary of their application. Under the current policy, applications are reviewed every 6 months. It is not yet known how this will affect the numbers of people on the Housing Register, however, this information will be regularly reviewed through the monitoring of the NHA service contract. It is important to note that customers will not be negatively affected. When customers fail to respond to reminders about their review they are removed from the register, the move to annual reviews will mean that fewer customers are removed.

Information about new vacancies. Weekly information on forthcoming vacancies will be published "on line" through the advertisement of properties. This information will not be available in printed format, which has been known as the "Freesheet". Customers can view available properties at the NHA Options shop in Lower Street, and also at the Aspire Housing Customer Service Centre, in Merrial Street. Properties will be advertised similar to Local Letting Agents, within clear fixed holders for window display. Vulnerable applicants who require assistance for bidding for properties will be identified by NHA staff members and will be given help by the CBL system selecting automatic bids.

Choice of Accommodation Customers will have the ability to make three bids per weekly cycle with the Homes Direct system. This allows better management of customers applications and monitoring of nominations. The present Joint Allocation Policy gives applicants the freedom to make unlimited bids, which allows applicants the ability to express interest in all areas. The review will include a revision of bid history and demand for properties to ensure that the Homes Direct system does not prevent customers access to certain properties and those which are classed as hard to let.

Members are asked to provide any comment on the above administration changes that the Homes Direct CBL system has introduced.

Recommendations and guidance from government policy

The Localism Act 2011 enabled Local Housing Authorities to better manage their housing register by giving them discretion to determine who can qualify for social housing within their area.

The Joint Allocation Policy is fully compliant with current legislation however there has been recent guidance to suggest that Local Authorities review their Local Connection criteria and to also allow for information to be published and made publicly available on the type and numbers of available social homes let to local people.

Information has been provided for Members on the allocation of social housing for Newcastle within the appendix on the demand and type of social homes allocated for the last financial year 2013/14.

This guidance will be reviewed to ensure that the current local connection criteria of the joint policy is not restrictive to customers wishing to apply on the Housing Register, being mindful, that, for example, if Band 7 of the policy be removed, this will disadvantage customers who require sheltered accommodation and may need to move closer to the Borough to receive support. The current Band 7 allows exemption from local connection criteria for sheltered housing.

Members are asked to consider the above guidance information and provide comments as to whether Local Connection criteria should be reviewed in light of the current policy being fully compliant with legislation. Members are also asked to provide comment on how they would like information to be made publicly available on social housing homes let to local people.

Consultation

It is proposed that the review of the Joint Allocation Policy be undertaken by a policy review group set up by Officers which will take account of views of partners and customers. The policy review is scheduled for completion by January 2015. The working group will include Aspire Housing and other Registered Providers within the Borough, to ensure partnership working and a joint approach. This will include reviewing, the current demand and allocation of social housing, the management of customer transfers and pre-tenancy training.

The review will also include a cross section of customers that are registered with Newcastle Borough Council. As mentioned above, prior to the Homes Direct CBL scheme launching

Newcastle Housing Advice contacted everyone on the housing register to check they still wished to stay on the housing register then providing information to re-register them on the new system. Methods used to contact customers, have included a variety of media formats, including email, letters, posters and leaflets and customers will also be invited the launch of the NHA service, which is scheduled for 24th September 2014. Officers of the Borough and NNA service team will utilise the event to ask customers questions on the current joint policy and if they would be interested in being involved in the review. Invitations to the launch will also be extended to voluntary groups and third sector organisation to whom consultation on the Joint Allocation Policy review will extend to.

We will use the time taken for consultation to also learn what has worked well with the current policy and to listen to any issues of concern of what has not worked well and how we aim to address any of these. We will also look at the relevant information that we can learn from customers' reviews that have taken place in relation to their housing register applications. The majority of review requests relate to additional information being provided to support medical or welfare needs priority. The review group will look at how best to highlight the need to provide relevant information to support initial assessment. Officers will also review any recent guidance that has been directed to Local Authorities on case law following Court Judgement and any other areas of practice for the allocation of social housing that need to be considered.

Scrutiny Members are asked to consider if the methods of consultation proposed are sufficient to review the joint allocation policy and if the timing proposed for the review is agreeable with the various stakeholders that will be invited to be involved with the review.

Outcomes

Members of the Scrutiny Committee are requested to provide comment on the proposed review of the Joint Allocation Policy and are requested to direct any further comments or questions to Officers of the Borough Council.

Supporting Information

The Housing Lettings Policy for Aspire Housing Group.

The social housing allocation information determined from the Joint Allocation Policy for 2013-2014.

Constraints

The Council has the option to adopt changes to the policy and supporting policies and protocols that will assist in the operation of Newcastle's Homes Direct CBL scheme.

It is not intended to complete a whole scale review of the policy and as such there has been no additional funding allocated. Officers and Midland Heart will be discussing issues raised through the consultation to ascertain if it is possible to make minor changes to the policy without incurring financial costs with the Homes Direct CBL system provider.

Conclusions

The policy review findings will be reported back to Scrutiny Members and further information will be provided to conclude if any changes to policy are recommended. The review of the joint allocations policy will ensure that there is a consistent approach to the allocation of social housing within the Borough

Relevant Portfolio Holder(s)

Councillor John Williams – Planning and Assets

Councillor Tony Kearon – Safer Communities

Appendices

The Housing Letting Policy for Aspire Housing Group.

The social housing allocation information determined from the Joint Allocation Policy 2013-2014