

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

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## **Report on Joint Housing Allocations Policy Review Progress**



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### **Introduction**

In September Scrutiny Committee Members approved a review of the Joint Housing Allocations Policy. This report provides an update on the review progress and outlines the main findings.

### **Background**

Under Part V1 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 V11 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by Homelessness Act 2002) to make provision for homeless households.

The Housing Allocations Policy is used alongside the newly implemented Homes Direct, ICT system to determine how social housing to which the Council has nomination rights is allocated.

### **Questions to be Addressed**

#### Consultation

As part of the September Scrutiny meeting it was agreed that officers would seek a range of views on the Allocation Policy to take account of views of partners, members and customers. Officers have been involved in detailed discussions with Registered Providers to which the Council has nomination rights; this has included one to one meetings and a group discussion at the Lettings Forum. Agencies which support vulnerable people to access housing have also been consulted including a discussion at the Homeless Forum. Consideration has also been given to recent case law on allocations and recent requests for register reviews to ensure the review covers the relevant areas.

An on-line survey has also been developed to seek views this has been promoted to partner agencies and is on the Homes Direct website so that customers see this when they are looking for housing. The information outlined below includes the initial findings from this survey, which concludes on 15th December.

#### Proposed revisions within the Joint Allocations Policy

##### A) Fair assessment of Aspire Tenants and other Registered Provider Tenants

Changes have been requested that 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 Registered Provider customer, for example, a Staffordshire Housing Association customer needing a new home.

Following discussions with registered providers this is seen to be the most equitable approach and can be easily explained to all customers in that all tenants of affordable housing are assessed on an equitable basis and that they are prioritised under their own landlords transfer policy.

Subject to approval this will result in the policy stating that:

- ❖ Registered Provider tenants who are under-occupying their accommodation by two or more bedrooms or who have an adapted property that they no longer need
- ❖ Preference System customers with enhanced banding (all Registered Provider tenants will be assessed equally)
- ❖ Registered Provider tenants who have been assessed and notified at the end of their fixed term tenancy due to inappropriate size of accommodation
- ❖ Registered Provider tenants who are under-occupying their home by one bedroom
- ❖ Registered Provider tenants households with children under 5 occupying a 2<sup>nd</sup> floor flat (or above)

Aspire Housing also requested the removal of their tenants who had no housing need from band 7. This aligns to the Aspire preferred approach to managing their stock effectively and prioritising those in need. Whilst this is supported by Aspire Housing, officers would like to see the final outcome of the survey to ensure the views of tenants are taken into account and whether other Registered Landlords also wish the policy changes to include their tenants.

##### B) Proposed changes to administering the Housing Register

The move to the "Homes Direct" system in August 2014 enabled officers to review some of the administration processes of the Housing Register. One of the key issues for the consultation is the extent of choice of accommodation, i.e. the number of properties an applicant can express interest in per week. The present Joint Allocation Policy gives applicants the freedom to make unlimited bids, which allows applicants the ability to express interest in all properties. The new system does however have the ability to make three bids per weekly cycle; this may allow better management of customers applications and monitoring of nominations. Officers have investigated the issues surrounding this and the

new system has one main advantage in that once someone has been offered a property they are then unable to see further vacant properties. This means that it is clear to the staff which properties are ready to offer to the applicants and correct advice can be given to applicants. This will reduce the likelihood of complaints or dissatisfied applicants pursuing their case with the ombudsman as previously occurred on occasions.

Officers therefore believe that offering unlimited bids should continue within the new policy, this is supported through the initial consultation responses.

#### C) Member request – Local Connection

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. The current policy has local connection criteria, with only applicants requiring sheltered accommodation and may need to move closer to the Borough to receive support being allowed onto the register in band 7.

This issue has been included in the consultation survey, whilst some may see that there are advantages in the Council accepting applicants without a local connection and that they should be allowed to access housing which local people don't want there is an important resource issue. The current policy focuses on applicants with a local connection so that staff resources at Newcastle Housing Advice can be focussed. If the policy was to be extended then these resources would need to be shared across the range of applicants resulting in local people receiving less of a service, It may also result in Midland Heart requiring additional contract fees to cover the costs of assisting a new group of non-local customers.

At present those without a local connection are advised to apply to Registered Providers directly, this is in line with most local authority policies and this approach can continue.

Officers therefore recommend that the current local connection criteria is maintained.

#### D) Member requests – Ex-Service Personnel

The Council supports the Armed Forces Community Covenant which seeks to support Ex-Service Personnel settle back into the community following active service. The covenant seeks to aid rehousing including those repatriating back to the area. Officers have reviewed the current allocations policy; this covers service personnel and enables the appropriate banding to meet their housing needs. The continuation of this is recommended for the revised policy.

#### E) Member requests - Equity

At the Scrutiny meeting Members requested that the review consider the Equity approach and to assess if the equity thresholds should be amended. As part of the review officers have considered complaints and operation of the thresholds, where there are greater housing needs such as health and safety risks due to tenants living in a home with serious disrepair then individual cases can be assessed. Officers believe that the number of people affected is minimal and that often they can be rehoused from a lower band, therefore it is appropriate that those with financial assets are a lower priority than those without.

## **Outcomes**

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

## **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 scheme.

It is not intended to complete a wholesale 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 whether it is possible to make minor changes to the policy without incurring financial costs with the Homes Direct ICT system provider (Abitas).

## **Conclusions**

Subject to Members views officers will commence discussions with Midland Heart and Abitas to ascertain whether there will be any financial implications of the proposed changes. These will need to be taken into account prior to any Cabinet review of the recommendations.

## **Relevant Portfolio Holder(s)**

Councillor John Williams – Planning and Assets

Councillor Tony Kearon – Safer Communities

## **Background documentation**

The survey is available on the Homes Direct website or from Housing Strategy on request.