

JOINT HOUSING ALLOCATIONS POLICY – MINOR AMENDMENT

Submitted by: Sarah Moore

Portfolio: Regeneration and Development

Ward(s) affected: All

Purpose of the Report

To highlight a request for an amendment to the Joint Housing Allocations Policy from Aspire Housing prior to the Policy launch in the New Year.

Recommendation

To give consideration to the request made by Aspire Housing for an amendment of the Joint Housing Allocations Policy and to grant approval.

Reasons

The request for the amendment to the Joint Housing Allocations Policy has been made by Aspire Housing following recent investigations into their void performance, which revealed that refusals rates are high and refusal reasons suggest that customers appear to be bidding on properties without giving full consideration of whether they would actually be prepared to accept a tenancy for the property.

1. Background

- 1.1 The Joint Housing Allocations Policy was approved by Cabinet in March 2012 and had been developed in partnership with Aspire Housing as a mechanism to determine priorities for housing need in the Borough and for defining the procedures to be followed in allocating accommodation to local residents approaching the Council through the Newcastle Housing Advice (NHA) service for assistance.

2. Issues

- 2.1 The Joint Housing Allocations Policy was reviewed and a new draft was prepared and approved in early 2012. The Policy was later approved in June 2012 following a number of minor amendments made to ensure that it complemented the provisions of Welfare Reform Act (2012) so that Borough residents are not placed in a detrimental situation relating to their housing register application and any subsequent offer of housing that could later be considered unaffordable.
- 2.2 There have been delays to the implementation of the revised Joint Housing Allocations Policy due to ongoing negotiations with the ICT provider that need to be resolved before the system could be built to support the enhanced delivery of the NHA Options Choice Based Lettings (CBL) system and accompanying Housing Register.
- 2.3 Aspire Housing, following recent investigations into their void performance, have recently identified issues indicating that refusals rates on properties advertised under the NHA Options (CBL) are high, which in turn is having a detrimental effect on void performance and is causing an increase in the loss of their rental income.

- 2.4 Social Housing stock is a scarce resource in the Borough and should be prioritised for those residents in most housing need.

3. **Options Considered**

- 3.1 In order to assist Aspire Housing in addressing their void performance issues and to ensure best use of social housing property stock in the Borough, Aspire asked the Council to consider a range of options as an amendment to the Joint Housing Allocations Policy, prior to its launch in the New Year. These options were:

- (a) To restrict the number of bids that an applicant is able to make on properties advertised each week;
- (b) To restrict the number of bids that an applicant is able to make on properties advertised each week and if an applicant then refuses a subsequent 'reasonable' offer of a tenancy or does not respond to an offer within the timescales on the offer notification to exclude the applicant from the Housing Register;
- (c) To restrict the number of bids that an applicant is able to make on properties advertised each week and if an applicant then refuses a subsequent 'reasonable' offer of a tenancy or does not respond to an offer within the timescales on the offer notification to suspend the applicant from the Housing Register for a period of 6 months;
- (d) To permit applicants to place an unlimited number of bids on properties advertised each week, however if an applicant makes an unreasonable refusal of an offer or does not respond to an offer within the timescale on the offer notification, their application will be suspended for 6 months. This does not apply to applicants in Band 1, 2 or 3 who have had an assisted bid placed by NHA on their behalf, if they refuse a suitable property from an assisted bid they become reassessed and placed 2 bands lower.

- 3.2 An unreasonable refusal is considered to be a reason given:

- (1) that was or could have been known at the time of bidding, such as; not liking the area; its too far from family support; it has a school nearby; don't like the neighbourhood; not happy with the external elements of the property; it has no front garden; it has steps to the front of the house etc. or;
- (2) regarding the internal space or décor or layout or the standard of the property when the property has passed Aspire's Void Standard. This will be considered on a case by case looking at customer vulnerability by a Manager to ensure consistency.

4. **Proposal and Reasons for this Preferred Solution**

- 4.1 It is proposed that the Joint Housing Allocations Policy is amended to permit applicants to place an unlimited number of bids on properties advertised each week under the NHA Options CBL scheme, however if an applicant makes an unreasonable refusal of an offer or does not respond to an offer within the timescale on the offer notification, that their application is suspended for 6 months (Option d above).
- 4.2 Applicants will be able to appeal against a decision made to penalise applicants for refusal of a property and these appeals will be dealt with by the Lettings Manager or a Manager who is more senior to the person who made the original decision.
- 4.3 Option d is considered the most favourable option because:-
- (1) it does not restrict an applicant's choice under the NHA Options CBL scheme;
 - (2) it encourages applicants to carefully consider bids that they do make;

- (3) it prevents delays to the Lettings system that may effect vulnerable applicants who urgently need accommodation;
- (4) it protects vulnerable applicants who may not understand the implications of bidding and will therefore not be penalised;
- (5) it does not permanently penalise applicants;
- (6) it enables more effective use of property stock and administrative time;
- (7) it can be clearly communicated to applicants at the time of registration or when they bid for properties;
- (8) the process can be managed effectively and efficiently;
- (9) there is a built in appeals mechanism to ensure that fairness and consistency is achieved.

5. Outcomes Linked to Sustainable Community Strategy and Corporate Priorities

- 5.1 The Joint Housing Allocations Policy enables the Council to prioritise meeting the housing needs of local residents; this contributes to the delivery of the corporate priority of creating safe and sustainable communities.

6. Legal and Statutory Implications

- 6.1 Housing Authorities are required by s.167 of the Housing Act (1996), as amended by the Homelessness Act (2002), to have an allocation scheme for determining priorities and for defining the procedures to be followed in allocating housing accommodation.
- 6.2 The Policy complies with the Housing Act (1996) (Part VI), as amended by the Homelessness Act (2002) and the Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities.

7. Equality Impact Assessment

- 7.1 The Council has completed an EIA for the Joint Housing Allocations Policy.

8. Financial and Resource Implications

- 8.1 There are no direct implications of the proposed amendment for the Joint Housing Allocations Policy as the Policy has not yet been incorporated into the enhanced ICT systems and amendments are already scheduled to be met within the current budgets using existing resources.

9. Major Risks

There are no major risks attributable to this proposal.

10. Key Decision Information

- 10.1 The adoption and the implementation of this Policy with the proposed amendment will affect all wards within the Borough.

11. Earlier Cabinet/Committee Resolutions

- 11.1 Choice Based Lettings Update – Feb 2010
- 11.2 Joint Housing Allocations Policy Review – July 2011
- 11.3 Draft Joint Housing Allocations Policy – March 2012

13. **List of Appendices**

None.

14. **Background Papers**

Joint Housing Allocations Policy 2012 – available on request from the Housing Strategy Team.