

Report to Council

Subject: Choice Based Lettings and Housing Allocations Policy

Date: 13 February 2013

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1. Purpose of the Report

To recommend that Council approves and adopts the Choice Based Lettings and Housing Allocations Policy, which was endorsed by Cabinet in January 2013.

2. Background

- 2.1 All local housing authorities are required by Part VI of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended) to publish an allocations scheme setting out how social housing in their district is to be allocated. The scheme must comply with legislation and must have regard to any guidance published by the Secretary of State.
- 2.2 The Localism Act 2011 made a number of amendments to Part VI of the Housing Act 1996, and the Secretary of State published revised statutory guidance in June 2012.¹ These changes have rendered the current joint allocations policy, adopted in 2011, out of date, meaning it is no longer in line with national policy or legislation.
- 2.3 Extensive discussions have taken place with Broxtowe and Rushcliffe borough councils with a view to updating the shared policy. The conclusion has been reached that each council wishes to use the new flexibilities around allocations in different ways, and hence it is now proposed that each council will publish a separate Choice Based Lettings and Housing Allocations Policy. The three councils will, however, continue to share the same website and software system for the Homesearch choice based lettings scheme.
- 2.4 The proposed policy (Appendix 1) has been developed through consultation with partner agencies, members and parish councils at a consultation event on 3rd October. There was then a further period of public consultation with everyone who attended that meeting, Registered Providers of Social Housing (housing associations) and current applicants on the housing register from 13 November 2012 to 10 December 2012. The proposed policy was available on both the Council website and the Homesearch website during this time. Letters

¹ [Allocation of accommodation: guidance for local housing authorities in England](#) (DCLG, June 2012)

were sent to the 130 applicants who receive the weekly Homesearch newsletter to inform them about the consultation. Emails were sent to the 1,303 current applicants who had provided an email address. In total, six responses were received from people on the housing register. Emails were also sent to all Registered Providers of Social Housing with properties in Gedling, with responses being received from Gedling Homes and Nottingham Community Housing Association.

- 2.5 The draft Allocations Policy was sent to all members of the Policy Review Scrutiny Group, in accordance with the Council's Budget and Policy Framework Procedure Rules for policies that have been developed in partnership.
- 2.6 The report was then presented to Cabinet in January 2013 by the Service Manager for Housing & Localities. Following discussion, the request was made, via the Portfolio Holder for Health & Housing, that the definition of Armed Forces personnel was widened to include those serving, or who had served in the last five years, in the Territorial Army and Reserve Forces.

3. Proposal

- 3.1 The proposed Choice Based Lettings and Housing Allocations Policy (attached at appendix 1) makes a number of changes to the current policy. In summary, some of the most significant are:
 - There will be a separate Choice Based Lettings and Housing Allocations Policy for Gedling, rather than one shared with Broxtowe and Rushcliffe. This means that future amendments can be made without requiring the agreement of the partner councils.
 - People with no recognised housing need will not qualify to join the housing register, unless they are over 50 or disabled and in need of sheltered housing.
 - People with no local connection to Gedling will not qualify to join the housing register (there are a number of exceptions to this, including Armed Forces personnel and people who are in need of sheltered housing).
 - "Recognised housing need" means meeting the criteria for priority bands 1 – 3, which have been adapted to make them more flexible. For instance, someone living in housing they cannot afford in the long term would qualify for band 3, as would someone who needed to move nearer family to be supported by them, or closer to a place of work or a child's school.
 - People who are adequately housed but wish to move to a more desirable or convenient location will not qualify for the housing register unless they have a housing need and a local connection
 - Applicants who are serving members of the Armed Forces, or who have left the Armed Forces in the last five years, including both Territorial Army and Reserve Forces, will be prioritised with nine months' additional waiting time. This reflects the spirit of the Community Covenant which the Council supports.
 - Homeless applicants will have the period of time in which they can choose accommodation reduced from eighteen weeks to six weeks. For the initial six weeks after the decision their application will be in band 2 after this time, unless there are exceptional circumstances. They will then move to Band 1 and the Council will identify a property (which may be a private rented sector property if suitable) and directly allocate it to them in discharge of its homelessness duties.

- Although the Council recognises why many people would prefer to live in social housing (lower rents and greater security of tenure), it will not be available to everybody.

3.2 The reasons for these proposed changes are:

- There is not enough social housing to provide it for everyone who wants it. At current levels of grant funding and with the housing market continuing to struggle, this is likely to be the case for the long term.
- An average of 25 social properties are let through Homesearch every month.
- As at 10 December 2012, there are 2,372 active applicants on the Housing Register, with an average of 108 new applications being received every month.
- Of these active applicants, 1,535 (65%) are in Band 4 – the lowest priority band.
- Only 61 properties have been let to applicants in Band 4 since the scheme was launched in April 2011, representing 12% of all lettings made. Many of these are sheltered housing, for which demand is lower, or are housing schemes where local lettings policies are in place. In general, an applicant in Band 4 has little chance of ever securing social housing in Gedling.
- Properties advertised on Homesearch in Gedling have attracted an average of 54 bids for each property. The greatest number of bids for a property is 168.

3.3 An application in Band 4 still has to be registered and supporting information (such as proof of identity, proof of address, proof of children’s residency, bank statements, pay slips, medical information etc.) still has to be gathered in, dealt with and held securely. Many applicants then contact the Council to enquire about their application and how long it is likely to be before they are housed. This is a poor use of Council resources, which could be better spent on intensive work with applicants in higher housing need, including preventing homelessness, if the burden of dealing with low-priority applications was removed.

3.4 More importantly, the current situation also provides a poor service to the customer, who is given false hope that completing a form, providing supporting information, checking properties on the website, bidding every week and responding to the annual review letter will eventually secure them a social housing property so long as they are willing to wait. Because priority band is a more important factor than waiting time, for most applicants in Band 4, this is not the case, as has been shown above. These applicants would be better advised to look at other options, such as the private rented sector or moving by means of a mutual exchange.

4. Resource Implications

- 4.1 There will be a cost for the Choice Based Lettings software provider to adapt and reconfigure the software to reflect the new Choice Based Lettings and Housing Allocations Policy. This cost has not yet been quantified, but is estimated to be in the region of £5,000 - £10,000 which can be met from existing resources. Following approval of the new policy, detailed work to specify and cost the required changes will take place with Abritas.
- 4.2 The proposal to restrict applications to people with housing need and with a local connection will greatly reduce the number of applications, and their supporting paperwork, that have to be received, registered, scanned, indexed, and checked, then renewed every year. It will

also eliminate the need to deal with enquiries relating to their housing application from people in Band 4 of the housing register (although many of these people will still receive advice about other housing options such as the private rented sector and mutual exchanges). This change has the potential to create considerable efficiency savings in Customer Services, Corporate Administration and Housing Options staffing, which will be fully quantified following implementation although these efficiencies may not be cashable.

5. Recommendation

- 5.1 To recommend that Council approves and adopts the Choice Based Lettings and Housing Allocations Policy.

Background papers

Equality Impact Assessment

Appendices

Appendix 1: Choice Based Lettings and Housing Allocations Policy

To view the appendix, please refer to the Cabinet agenda 10 Jan 2013 on the Council's website.