

Housing Allocations Policy Review 2015

Report by Eibhlin McHugh, Joint Director, Health and Social Care

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1** The purpose of this report is to inform Cabinet of the lettings outcomes in 2014/15 from the revised Housing Allocation Policy agreed at Council on 8 January, 2013, which was implemented in April, 2013. This follows the previous year reporting of lettings outcomes in 2013/14 which largely met the required targets.
- 1.2** These findings will inform a review of the Allocations Policy to take place during autumn/winter 2015. It was agreed that Council will review this Housing Allocation Policy every 2 years together with tenant representatives, in accordance with the Tenant Participation Strategy.

2. Background

- 2.1** In April 2013 Midlothian Council adopted a new housing allocation policy. Prior to this the Council's Allocation Policy was Transfer led, meaning that current tenants were given first option to new lets.
- 2.2** The 2013 policy adopted a group and points model in which three waiting lists were created to reflect applicant circumstances, with yearly letting targets set. The new waiting lists are:
 - Choice List (Target 15%) – list for those applicants with no identifiable need.
 - Homeless List (Target 45%) – list for those applicants who have presented and been accepted as being homeless.
 - General Needs (Target 40%) – list for those applicants with a specific housing or medical need.
- 2.3** As demand for social housing continues to outstrip supply it is necessary to assess each housing applicant's housing need according to their circumstances and then prioritise them according to the Allocation Policy.
- 2.4** It is necessary to give a degree of priority in allocation to these groups but other factors can be added to respond to particular needs and demands in the local area.

- 2.5** It is important that we make best use of our housing stock, which includes how these are allocated. Scottish Government guidance requires that houses are let in a way that gives reasonable preference to those in greatest housing need, which makes best use of the available stock and helps to sustain communities.
- 2.6** Allocation outcomes have matched the current policy intentions as detailed in the Lettings Analysis in Appendix 1. It shows that:
- i) The Housing Allocation Policy is closely meeting the targets for Waiting List Groups, with the exception of the Choice Group, which had a reduced proportion of allocations than anticipated (9% in 2012/13 and 10% in 2013/14 as opposed to the 15% target).
 - ii) There has been a reduction in lets due to fewer new build developments being completed in 2013/14 and 2014/15.
 - iii) The Policy has also ensured that there has been a move away from Transfer-Led Allocations as there was a reduction in the number of lets to existing tenants.
 - iv) There has been a significant increase in households waiting for 1 bedroom housing due to the change in household size eligibility. At the same time, the number of households requiring 2 bedroom housing has decreased significantly. 2 Bedroom housing continues to be the most common property size being let to applicants.
 - v) There has been a reduction in lets to households with points for overcrowding and under occupation and an increase in lets to households with medical points and to homeless households.
 - vi) Use of Ready to Rent procedures has improved the speed of relets for properties which have previously taken longer than average to let.
 - vii) The use of Homeswapper was initially very successful at generating increased mutual exchanges although there was a reduction in 2014/15.
 - viii) There has been a reduction in the number of Waiting List applicants refusing offers due to Applicants being given more choice of the property types they will be offered.
- 2.7** The outcomes from lets made during 2013/14 and 2014/15 will enable informed decisions to be made about any changes which should be undertaken following the first two years of the operation of the Housing Allocation Policy. Council Officers will shortly make recommendations arising from these outcomes which will also be informed by internal and external consultation whilst also taking account of recent legislative change.
- 2.8** The Housing (Scotland) Act 2014 makes several changes to housing allocation rules that are intended to increase the flexibility and make better use of social housing. It amends the provisions within the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 in relation to priority allocation of housing. The current reasonable preference categories are to be removed and replaced with 3 new priority groups. Social landlords must therefore ensure their housing allocation policies give reasonable preference to:

- Social housing tenants who are under occupying their home;
- Homeless peoples with unmet housing needs; and
- People who are living in unsatisfactory housing conditions with unmet housing needs.

2.9 The Act also allows social landlords to take home ownership into account in allocating housing except where the owner cannot access their home or where their occupation would lead to further difficulties, for example, domestic abuse or deterioration in health. Social landlords can grant a Short Scottish Secure Tenancy (SSST) to homeowners who cannot occupy their home on a short term basis. For example, if an owner needs to move out while repairs are carried out to make the home safe.

2.10 In addition, the Act sets out a range of measures to help social landlords deal more effectively with anti-social behaviour. A suspension period can be applied for housing applications in circumstances where the applicant has acted in an anti-social manner in the locality of their house or towards an employee of a social landlord in the course of making the application.

3. Newbyres Crescent/Gore Avenue, Gorebridge

3.1 During 2013/14 it became apparent some households living on one of the Council's recently built developments at Newbyres Crescent and Gore Avenue, Gorebridge had become unwell and subsequent investigation identified that carbon dioxide (CO₂) was migrating into the houses and accumulating at levels sufficient to affect human and animal health. Following testing of levels of carbon dioxide levels within buildings, and working with the NHS to ensure public safety, the Council has taken the decision to demolish all 64 properties on this site. It is now intended to rebuild housing on this site as part of the phase 2 programme. Prior to redevelopment of the site, further appropriately designed investigation, ground gas monitoring, risk assessment and appropriately designed, installed and verified gas defence systems included within the building structures of the building and within the site itself will be incorporated within the development to avoid a risk of CO₂ exposure.

3.2 All affected households have been supported by the Council to find suitable council housing and other housing options and there are no tenants now resident at this development. In addition, those required to be rehoused are being offered the opportunity to return to a new build development once it is completed, with the next development in Gorebridge being at Stobhill Road in 2016/17. Therefore, despite Gorebridge having lower levels of housing need than some other areas, the development of two new council housing sites reflects the need to re-house displaced households into permanent accommodation and also to replace stock that is being demolished. The Scottish Government has also provided grant funding in order that the Council was able to purchase a limited number of properties to meet specific needs of some households.

Report Implications

4.1 Resource

There are no resource implications arising directly from this report.

4.2 Risk

The principal risks are around the issue of compliance with legislative requirements in the allocation of council housing, and equality of access to the Common Housing Register. These risks are addressed in the Housing Allocation Policy and are monitored through the annual letting analysis.

4.3 Key Priorities within the Single Midlothian Plan

Midlothian Council and its Community Planning Partners have made a commitment to treat the following areas as key priorities under the Single Midlothian Plan:

- ☐ Early years and reducing child poverty
- ☐ Economic Growth and Business Support
- ☐ Positive destinations for young people.

The themes addressed in this report impact on the delivery of the Single Midlothian Plan outcome measures in homelessness and stable and balanced communities. Early intervention and tackling inequalities are key priorities for Midlothian Council and the Community Planning Partnership and these proposals meet those objectives.

- ☐ Community safety
 - x Adult health and care
 - x Getting it right for every Midlothian child
- ☐ Improving opportunities in Midlothian
 - x Sustainable growth and housing
- ☐ Business transformation and Best Value
- ☐ None of the above

4.4 Impact on Performance and Outcomes

The core aim in the revised Allocation Policy is to offer applicants to Midlothian Council flexibility in the type and location of housing they wish to apply for. The application process includes advice about housing prospects so that applicants can make realistic choices.

4.5 Adopting a Preventative Approach

The policy is based on a clear framework for prioritising applicants based on housing need and the reasonable preference criteria set out in

legislation and aims to provide affordable, quality housing for people in need. The Council's Allocation Policy was reviewed in order to better reflect the needs and demands in Midlothian, and also take account of the Welfare Reforms introduced in April, 2013.

4.6 Involving Communities and Other Stakeholders

In developing the Housing Allocation Policy consultation was carried out with service stakeholders, including Social Work Adult Care, Children & Families and Legal and Audit services in relation to this report. External consultation had also been carried out with the Registered Tenant Groups and Registered Social Landlords in Midlothian, the Housing Association Forum, tenancy support agencies, Midlothian Disability Access Panel, Shelter and the Armed Forces Covenant Liaison Officer.

As part of the 2015 Allocation Policy Review all tenants and prospective tenants are being consulted on the current Housing Allocation Policy via a newsletter and "housing chats" events are taking place in local community meeting spaces in Midlothian. Officers will also undertake external consultation with key stakeholders as was undertaken prior to implementing the Allocation Policy in 2013.

4.7 Ensuring Equalities

The revised Housing Allocation Policy was subject to a full Equality Impact Assessment in accordance with the Council's Equalities Schemes to ensure equality of opportunity.

The policy ensures that discriminatory practices and procedures are eliminated and that the needs of women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and other target groups are assessed. The duties required of local authorities when letting their houses are set out in the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 and the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001.

4.8 Supporting Sustainable Development

Not Applicable

4.9 IT Issues

Not Applicable

5 Recommendation

It is recommended that Cabinet:

- a) Note the positive lettings outcomes following the review of the Housing Allocation Policy;
- b) Refer this report to the Performance, Review and Scrutiny Committee;

- c) Note that a review of the Housing Allocation Policy has commenced with a consultation exercise being undertaken to facilitate effective engagement with tenants and prospective tenants and other key stakeholders;
- d) Note that a further Report will be presented to Cabinet following the consultation exercise which could recommend minor changes to the Housing Allocation Policy in order that it addresses local needs and takes account of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2014.

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