

SHEFFIELD CITY COUNCIL



Individual Cabinet Member Report

Report of: Executive Director of Communities

Report to: Cabinet Member for
Housing

Date: 21st September 2015

Subject: Amendment to the Sheffield City Council Lettings Policy

Author of Report: Suzanne Allen, Head of City Wide Neighbourhood Services

Key Decision: Yes

Reason Key Decision: Has a significant effect on the communities of two or more wards

Summary:

This report sets out proposed amendments to the current Sheffield City Council Lettings Policy. These amendments will allow us to:

The proposed changes to the Lettings Policy are to enable the City Council to request proof of identification for applicants at the point they join the housing register, to prevent applicants from re-joining the housing register within 2 years of them being rehoused to social housing unless there is an urgent housing need, to restrict applicants from being part of more than one housing registration and to allow approved foster and adoptive parents to access larger accommodation for their prospective increased households.

It is proposed that these changes will take effect from 21st September 2015.

Reasons for Recommendations:

These proposed changes will:

- Help the Council to discharge it's safeguarding responsibilities towards children and young people
- Help the Council to make best use of available social housing
- Help applicants to focus more carefully about their choice of housing and understand the value of Council accommodation.
- Contribute towards initiatives which may prevent tenancy fraud and the potential for illegal subletting.
- Allow for some streamlining of internal processes and development required for the implementation of the Allocations Policy
- Reduce the impact of changes for applicants following the implementation of the Allocations Policy in April 2016

Recommendations:

1. That the following amendments to the Sheffield city Council Lettings policy are agreed:
 - a) To request applicants to provide proof of identification at the point of registration, for a change of circumstances and at the point of a property offer
 - b) To prevent applicants from accessing the housing register for a period of two years after being rehoused to social housing unless they are in urgent and immediate need of housing.
 - c) To restrict applicants from being on more than one application unless they are aged between 16 and 25 years old
 - d) To support prospective Foster and Adoptive parents to access larger accommodation once they have been assessed and approved by Social Services
 - e) To allow minor grammatical changes, to update and correct errors within the body of the Lettings Policy text and which do not alter the technical nature or intention of its provisions.
2. That amendments to the wording of the Sheffield City Council Lettings Policy as outlined in Appendix 1 of this report are agreed.
3. That the implementation of these changes with effect from 21st September 2015 are agreed

Background Papers:

Appendix 1 - Changes to Sheffield City Council's Lettings Policy

Appendix 2 - Equalities Impact Assessment

Category of Report: Open

If CLOSED add 'Not for publication because it contains exempt information under Paragraph (insert relevant paragraph number) of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).'

Statutory and Council Policy Checklist

Financial Implications
Yes Cleared by: Karen Jones
Legal Implications
YES Cleared by: Andrea Simpson
Equality of Opportunity Implications
YES Cleared by: Louise Nunn
Tackling Health Inequalities Implications
No
Human Rights Implications
NO
Environmental and Sustainability implications
No
Economic Impact
No
Community Safety Implications
No
Human Resources Implications
NO
Property Implications
NO
Area(s) Affected
CITY
Relevant Cabinet Portfolio Lead
Councillor Jayne Dunn
Relevant Scrutiny Committee
Is the item a matter which is reserved for approval by the City Council?
YES/NO
Press Release
NO

REPORT TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING

1.0 SUMMARY

This report sets out proposed amendments to the current Sheffield City Council Lettings Policy. These amendments will allow us to :

- request identification for people joining the housing register at the point of their registration, following a change in circumstances and at the point of offer.
- prevent applicants from joining the housing register for a period of two years after being rehoused to social housing
- prevent people over 25 years of age to be included in more than one housing registration
- allow approved foster carers and adopters, subject to confirmation, access to larger accommodation for which they will be eligible following the placement of a child to their care

It is proposed that these changes will take effect from 21st September 2015

2.0 WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR SHEFFIELD PEOPLE

2.1 An In-Touch Organisation

These proposed amendments allow the City Council to continue to respond to customer concerns about simplicity and transparency in our allocations process. They also allow us to meet individual needs by giving households greater choice and control about their housing options and, ultimately, where they live.

2.2 Thriving Neighbourhoods and Communities

These proposals provide better routes into suitable council housing for families who are approved foster carers and adoptive parents.

The proposals also introduce a process of early identification of applicants to ensure we understand our prospective tenants and their support needs, and allow us to make quicker appropriate and informed allocations.

It is also expected that these proposals will help applicants to appreciate that social housing is a valuable resource, to carefully consider their housing options and to make more focused longer term choices over where they live.

2.3 Tackling Inequalities

These proposals supports a clear and transparent Lettings Policy to help applicants understand how they can access to social rented housing, how prescribed groups are assisted and ensures that social housing is let fairly and so as to fulfil our legal obligations

2.4 Better health and Wellbeing

The proposals will allow the City Council to support those who need it to access homes, support services and local facilities. In particular, the proposals will afford approved foster carers and adoptive parents access to more appropriate family accommodation. This in turn will help some children in the authority's care to become settled in a family setting more quickly, and to receive the care and support they need at an early stage giving them and greater chance of success.

3.0 OUTCOME AND SUSTAINABILITY

The expectation is the new policy will reduce the Housing Register in size by better managing expectations and encouraging applicants to consider if social housing is the right option for them.

The requirement for more documents and information about applicants at point of registration will enable more appropriate lets. It is hoped that this will help to prevent anti-social behaviour and rent arrears as a result of more appropriate allocation and support for vulnerable applicants.

4.0 MAIN BODY OF THE REPORT

4.1 Background

A full review of Sheffield City Council's Lettings Policy has been undertaken and a new Allocations Policy, agreed by Cabinet in March 2013, was developed following an extensive and public consultation process.

The Allocations Policy is expected to be implemented by Spring 2016 once the necessary changes to IT facilities, staff training and procedural development have been completed.

In March 2013 the Cabinet Member for Homes and Regeneration agreed the following changes to the Lettings Policy. Primarily, the amendments were necessary to address issues of under supply and increasing demand for social housing, but also to mitigate some of the effects of the welfare benefit reforms for some affected applicants, to make provision for

additional preference for some armed force personnel, their spouses or civil partners, and changes to ensure the new Choice Based Lettings (CBL) website can be implemented effectively.

The following changes to the Sheffield City Council Lettings Policy were agreed and implemented in April 2013:

- a) That an amendment to the current lettings criteria is introduced to bring the household eligibility criteria in line with the bedroom standard introduced with the welfare benefits reforms with some relaxed criteria for exceptional circumstances.
- b) That the release of high demand priority to be extended to include tenants under occupying 2 bedroom properties.
- c) That the criteria outlining when a priority for releasing a high demand property will be awarded is amended to determine the type of property applicants can access using this priority. Applicants moving from larger flats and maisonettes will only be given priority for similar property types.
- d) That additional preference for specified serving and ex-Armed Forces personnel or their spouses or civil partners who have an urgent housing need is provided for by allowing the effective date of their priority to become the date they joined the armed forces.

The following change to the Sheffield City Council Lettings Policy was agreed and implemented in October 2013:

- e) To restrict the number of bids each applicants can make within a bidding cycle to 3 per applicant and for this to apply to all applicants.

4.2 Proposed Changes to the Lettings Policy

The proposed changes to the Lettings Policy are:

To request applicants to provide proof of identification at the point of registration, for a change of circumstances and at the point of a property offer

To prevent applicants from accessing the housing register for a period of two years after being rehoused to social housing unless they are in urgent and immediate need of housing.

To restrict applicants from being on more than one application unless they are aged between 16 and 25 years old

To support prospective Foster and Adoptive parents to access larger

accommodation once they have been assessed and approved by Social Services

Amended wording to the policy is set out at Appendix 1 to this report.

4.3 Key Drivers

Requesting that applicants provide proof of identification (ID) at the point of registration, following any change of circumstances and before we make any offer of accommodation will ensure we know who our prospective tenants are. The requirement for more documentation and information about applicants at the point of registration will enable faster and fairer lettings. It is hoped that this will also contribute towards the management of anti-social behavior, control of rent arrears and contribute to the reduction of tenancy fraud as a result of more appropriate allocations.

Preventing applicants from being registered on more than one application will have an impact on the overall size of the housing register. The introduction of this policy change will also ensure that households are not allocated properties larger than they need because their applications include household members that will not be moving with them. This will make the allocations process more efficient and ensure we continue to make the best use of our available housing stock.

New tenants are currently able to re-join the housing register as soon as they are rehoused. This adds to the size of the housing register and may encourage more frequent moves within council housing. Preventing applicants from joining the housing register for a period of two years after being rehoused to social housing, unless they are in urgent and immediate need of housing, will encourage greater stability in communities, with the advantages of reduced vacant property turn over, associated repair costs and rent loss. It will also encourage applicants to better manage their expectations and will help them to consider their available choices and in particular if social housing is the best option for them.

Making a provision to allow access to larger properties for approved foster carers and adoptive parents will support a joined up approach to the Council's safeguarding and corporate parenting responsibilities, easing access to suitably sized accommodation for prospective increased households. These measures simplify the rehousing process for those involved. This in turn will help some children in the authority's care to become settled in a family setting more quickly, and to receive the care and support they need at an early stage giving them a greater chance of success.

4.4 Financial Implications

There will be no additional budgetary requirements as a result of implementing these changes now. The changes to the Lettings Policy

proposed in this report also form part of the approved Allocations Policy. The Allocations Policy implementation team is already in place and they are able to undertake the necessary preparatory work required to implement these changes. Additionally they are able to assist with the training, briefing and communication requirements.

Development of processes and procedures will be undertaken by an established team in Access to Housing.

There are no IT developments or system amendments required to implement these policy changes, and therefore no associated IT costs.

There are some expected efficiencies to these changes being implemented. Restricting applicants from re-registering immediately after being rehoused is expected to slow down the rate of new applications to join the housing register.

There may also be savings to the Council through the reduction of the number of offer refusals as applicants more carefully consider their housing options and making more informed choices. This may impact upon and make the allocation of available properties a more cost effective operation in the long term.

Other expected benefits are an improvement in sustainability of tenancies which is likely to contribute to a reduction in the cost to the Council of unsuccessful tenancies.

4.5 Legal Implications

Part VI Housing Act 1996 requires a local housing authority to adopt an “allocations scheme” and, except in defined circumstances, to allocate property only in accordance with the scheme. The Lettings Policy is the Council’s statutory allocations scheme. When framing the scheme the authority must have regard to statutory guidance issued by the Secretary of State and to its own homelessness strategy (approved by Cabinet in July 2010) and tenancy strategy (approved by the Cabinet Member for Homes and Neighbourhoods in January 2012).

4.6 Equality Implications

Access to Council Housing is a critical issue. These proposals for change will ensure that access to housing for all applicants who want to access social housing is fair and equitable.

An Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed for the implementation of the new Allocations Policy to identify who will be affected by the changes and to outline recommended mitigating actions in relation to these impacts. This is attached at Appendix 2.

The EIA identifies both positive and negative impacts for all groups. Negative impacts will be mitigated by having a comprehensive communications plan in place for each aspect of the policy that is implemented.

5.0 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

The proposed changes are similar to some of the provisions in the Allocations Policy which is due to be implemented in April 2016. One alternative therefore is not to implement the proposed changes at this stage but wait until the Allocations Policy is in place.

The impact of this is that there will be other and quite significant changes which will be introduced as part of the Allocations Policy. This may prove to be especially difficult for applicants and staff to understand and adapt to and may result in increased enquiries and complaints.

It will increase the need for support mechanisms and clear communications. It is also likely to result in increased training requirements for our staff and this could disrupt front line services at a time when there is likely to be significant change elsewhere within the Housing and Neighbourhood Service.

6.0 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS -

6.1 These proposed changes will :

- Help the Council to discharge it's safeguarding responsibilities towards children and young people
- Help the Council to make best use of available social housing
- Help applicants to focus more carefully about their choice of housing and understand the value of Council accommodation.
- Contribute towards initiatives which may prevent tenancy fraud and the potential for illegal subletting.
- Allow for some streamlining of internal processes and development required for the implementation of the Allocations Policy
- Reduce the impact of changes for applicants following the implementation of the Allocations Policy in April 2016

6.2 There are also some administrative reasons for introducing these changes.

- It will allow for better management of the impact and potential risks of significant change for applicants on the housing register, which in turn is likely to reduce the number of enquires and complaints associated with such a change.

- It will allow staff to support applicants through a stepped approach to changes to the Council's allocations scheme ahead of the implementation of the Allocations Policy in April 2016.
- It will allow for gradual roll out of training, briefings and communications for staff and stakeholders and to ensure these are established and effective before committing to a further stage of change.
- There are no IT development requirements to these changes ahead of full implementation of the Allocations Policy and this allows us to embed new practices ahead of major change in April 2016.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS -

Recommendations:

1. That the following amendments to the Sheffield City Council Lettings policy are agreed:
 - a) To request applicants to provide proof of identification at the point of registration, for a change of circumstances and at the point of a property offer
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