

Report of Chief Officer, Housing Management

Report to Director, Environment and Housing

Date: 25 September 2014

Subject: Local Lettings Policy for new build homes at Beech Avenue and Beech Grove, Gipton, LS8 (the 'Thorn Walk development')

Are specific electoral Wards affected? If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s): Gipton and Harehills	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for Call-In?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number: Appendix number:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

Summary of main issues

1. This report sets out the framework for the development and implementation of a local lettings policy for 23 new build council houses to rent in Beech Avenue and Beech Grove, part of the Thorn Walk development, Gipton, LS8.
2. The Council House Growth Programme will deliver 1,000 new homes to rent across the city. The council recognises the contribution that a local lettings policy will have in creating sustainable communities and rewarding existing council tenants within the regeneration areas.
3. The report sets out the proposed lettings policy which will support the council's ambition of being the best city and council in the UK.

Recommendations

4. The Director, Environment and Housing, approves the local lettings policy for the new build homes at Beech Avenue and Beech Grove in Gipton detailed in section 3 of this report.

1 Purpose of this report

- 1.1 This report seeks approval for a local lettings policy for 23 new build council houses at Beech Avenue and Beech Grove in the Gipton area to deliver sustainable lettings and support community cohesion.
- 1.2 This report details how the local lettings policy will support the Vision for Leeds, Council Business Plan and City Priority Plan.

2 Background information

- 2.1 The Council House Growth Programme will deliver 1,000 new council homes across the city in the next few years.
- 2.2 The council has entered into an agreement with Bellway to purchase 23 houses at Beech Avenue and Beech Grove, Gipton. These are a combination of 7 x 2 and 16 x 3 bedroom houses as shown below:

House no.	Address	Locality	Postcode	Prop type
1	Beech Avenue	Gipton	LS8 3AW	3BH semi
3	Beech Avenue	Gipton	LS8 3AW	3BH semi
5	Beech Avenue	Gipton	LS8 3AW	3BH semi
7	Beech Avenue	Gipton	LS8 3AW	3BH semi
9	Beech Avenue	Gipton	LS8 3AW	3BH semi
11	Beech Avenue	Gipton	LS8 3AW	3BH semi
12	Beech Avenue	Gipton	LS8 3AW	3BH semi
10	Beech Avenue	Gipton	LS8 3AW	3BH semi
8	Beech Avenue	Gipton	LS8 3AW	3BH semi
6	Beech Avenue	Gipton	LS8 3AW	3BH semi
4	Beech Avenue	Gipton	LS8 3AW	3BH semi
2	Beech Avenue	Gipton	LS8 3AW	3BH mid terrace
1	Beech Grove	Gipton	LS8 3BF	2BH end terrace
17	Beech Grove	Gipton	LS8 3BF	2BH detached
34	Beech Grove	Gipton	LS8 3BF	2BH end terrace
32	Beech Grove	Gipton	LS8 3BF	2BH mid terrace
30	Beech Grove	Gipton	LS8 3BF	2BH mid terrace
28	Beech Grove	Gipton	LS8 3BF	2BH end terrace
26	Beech Grove	Gipton	LS8 3BF	3BH end terrace
24	Beech Grove	Gipton	LS8 3BF	3BH mid terrace
22	Beech Grove	Gipton	LS8 3BF	3BH mid terrace
20	Beech Grove	Gipton	LS8 3BF	2BH end terrace
2	Beech Grove	Gipton	LS8 3BF	2BH detached

- 2.3 The council's lettings policy provides the overall framework for lettings of council properties. Local lettings policies allow the council to respond to local needs and have a localised approach to the management of specific properties. Local lettings policies may give preference for offers of accommodation to defined groups of customers, for example, on the basis of their age, employment status or local connection to an area.

- 2.4 The council wishes to let the new build properties through a specific local lettings policy tailored to meet local needs and aspirations.
- 2.5 The council wishes to overcome the perception that the current lettings policy is unfair to tenants who have been on the housing register for a long time who feel they have little hope of being rehoused ahead of other customers in housing need. For this reason, the council proposes to give preference for the majority of lettings of the new build homes to existing Leeds City Council tenants in the area who can demonstrate an excellent tenancy record.
- 2.6 This approach will have the benefit of releasing additional council properties for rent, which will be relet to other customers on the housing waiting list.
- 2.7 Other preference groups, including people in employment will also be recognised.

3 Main issues

- 3.1 An officer Project Team has been established to manage the handover of the new homes and develop the local lettings policy. This includes representatives from Housing Leeds including the local housing management service, Housing Policy, Housing Partnerships, Property and Contracts and City Development to ensure a smooth handover of properties to avoid homes standing empty prior to allocation.
- 3.2 The council has considered the information it holds about housing need in the locality as well as the aspirations of local communities. Draft proposals have been developed for consultation with key partners and stakeholders, including elected members, tenants and residents.
- 3.3 The council posted a survey with a freepost return envelope to local tenants and residents and to a proportion of housing applicants who indicated they would like rehousing in the area. A consultation event was held in August at the Henry Barran Centre in Gipton.
- 3.4 Respondents were asked which groups they thought should be given preference for rehousing. The council asked respondents to provide information about their circumstances including equality monitoring information, their current housing tenure (council tenant, private rented tenant, owner occupier etc) and the postcode area they currently live in. The survey was anonymous and respondents were not required to provide these details.
- 3.5 The majority of respondents identified themselves as council tenants who lived in the local area. Just under half had applied for rehousing with the council.
- 3.6 The consultation closed on 25 August 2014 and the views of respondents have been taken into account when finalising the draft local lettings policy for approval.

The table below shows the preference groups the council consulted on, ranked in order of approval:

Preference group	Agree	Disagree	Don't know / no response	Total	% in favour
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LCC tenants with an excellent tenancy record living in the Gipton and Harehills Ward	38	1	5	44	86
Tenants and residents who have a good tenancy record, including checks on rent accounts, condition of property and garden and any history of antisocial behaviour	37	2	5	44	84
Disabled people who need adapted properties to meet their needs	35	4	5	44	80
People with a local connection to the Gipton and Harehills Ward including living, working or having close family living in the area	31	7	6	44	70
People who are living in overcrowded conditions	25	7	11	44	57
Families with dependent children who are living in high rise flats	24	11	9	44	55
People in employment, key workers or people in training in the area	21	13	10	44	48
Members and former members of HM Armed Forces	18	8	18	44	41

3.7 Feedback from the three Ward Members for Gipton and Harehills was they were all supportive of the preference groups, with one specifically requesting the needs of under occupying tenants affected by housing benefit changes be considered.

3.8 In addition to the consultation, the council has analysed information from the housing waiting list about customers who indicated their preference for rehousing was in the Gipton area. A breakdown of LCC tenants living in the Gipton area shows a total of 120 tenants needing a 2 bedroom property, and 95 needing a 3 bedroom property. The majority of these tenants have no recognised housing need and are in Band C.

3.9 Of these LCC tenants, 48 have Gipton North or Gipton South as their area of first choice. There are also another 26 LCC tenants living outside of the Gipton and Harehills Ward area who need a 2 or 3 bedroom home and have Gipton North or Gipton South as their area of first choice.

3.10 The council proposes to operate a local lettings policy which will give preference for offers of accommodation as follows:

Property types	Preference
4 x 2 bedroom houses 8 x 3 bedroom houses	Shortlisting based on date of housing application LCC tenants living in Gipton and Harehills Ward area with an excellent tenancy record Followed by LCC tenants with a local connection to the Gipton and Harehills ward and with an excellent tenancy record

<p>3 x 2 bedroom houses 8 x 3 bedroom houses</p>	<p>Shortlisting based on housing need priority</p> <p>Households with a local connection to the Gipton and Harehills ward</p> <p>Households who can demonstrate an excellent tenancy record / equivalent and fulfil at least one of the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People in employment or undertaking a vocational qualification for a keyworker profession • Overcrowded • Under occupying a council home • Living in a high rise flat with children under the age of 18 • Members / former members of the Armed Forces
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- 3.11 Prior to offers being made, the council will check the tenancy record of tenants to ensure they have met their responsibilities under their tenancy agreement. This will include checks on their rent payment history, condition of the property including internal and external areas such as gardens, and community responsibilities, including antisocial behaviour, nuisance and environmental issues. The council will conduct a home visit to the property as part of the robust checks.
- 3.12 In order to pay due regard to equality issues, the council will work to identify suitable matches for disabled customers whose medical housing needs would be met by a move into one of the properties. In order to ensure properties are let as soon as possible the council will seek to make a direct offer of accommodation to customers in this group.
- 3.13 The final local lettings policy and adverts will include clear definitions of preference groups. The local lettings policy is framed to allow the council to consider customers who are not able to meet the strict criteria where there would be the potential for unlawful discrimination, for example, a recognised carer who was unable to work due to their caring commitments may be offered a home if they were the highest ranked customer on the shortlist who met the local connection and good tenant criteria.
- 3.14 The council does not anticipate any properties will be let to customers who would under occupy the new home but if such a scenario arises, the council will undertake an affordability check prior to making an offer.
- 3.15 Due to tight handover deadlines the onus will be on customers to provide evidence of how they meet the criteria.

- 3.16 The local lettings policy will apply to all initial lets and subsequent relets made to the end of 2015. The council will then evaluate the effectiveness of the policy and decide whether to extend it.
- 3.17 Once approval has been received, the properties will be advertised in the Leeds Homes property flyer and website with the local lettings policy criteria. The properties will be advertised ahead of the handover date to allow shortlisting and verification to be completed, and properties pre-allocated to the successful customer. This will involve a home visit to the prospective tenant at their current property.
- 3.18 By giving preference to existing council tenants there will be an increase in the number of transfers from neighbouring council tenancies, but the associated void costs will be minimised through the use of enhanced pre-transfer tenancy checks.
- 3.19 New tenants will be offered an introductory tenancy, unless they previously held a secure tenancy with the council, or an assured tenancy with a housing association.
- 3.20 An introductory tenancy is for a trial period which lasts for a year. Provided there are no issues the tenancy will become a secure tenancy at the end of the year. The introductory tenancy can be extended for a further six months if the tenant does not fully comply with the tenancy terms, or action to repossess the property can be taken.
- 3.21 The council will develop its tenancy management service offer to tenants in the new build properties, including a comprehensive sign up process, a programme of tenancy welcome visits and annual tenancy visits. The council will also seek to involve new tenants with Tenants and Residents Associations and Good Neighbour Agreements to ensure ongoing sustainability and tenant satisfaction.

4 Corporate Considerations

4.1 Consultation and Engagement

- 4.2 The council has consulted with local members, tenants and residents on the new local lettings policy. This has included face to face meetings, a written survey and a local community event.
- 4.3 The top ranked priorities are reflected in the proposal to let the majority of properties to existing council tenants who have a local connection and excellent tenancy record. This is supported by the majority of respondents identifying as council tenants.
- 4.4 Previous consultation on changing the council's main lettings policy have consistently shown high levels of support for making lettings based on waiting time and local connection. With affordable social housing being a scarce resource, the council wishes to meet the aspirations of its tenants who have abided by the terms of their tenancy agreement, but who would not necessarily receive any priority on the housing waiting list.

4.5 Making lettings to existing tenants will assist tenants remain in the area they have a connection with, and will improve community cohesion and sustainability of the area, for example, by allowing grown up children to remain near their family. It offers another route into housing and will assist people before their housing situation becomes so urgent that they warrant a priority award.

4.6 The properties released by tenant transfers will be relet to other customers on the housing waiting list.

4.7 The remaining priority groups listed in 3.11 will receive preference for a proportion of the remaining new build properties.

4.8 Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration

4.8.1 The council has undertaken an equality and diversity impact assessment of the local lettings policy, which identifies the main positive and negative impacts on equality groups. The assessment includes an action plan to address any potential negative impacts available in Appendix 2.

4.8.2 In developing the criteria for the local lettings policy, the council has considered the equality groups who may be unable to meet the criteria and allowed for the criteria to be relaxed, for example, an offer could be made a customer with a recognised carer who is unable to meet the employment criteria.

4.9 Council policies and City Priorities

4.9.1 Leeds' ambition is to be the best city in the UK – fair, open and welcoming with an economy that is both prosperous and sustainable so all our communities are successful. The development of local lettings policies for new build homes will support the council's desired outcomes of improving quality of life for our residents, particularly for those who are vulnerable or in poverty.

4.9.2 The local lettings policies will support the 'Best council objectives' of ensuring high quality public services, dealing effectively with the city's waste, building a child friendly city, delivery of Better Lives programme, promoting sustainable and inclusive economic growth and becoming an efficient and enterprising council.

4.10 Resources and value for money

4.10.1 The new local lettings policy will need resourcing to ensure the council undertakes the enhanced verification of applicants (through home visits) prior to a formal offer of accommodation being made. The timely approval of the local lettings policy, property advertisements and shortlisting is essential to ensure the properties are let as soon as they are available to reduce potential void costs to the council.

4.10.2 Void costs associated with increased transfers will be minimised by conducting enhanced checks on existing tenancies, including a home visit to inspect the property.

4.11 Legal Implications, Access to Information and Call In

- 4.11.1 The council must abide by the Housing Act 1996, as amended, in developing its allocations scheme, including local lettings policies. Local lettings policies may be used to achieve a wide variety of housing management and policy objectives. However, the council must have regard to its duties under equalities legislation, as well as the requirement to give overall priority for allocations of social housing to people in the reasonable preference (housing need) categories, including homelessness, medical need or overcrowding. This is achieved through the council's approach to lettings across the wider ward areas and city.

4.12 Risk Management

- 4.12.1 There is a risk that any delay in obtaining approval of the new local lettings policies could jeopardise the council's ability to let the properties to tenants as soon as they are handed over. This would result in void costs and reputational damage to the council. This has been mitigated by seeking approval ahead of handover.
- 4.12.2 The council has identified that additional staffing resources will be required to enable lettings teams to undertake checks and home visits to prospective tenants, and additional costs may arise through increased transfers. This will be mitigated by conducting enhanced tenancy checks prior to making offers and developing a short life local lettings policy in these areas.

5 Conclusions

- 5.1 These new homes are part of a wider programme that will see the council providing more than 1,000 new properties by 2016.
- 5.2 The council is working with local stakeholders to develop new local lettings policies to address housing need and community aspirations, which support the council's ambition to become the best city in the UK.
- 5.3 The development of the new build homes present an opportunity for the council to address the aspirations of tenants who have waited for a move, and reward tenants who have demonstrated a commitment to their existing tenancy.

6 Recommendations

- 6.1 The Director, Environment and Housing, approves the local lettings policy for the new build homes at Beech Avenue and Beech Grove in Gipton detailed in section 3 of this report.

7 Background documents¹

None

Appendix 1: Local lettings policy criteria, verification and definitions.
Appendix 2: Equality Impact Assessment

¹ The background documents listed in this section are available to download from the Council's website, unless they contain confidential or exempt information. The list of background documents does not include published works.