

Report of Environment and Housing
Report to Housing Advisory Board
Date: 7th June 2016
Subject: Lettings Policy Review Consultation Update

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

Summary of main issues

In February 2016, Executive Board agreed to commence consultation on these proposed changes to the current lettings framework with a view to approving a revised policy in September/October 2016.

The Consultation commenced with 2 Elected Member sessions in early March 2016. This has been followed by further consultation with local tenant and resident groups, statutory and voluntary sector partners and individual tenants and residents.

The consultation asks for feedback on the following proposals:

- The introduction of a tenant transfer policy;
- Review of the main lettings policy to mainstream some elements previously covered by local lettings policies;
- A new approach to community lettings policies to replace local lettings policies, with improved links to tenancy management issues in the wider community.

The paper provides an update on progress with the consultation to date, and some feedback on the key themes to emerge so far.

Recommendations

Housing Advisory Board is invited to note progress to date with the lettings policy review consultation.

1.0 Purpose of this report

1.1 To provide an update to Housing Advisory Board on progress with the Lettings Policy Review consultation.

2.0 Background

Housing Leeds lets between 4,500 and 5,000 homes a year, and in 2014/15 over 1,000 applicants from the housing register were rehoused by housing associations under the council's nominations agreements.

The current lettings framework is based on the council's legal duties set out in the Housing Act 1996 of meeting housing needs as well as meeting the aspirations of tenants and residents. In order to balance the needs of households in housing need with those local communities, the council lets 75% of properties based on housing need and 25% to households who have been on the waiting list the longest with a local connection to the ward area.

Demand for council housing outstrips supply. The average waiting time for households who were rehoused in 2014/15 was 48 weeks across the city, property types and sizes.

Currently there are 23,762 (31/12/15) households on the housing register, approximately 24% (5,635) of customers have assessed housing needs (Band A & B) and 76% households have no identified housing need, but have expressed a preference to be rehoused by the council.

Around 1 in 6 of the council's 57,000 homes have a local lettings policy which gives preference to certain groups of applicants for some properties, e.g. local connection preference in some outer lying areas of the city or age restrictions intended to minimise lifestyle clashes in flats.

Over the past two years, Housing Leeds has undertaken a harmonisation programme of tenancy management and support policies and procedures, to ensure a consistent, high quality service is provided. The programme has taken the good practice of the former ALMOs, and developed policies and procedures which are based on the social contract model of reinforcing tenant responsibilities whilst providing high levels of support.

As part of the harmonisation programme Housing Leeds commenced a fundamental review of the local lettings policies currently in operation to ensure they are fit for purpose and consistently applied across the city. The review has involved extensive consultation with tenant and resident groups, officers, Housing Advisory Board and Scrutiny Board. As the project developed new priorities have emerged, and the scope of the review was widened to include the wider lettings framework and a number of proposals have been put forward.

In February 2016, Executive Board agreed to commence consultation on these proposed changes to the current lettings framework with a view to approving a revised policy in September/October 2016.

3. Overview of consultation

The Consultation commenced with 2 Elected Member sessions in early March 2016. This has been followed by further consultation with local tenant and resident groups, statutory and voluntary sector partners and individual tenants and residents. We are about a third of the way through the consultation and are currently on track to complete by July 2016.

A full timetable for the consultation is below:

Consultation plan	Timescales
Finalise proposals for consultation	Jan / Feb 2016
Executive Board approval to commence consultation	Feb 2016
Political briefings on draft version	March 2016
Public consultation with stakeholders on proposed changes to lettings policy, including tenants / customers	March – July 2016
Collation of responses	July 2016
Proposals to Housing Advisory Board	September 2016
Equality Impact Assessment of proposed changes to lettings policy	July - August 2016
Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Board to view final proposals	July 2016
Community Committees	July- August 2016
Executive Board to consider and approve changes	October 2016
Implementation including IT changes, training and promotion of new policy	October – November 2016
Implementation of Community Lettings Policies on Block by Block Basis	From October 2016
Regular Updates to HAB throughout implementation	October 2016 – March 2017

In addition to face to face consultation, we have also published an online survey through the council's Talking Point portal, which has been promoted through the Leeds Homes flyer and website, Housing Leeds website, tenant newsletter and via social media.

The consultation is currently focusing on the overarching policy framework and changes to individual blocks will be subject to further local consultation with tenants and residents prior to implementation on a phased basis.

The consultation asks for feedback on the following proposals:

- **Introduction of a tenant transfer policy** to give greater preference to and reward existing council tenants who have successfully held a secure tenancy as part of our commitment to the social contract and enabling the council to make better use of its housing stock

- **Review of the main lettings policy** to mainstream some elements previously covered by local lettings policies – specifically:
 - Use of local connection preference in outer lying areas of the city with low turnover and high demand
 - Giving preference to tenants with a good tenancy record
 - Conducting home visits to prospective applicants prior to making an offer
 - Introducing pre tenancy training for 16 and 17 year olds, and applicants who are unable to demonstrate a good tenancy record
 - Using our good neighbour criteria in areas with significant issues of anti-social and criminal behaviour

- **New approach to community lettings policies** to replace local lettings policies, with improved links to tenancy management issues in the wider community. To include more proactive marketing of lower demand homes to attract new customer groups, and to encourage people in employment and flat sharing, and to encourage council tenants to downsize to a smaller property or high rise flat, and free up a family council house

4. Progress to date

We are currently about a third of the way through the consultation period. To date the consultation team have held two member sessions, and met with a number of groups, including VITAL, Cross City Chairs Group, Leeds Tenants Federation, VOLT, High Rise Group, Equal Access Group, and a number of staff groups. Over the next couple of months we will be holding discussions with a wider range of tenant and resident groups, Housing Advisory Panels and tenant forums, as well as Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Board and Community Committees.

Online Survey:

The online survey has now been live for a number of weeks, and has been promoted as widely as possible to current tenants and prospective tenants through the Leeds Homes flyer and website, Housing Leeds website, tenant newsletter and via social media.

The survey has generated 269 responses to date. Of the 269:

- 125 are existing Housing Leeds tenants;
- 23 are housing association tenants;
- 37 are in private rented accommodation;
- 10 home owners;
- 28 have no fixed address (either living with friends/relatives or registered as homeless.).

Of respondents to date 61% are female, with 21% male and 18% not answering the question. There is an equal split in terms of age with 43% aged under 40, and 40% over 40, with 20% not answering the question.

Feedback from consultation to date

We are only about a third of the way through the consultation period so it is early days in terms of getting a clear outcome from the consultation. Because of the complexity of the consultation we have taken the approach to visit a number of groups twice, initially to give an overview of the proposed changes, and then revisiting to discuss their views and thoughts on the changes once they have had more time to look at the proposals in detail. Therefore, the update below is only from a small sample of the overall consultation, and may change in the coming weeks.

From the consultation so far, there are a number of key themes to emerge which are summarised below:

- **Introduction of a tenant transfer policy**

There is overwhelming support from across the various groups for the introduction of a tenant transfer policy. It is generally felt that the policy would be a sensible addition that would allow us to reward and incentivise good tenant behaviour, and would add flexibility to the lettings process. There is a consensus that the policy should be kept as simple as possible and clearly explained to both existing and prospective tenants so the policy is clearly understood. Some thought needs to be given to how it would work for people wanting to downsize and how we could incentivise people in 2 or 3 bedroom houses to take 1 or 2 bed flats. More detail is needed on which properties would be selected for a tenant transfer and how this would be promoted/managed.

From the online survey, again the majority are supportive of a tenant transfer, although it should be noted that responses from people who are not existing Housing Leeds or Housing Association tenants the response has been more mixed, with around 40% disagreeing with the introduction of a tenant transfer policy.

In terms of applying a tenant transfer quota there has been less clarity in responses so far. Members in particular felt that if we did have a quota, it should remain flexible, possibly with an annual review to ensure it was working as intended.

- **Home visits/Pre-tenancy training**

Again there has been strong support for introducing pre-tenancy training and/or home visits for prospective tenants. It is felt that this will allow a more proactive approach in supporting prospective tenants to hold a successful tenancy and identify and help address any potential issues before they emerge. Tenants should be given a clear message around what is expected of them in managing their tenancy. It was also felt that it may allow us to identify certain types of property that may not be suitable for individual applicants. Consideration also needs to be given to prospective tenants with support needs that may make a home visit or attendance at training difficult to ensure that nobody is unintentionally disadvantaged.

From the online survey so far, 75% of respondents are in favour of conducting home visits with potential applicants.

It was felt that the training needed to be clear and consistent, and emphasise tenant responsibilities, but also that in return it should be clear what Housing Leeds will offer as a landlord.

Several issues have been raised around the need to ensure that we have a flexible approach to pre-tenancy training/home visits, and that existing support needs etc should be taken into consideration when undertaking the visits in particular.

It was also felt that the timing of training/visits needed to be carefully managed to ensure that it was undertaken as close to the commencement of a tenancy as possible.

- **Local connection Policy**

The response so far has generally been positive towards having a local connection policy across the city, although feedback has suggested that there is a limited understanding across the board around how the policy works, where it applies and how it is implemented (definition of 'local' etc). A number of suggestions that clear guidance is needed, and further training for staff.

Some concerns have been expressed around people without a local connection being blocked from living in certain areas of the city and restricting aspiration. Policy needs to be clear and consistently and fairly applied.

From the online survey, 57% of respondents so far are in favour of using local connection in other areas of the city, with 24% disagreeing and 19% stating 'Don't know'.

- **Community Lettings – proposals to replace existing age restrictions**

Response to this to date has been fairly mixed. There has been a general acceptance that the current policy of relying on age has not always worked, and leaves us open to challenge. Members and some of the strategic tenants groups in particular have been supportive of a move away from age related LLPs, emphasising that we should be more intelligent around lettings rather than using age as a management tool. Strong emphasis that this should be supported by strong and robust management was to reassure tenants that removing age restrictions would not increase problems, particularly within high rise blocks.

The online survey is even more mixed, with around half supportive of removing age restrictions and half against it. Unsurprisingly when you look at age breakdowns of respondents, older people are mostly in favour of age restrictions, while younger people are more supportive of removing them in favour of other options.

There is a high level of support across the board for giving preference to under occupiers to free up a house for another family and again for the introduction of home visits/ tenancy checks and pre-tenancy training.

Next Steps

The consultation will run until July. A full consultation timetable is detailed above. Over the next 6-8 weeks further consultation will be undertaken with:

- VITAL;
- Community Committees;
- YAGI;
- High Rise Group;
- All Housing Advisory Panels;
- Equal Access Group;
- Staff;
- A number of tenant and residents groups facilitated through the tenant involvement team.

We will also be further promoting the online survey as widely as possible to gauge the views of both current and prospective tenants. A full summary and outcomes from the consultation will be presented to Housing Advisory Board in September 2016.

4.0 Corporate Considerations

Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration

Housing Advisory Board members are being asked to note the progress being made with the Lettings Policy review consultation, and as such, a decision is not being made. An Equality Impact screening assessment has been completed and the council will conduct a full equality and diversity impact assessment as part of the review to identify potential positive and negative impacts, and will develop an action plan to address any negative impacts identified. A full EIA on the final proposals will be included in the final Executive Board report in October for approval.

Council policies and Best Council Plan

The development of community lettings policies supports the council's ambition of being the best city in the UK, which is fair, open and welcoming to all. This links to the best council outcomes of improving the quality of life for residents, particularly those who are vulnerable or in poverty.

Existing local lettings policies are perceived by some existing tenants as positive in establishing stable communities, but also restrict the choice of rehousing for other customer groups.

The proposals will help achieve the savings and efficiencies required to continue to deliver frontline services by rewarding tenants who abide by their tenancy agreement.

Resources and value for money

The Council aims to ensure its housing stock is managed efficiently and best use is made of the limited resource, for example, by reducing homelessness and the associated social and financial costs such as temporary accommodation placements.

The Council aims to operate an efficient lettings process, to reduce the length of time properties remain empty to ensure the needs of customers in housing need are met, and to increase tenant and resident satisfaction with their homes and neighbourhoods.

The move to develop community lettings policies will improve lettings outcomes and reward tenants who abide by their tenancy agreement and care for their property, and reallocate resources to support proactive tenancy sustainment through home visits and pre-tenancy training.

Legal Implications, Access to Information and Call In

None at this stage. The report is an update paper and is not subject to call in.

Risk Management

The report is an update paper. A full risk assessment has been undertaken for the Lettings Policy Review.

5.0 Conclusions

- 5.1 This report highlights the progress that has been made to date with the consultation on the lettings policy review, and provides some feedback on the key messages emerging from the consultation so far. A full report on the outcome of the consultation and next steps will be presented to the September meeting of Housing Advisory Board, prior to being taken to Executive Board for approval.

6.0 Recommendations

- 6.1 Housing Advisory Board is invited to note progress to date with the lettings policy review consultation.

Background documents¹

- February 2016 Executive Board paper 'Effective Housing Management and Lettings Framework.'

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.