

SOUTH HOLLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report of: Portfolio Holder for Housing and Health and/or Executive Director - Place

To: Policy Development Panel Wednesday, 19 September 2018

(Author: Martin Cregg Housing Landlord Services Manager)

Subject Review of Housing Allocations Policy

Purpose: To report on the review and seek agreement to changes proposed in the Housing Allocations Policy

Recommendation(s):

That it be recommended:

- 1) That Members approve the changes proposed following the review of the Housing Allocations Policy
- 2) That Members approve the revised policy coming into effect from 1st April 2019 once the IT capability is operational to enable applicants to self manage
- 3) That following Members approval, the Council's housing association and other appropriate external partners are advised of the changes

1.0 BACKGROUND

On 20 February 2018, Members of the Policy Development Panel, in considering the Council's Housing Allocations Policy raised a number of issues. These can be summarised as follows

- That there were 350 households on the Register, which was a relatively low amount compared to other Lincolnshire district councils
- Concern that a review of the Policy was overdue had not taken place when originally planned in 2016.

Recognising these concerns this Review has now been undertaken, completed and, subject to Members approval, will go out to the relevant partner organisations for consultation before fully implementing in April 2019 when the IT capability is planned to be operational.

Having reviewed the current policy the purpose of this report is to present to Members the changes that are considered appropriate to meet the following objectives

- i. To provide a single point of access to affordable housing in the district
- ii. Create a simpler system to use.
- iii. Applicant self management and responsibility for their application
- ii. To ensure that affordable housing is allocated in a fair and transparent manner
- iii. To ensure the best use of the housing stock across the district
- iv. To prevent homelessness and for the Council to meet its statutory duties.
- v. To contribute towards the building of strong communities

- vi. To provide partner affordable housing providers with a timely allocations service
- vii. Encourage applicants to take an informed and measured on their housing options

1.1 PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE ALLOCATIONS POLICY

The key changes determined through the review are about refocusing the policy in the district to ensure allocations deliver a vision around housing for the “Right Person, Right Place, Right Time at the Right Price”. The objective is to introduce changes that will create a simpler system to use, an emphasis on applicant self-management and responsibility for their housing application and the encouragement for people to take an informed, measured and long term view on their housing options.

It is also about seeking to bring about a more balanced approach to allocations and meeting housing need through partially relaxing qualification criteria to the Housing Register and hence more accurately capture housing need whilst at the same time streamlining the process through digitalising and reducing the number of wasted offers made to applicants. Whilst it is difficult to accurately predict the impact, particularly to qualification criteria, previous trends suggest an increase of between 100 to 150 households coming on to the Register as a consequence of the proposed changes.

The key changes to the revised policy document (attached as Appendix 1) are outlined below and focus on the four key changes below followed with an explanation of why the change is proposed:

- The housing application process – the transition to self-management
- Qualifying residency restrictions – a reduction in qualifying periods
- Sheltered accommodation – bringing in a lower age limit for automatic qualification
- Number of offers made to applicants – reducing number of offers of properties

1.1.1 THE HOUSING APPLICATION PROCESS

This change is to move from a manual interview process to a web based application which puts the emphasis on the applicant to self-manage. The new process is contained in the revised policy as below:

“Para 7.1 How to apply for housing

All applicants and existing housing association tenants who wish to apply for housing must now complete the online application form and provide documents to support their application.

*Once the application has been submitted online applicants will have 21 days to provide supporting information as detailed on the online form. At this stage the status of the application will be “online to be validated”. Once the supporting documents have been provided the application will then be assessed to establish eligibility to join the register, local connection, bedroom need and the applicant’s priority for housing. The Council **will not** process applications until supporting information has been provided. The Council will aim to assess applications within 28 days of receipt of their supporting evidence.*

7.2 Assistance with making an application

In exceptional circumstances where the applicant is unable to use a computer and has no friend, relative or advocate assisting them, the Council may refer the applicant to an outside organisation who will assist the applicant to submit an application

7.3 Remaining on the Housing Register / Renewals

Applicants will be required to renew their housing application on an annual basis, on the anniversary of their relevant application date – known as the “renewal” date. If applicants fail to voluntarily renew their application they will be sent a written reminder to do so within 28 days of the renewal date and a failure to respond to this reminder will lead to the cancelation of the application.

In order to remain on the Housing Register, applicants will need to retain a continuous local connection

Applicants are required to inform the council of any changes in their circumstances. Failure to inform the council of any changes, may result in your application being suspended/reviewed and any bids placed during this time may not be considered.”

1.1.2 Why this change is proposed

Currently all applicants are submitted to a lengthy interview at the time of application, this is resource intensive and the information provided is only relevant at the time of application, in many cases it may be an extensive period of time before an offer of housing is made . This change puts the emphasis on to the applicant to self - manage and take responsibility to keep their application up to date. This is reinforced by the new requirement outlined in Para 7.3 for applicants to annually renew their housing application. This ensures going forward that the Register remains up to date and a relevant indicator of housing need. This on line application process is now considered standard practice across the social housing sector both in terms of local authorities and housing associations.

1.2.1 QUALIFYING RESIDENCY RESTRICTIONS

Whilst this section introduces the statutory changes brought in by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 it also brings in new changes to local connection that reduce the required residency period in South Holland District down from three to two years or if through a close family member connection down from five to three years residency:

“8.2.2 Local Connection

An applicant will only be considered to be a qualifying person if they or a member of their household holds a local connection with the district of South Holland. A person will be considered to have a local connection with the district if one or more of the following apply:

- They have, through their own choice, lived in the district for at least two out of the last five years from the date of the application*
- They have a close family member that has lived in the district for at least the last three years. For the purposes of this policy the definition of family members is restricted to parents, grandparents, siblings and/or children with whom the applicant has proven regular and ongoing contact”*

1.2.2 Why this change is proposed

Residency periods can present a major obstacle in access to Housing Registers and are considered to be a significant factor in the relative low number of applicants on the South Holland Register. Research into other local authorities demonstrate a range of restrictions usually dependent upon local demand and housing markets however these proposed changes are consistent with a number of other Councils.

1.3.1 SHELTERED ACCOMMODATION

This change brings down the age for automatic qualification for sheltered housing from 62 to 55 years of age and the age for no other member of the household being below 50 to 45 years of age

“8.2.5 Sheltered Accommodation

Sheltered Housing provides communal living for individuals who wish to live independently. The following will automatically qualify for Sheltered Housing:

- Where the main applicant is at least 55 years of age regardless of gender*
- Where no other member of the household is aged below 45 years of age, except a partner”*

1.3.2 Why this change is proposed

This change is to broaden the potential catchment for sheltered accommodation particularly where there made currently be low demand in certain areas for this type of housing. It is also an opportunity to contribute towards more sustainable sheltered communities with “younger, older” residents particularly as the demographic shifts.

Research into other local authorities show that very few have the higher age limits contained within the current South Holland Allocations Policy, the majority reflect those proposed within this review but there are examples where the main applicant for sheltered housing can be as young as 45 years of age.

1.4.1 OFFERS OF ACCOMMODATION

This change reduces the number of “reasonable” offers made to an applicant from the current number of three down to two.

“18.1 Number of offers

South Holland District Council and its partners are committed to offering applicants as much choice as possible. However, with access to the register restricted to those in the most urgent need, the council expects that refusals of offers should be few and far between. Consequently, where an applicant refuses two “reasonable” offers of accommodation without good reason, they will have their application suspended for a period of six months”

1.4.2 Why this change is proposed

There are a number of reasons for this change, not least being the objective to make offers based on the overarching principle of “Right Person, Right Place, Right Time at the Right Price”. There is also the need to improve key to key turnaround performance time (as identified in the Members Voids Task Group) as well as reducing the resource implications of generating offers, viewings and having to go through the process several times on individual properties. Anecdotally there is evidence to suggest reasonable offers on properties are being turned down because applicants are aware they will receive further offers under the current existing policy of three offers.

Research across a range of other councils demonstrates that a number of local authorities are reducing the number of offers particularly since the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

2.0 **OPTIONS**

2.1 Approve the changes as proposed based around the application process, residency qualification periods, age limitations on sheltered housing and number of offers of housing

2.2 **Do nothing, continue to operate under the conditions of the existing Housing Allocations Policy**

3.0 **REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)**

3.1 The reason for the changes as specified are to provide a more balanced and workable approach to Housing Allocations that at one end will increase the number of applicants on the Housing Register by partially opening up residency rules whilst making the process more streamlined and targeted by reducing the number of offers. Bringing down the age limit on sheltered housing will reduce void times in properties historically more difficult to let whilst increase community sustainability.

3.2 The changes to an online application process will provide for a faster and less resource intensive management process whilst maintaining a more up to date Register with an emphasis on self management and responsibility on the part of the applicant.

4.0 **EXPECTED BENEFITS**

4.1 The expected benefits of the changes proposed will include a more accurate assessment of housing demand through an up to date Housing Register. There will be a more targeted use of staff resources through the move to applicant self management and taking a greater degree of responsibility whilst providing a safety net for the most vulnerable. Bringing down the age limits on sheltered property and reducing the number of property offers to two from three will contribute to bringing down the time properties remain void and the “key to key” period will improve.

4.2 **IMPLICATIONS**

Carbon Footprint / Environmental Issues

4.2.1 The move to on line applications will reduce the number journeys made by applicants to the Council Offices

Constitutional & Legal

4.3.1 The review of the Housing Allocations Policy meets a statutory requirement

Corporate Priorities

4.4.1 The changes directly contribute to the priority to “provide the right services, at the right time in the right way” and, through the change to applicant self management and taking responsibility, towards the corporate priority to enhance “independent communities”

Health & Wellbeing

4.5.1 The changes by a balanced further opening of the Housing Register directly contributes to both health & well being

4.6 **Staffing**

4.6.1 The move to digitalisation will increase capacity within the existing structure

4.7 **Stakeholders / Constitution / Timescales**

4.7.1 The relevant partners of the Council will be advised of the proposed changes to the Housing Allocations Policy.

5.0 **WARDS/COMMUNITIES AFFECTED**

5.1 All

6.0 **ACRONYMS**

6.1 None

Background papers:- South Holland Allocations Policy

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Key Decision: Y

Exempt Decision: N

This report refers to both Mandatory Service and Discretionary Service

Appendices attached to this report:

Appendix A Draft South Holland Allocations Policy