

Mutual Exchange Policy

Tenant's submission to Scrutiny and Overview Committee

7/9/2023

1. Background

1.1 It has been widely recognised that social housing and council tenants across the country have for many years been stigmatised, with their homes looked upon as “stock” and have often suffered from a paternalistic, master/servant type of relationship with their landlords, with little attention being paid to the views of those who fund the housing service through their rents.

1.2 Thankfully, things are gradually changing, and in South Cambs. we have made some good, if sometimes frustratingly slow, progress with tenant involvement in recent years.

1.3 It must be said though, that in our view we still have some way to go, both in terms of how tenant input integrates with the council's decision making structure, and in shifting attitudes amongst some of the “old guard”

1.4 Tenant reps. want to see South Cambs. in the vanguard of improving the lives of our tenants, not dragged along half-heartedly, and it is in this spirit that we make these proposals.

2. Mutual Exchange (MX)

2.1 Research by the Human City Institute has shown that the lack of mobility amongst social housing tenants has an enormous social and economic cost.

2.2 In 2010 the national cost was conservatively estimated at £540M - a large part of this was due to tenants being unable to move closer to care for relatives, so the state had to pay for their care.

Social mobility also helps tenants move with their work, school, or to be near family.

2.3 It is generally agreed that MX is a good way of facilitating social mobility, and that there are huge benefits for tenants, landlords, and as the research showed, the NHS and the criminal justice system.

3. New Mutual Exchange policy

3.1 Tenant reps. welcomed this long overdue overhaul of the South Cambs. MX policy, which for years has caused untold misery to tenants seeking to improve their lives, by denying them the opportunity to exchange properties, for no logical reason other than to try to force tenants to downsize against their will.

3.2 We believe that the MX policy should recognise and encourage mutual exchanges as an important vehicle for social mobility.

3.3 We do not believe it should be used for social engineering purposes, by trying to force tenants to downsize before they are ready to. This often leads to tenants not being able to exchange, so the council does not gain anything, but the tenants suffer.

3.4 The policy should reflect that finding a suitable mutual exchange is very difficult, as there are a very limited number of tenants who wish to swap at any one time, and the chances of finding one where you wish to move to and has a tenant who also wants your property is slim.

The policy should therefore not put unnecessary obstacles in the way of proposed exchanges.

3.5 Whilst we agree with much of what is proposed and welcome the recognition that change was needed - the policy is still needlessly and illogically inflexible.

4. Recommendations (Para 6 in the report)

1) Under Occupation.

4.1 It has been accepted that like many other councils and H.A.'s under occupation by 1 bed will be allowed.

4.2 The elected Tenant reps submit that there is no logic in continuing to refuse like for like exchanges, or other exchanges where there will be no increased over or under occupation.

4.3 *It is very important to remember that the Housing and Localism Acts (1985 and 2012) listed grounds where councils were ALLOWED to refuse exchanges – it was not an order or recommendation, it just meant that it would not be illegal.*

4.4 Illustrative examples that would still be refused under the officer proposals:

A) Couple (1 bed need) in 3 bed house with big overgrown garden. Wish to swap with a couple, also 1 bed need in 3 bed house, tiny garden, desperate for garden space to grow veg and have a greenhouse.

Result – Although under occupation levels would not have changed, the community continues to suffer an eyesore garden, the other couple are unable to make productive use of the garden to grow their own veg, with commensurate effects on mental and physical wellbeing.

B) An older couple (1 bed need) in a 5 bed house wish to move to a small village to be close to and care for their parents, one of whom is suffering from dementia, the other is very frail. Due to the limited supply, there are only 3 bed houses available in that area. After much effort they find one with young tenants willing to swap. They currently have a 3 bed need but as their current children get older will have a 4 bed need, and they have a baby on the way.

Result – The young family will become overcrowded in the future, older couple's parents go into care with all the economic, mental and physical cost associated with that, and the 5 bed house is not freed up for a bigger family – even though under occupancy levels overall would not have changed.

4.5 We submit that this is not the council “making best use of its stock” (para 15) or “promoting health and wellbeing through housing” (Greater Cambridge Housing strategy priority)

2) Over crowding

4.6 The same arguments apply as in (1)

Some councils (I.e., Norwich) also allow overcrowding by 1 bed in MX.

4.7 We submit that it makes no sense to refuse an exchange, where the overcrowded tenants are unable to find a suitable bigger property but wish to swap without worsening the overcrowding.

4.8 They may need to move to be near work, schools or family, with all the life changing benefits that brings.

This does not “actively encourage” overcrowding as claimed (Para 19), but the refusal *does* deny social mobility for those who cannot find a bigger property, with no gain for the council.

4.9 The clear principle should be that if the overall overcrowding is not made worse, then MX should be permitted.

3) Staffing

4.10 The 2014 report “Improving social mobility in the social housing sector” found that *“employing dedicated housing officers to promote and support MX led to the largest increase in mobility.”*

4.11 Our experience with tenants and the recent Ombudsman case have both starkly demonstrated the awful and embarrassing shortcomings of the administration of MXs at SCDC.

4.12 Elected tenant reps firmly believe that without the appointment of a dedicated specialist officer to administer and promote MXs, then the risk of adverse Ombudsman findings will remain high, and opportunities for social mobility will be reduced.

Failing this, we believe that at the very least, a named senior officer should be identified who will have overall responsibility for the operation and promotion of MXs to ensure accountability.

5. Conclusion

We hope that the elected members of the council can support tenants in their desire to improve social mobility in South Cambs. The Council was brave enough to trial the 4 day-week, and we hope that you will similarly push out in front of the crowd on this important matter.