

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Housing Portfolio Holder

17 October 2012

AUTHOR/S: Director of Housing

AMENDMENTS TO LETTINGS POLICY

Purpose

1. To approve the new lettings policy, which will become effective from 1 April 2013.
2. This is a key decision because it is significant in terms of its effects on communities living or working in an area comprising two or more wards.

Recommendations

3. To approve the amendments to the lettings policy.

Reasons for Recommendations

4. The revised lettings policy addresses the changes in legislation, LHA size criteria affecting social housing and enables us to respond better to the impact of the wider welfare reforms
5. Most of the policy changes apply to all seven local authority areas making up the sub regional Home-Link scheme. It is important to maintain consistency across the sub region to avoid confusion amongst applicants or an increased demand based on a favourable lettings policy.
6. Changes to the matching policy will prevent further allocations of properties which may not be affordable to applicants if they are not in line with the LHA size criteria, resulting in higher levels of arrears on our own tenancies.

Background

7. SCDC are one of the partners in the Cambridge sub regional choice based lettings scheme which replaced the points based waiting list in February 2008. Instead of properties being allocated via a waiting list, SCDC properties are advertised every two weeks and applicants can express an interest or "bid" for up to 3 properties per advertising cycle. Applicants are banded from A-D with A being the highest and properties are offered to the highest banded person on each shortlist. Where two or more people in the same priority band bid for the same property, priority is given to the applicant with the longest date in band.
8. A new Code of Guidance for allocations was published in June 2012. This encourages local authorities to make local decisions and enables local authorities to restrict the number of applicants joining their register, such as those with no local connection.
9. The government are currently consulting on new regulations that require former members of the armed forces (and their bereaved families) to be given priority for housing ahead of those applicants with similar levels of housing need.

10. As part of the Welfare Reforms, housing benefit will be reduced for working age tenants of social rented properties who are under-occupying their properties. The Housing benefit regulations stipulate that one bedroom is required for the following:
 - adult couple
 - other person aged 16 or over
 - any two children of the same sex up to the age of 16
 - any two children regardless of sex under the age of 10
 - any other child.
11. Housing Benefit will be reduced by 14% for those under-occupying by 1 bedroom and 25% for those under-occupying by 2 bedrooms. There are no interim provisions for this and it will come into effect from April 2013.
12. In addition, the impact of the Welfare reforms is creating an increased demand from households in high levels of housing need.

Considerations

13. Interim amendments were agreed in a report to the PFH in June 2012, in response to these reforms. This enabled the Council to offer accommodation of a suitable size having regard to the LHA size criteria.
14. Partners to the Home-Link scheme have been reviewing the lettings policy in response to the Code of Guidance, proposed changes in legislation and the impact of the welfare reforms.
15. The main changes to the SCDC lettings policy include:
 - Applicants will need to go through a pre-assessment module first to receive advice on all the housing options available to them.
 - Armed forces personnel (including bereaved families) - their 'priority date in band' will be calculated by backdating their date in band by the total cumulative period of their length of military service.
 - Applicants will only be able to register with the Council if they hold a local connection to the district (please see appendix 1)
 - Changed definition to assess over-crowding and under occupation, which reflect the LHA size criteria (see appendix 2)
 - Increased priority for those assessed as over-crowded or under-occupying accommodation. (Applicants lacking one bedroom will be placed in Band B, applicants lacking two or more bedrooms will be placed in Band A. Applicants under occupying by one bedroom will be placed in Band B, applicants under occupying by two or more bedrooms will be placed in Band A).
 - Offers to homeless applicants - whilst applicants will be able to bid for properties in the usual way, we reserve the right to place bids on their behalf or offer a direct let in order to resolve their housing need. (see appendix 3)
 - Bedroom matching requirements will now be based on the LHA size criteria (see appendix 2) with flexibility allowed for local lettings plans related to new developments and local discretion to allow landlords to meet the needs of atypical cases.
 - Subject to approval the Policy will be implemented with effect from 1 April 2013.

Options

16. To approve the amendments to the lettings policy.
17. Not to approve the amendments to the lettings policy.

Implications

18. Financial	A number of SCDC tenant are currently under-occupying, based on the LHA size criteria and will therefore have their housing benefit reduced. The new policy will prevent additional new tenants being unable to afford their rents due to HB restrictions.
Legal	Lettings are made in accordance with Part 6 of the 1996 Housing Act, and these changes reflect the welfare reforms and associated legislative changes.
Staffing	Increased workload for staff in order to implement the new policy, however, we are currently recruiting to an additional Housing Options Assistant post.
Risk Management	There is a significant risk in continuing with the existing policy if we offer applicants properties for which their housing benefit entitlement will be restricted.
Equality and Diversity	The new policy will be applied to all households.
Equality Impact Assessment completed	Yes
Climate Change	None

Consultation

19. Consultation on changes to the Home-link system was carried out between 20th July and 28th September 2012. This involved publicising the consultation to both customers (applicants to the Housing Registers) and Stakeholders (both Registered Providers and other agencies) through a variety of methods.

Consultation was concentrated on three issues.

- Changes to the Home-link website and the introduction of the pre-assessment module.
- The withdrawal of the Home-link magazine
- Formal consultation on the new draft Lettings Policy

20. A summary of the responses is included below:

- 72% felt that improvements to the website will improve access to information.
- 78% felt that the personalised property list will be a suitable replacement for the printed magazine.
- 63% agreed that only people with a local connection to the area should be able to apply for housing.
- 48% agreed with the method of using the date in service as a fair way of prioritising applications from former armed service personnel. (Most responses of a negative nature related to the issue of former armed service personnel having priority, as opposed to the method of awarding this).

- 81% agreed with additional priority being awarded for over-crowding and under-occupation.

Consultation with Children and Young People

21. As above

Effect on Strategic Aims

22. **We will make sure that South Cambridgeshire continues to offer outstanding and sustainable quality of life for our residents**
The new policy will enable new tenants to sustain their homes and therefore their quality of life.

Conclusions / Summary

23. The lettings policy which accompanies the Home-Link scheme has been reviewed by all district partners across the sub region, in response to the impact of the welfare reforms and legislative changes.
24. Full consultation has taken place and the overall response has been positive towards the changes proposed.
25. The new policy will help us to manage the impact of the welfare reforms.

Background Papers: None

Contact Officer: Sue Carter / Heather Wood – Head of Housing Advice and Options
Telephone: (01954) 713044