

REPORT TO:	Cabinet	22 nd March 2021
LEAD CABINET MEMBER:	Cllr Hazel Smith	
LEAD OFFICER:	Heather Wood/Peter Campbell	

Lettings Policy Review

Executive Summary

1. This council is part of the Cambridgeshire and West Suffolk Home-Link partnership; a partnership of six local authorities and 34 Registered Providers with a shared framework for prioritising and allocating social housing across the area.
2. The last major review of the allocations process took place in 2012. Minor policy amendments were subsequently approved in 2018 to incorporate changes in legislation. The allocations process and associated Lettings Policy were therefore due for full review.
3. The 2020 review involved a detailed, line by line review of the policy but resulted in a recommendation for only minor amendments. A public consultation ran for eight weeks from 23rd October – 18th December 2020 and demonstrated broad agreement with the proposals.
4. The Home-Link Management Board (comprising representatives across the partnership), agreed a final draft of the policy at an Extra Ordinary Meeting held on 14th January 2021. Although the board have agreed the allocations framework and policy for the partnership, each local authority must also now seek formal approval to accept the updated Lettings Policy via Cabinet. The updated policy will be implemented once all local authorities have received formal approval (estimated June 2021).

Key Decision

5. No. This is not a key decision.

Recommendations

6. Cabinet are asked to note the outcome of the allocations review, including the consultation feedback and agree the subsequent revisions to the Lettings Policy.

Details

7. As at 1st March 2021 there were 10,288* households with live applications waiting for social housing in the Cambridgeshire and West Suffolk Sub-Region. 1,667* of these applicants were registered with this council. (*Please note these figures are fluid as applicants join and leave the register daily).
8. Between 1st April 2020 and 1st March 2021, 2666 households were accommodated across the partnership via the Home-Link system. This includes 466 households in South Cambridgeshire; 344 of which were in the top two priority bands and 136 which were newly registered after 1 April 2020.
9. A comparable 2,963 households were housed via the Home-Link system in 2019/20 which includes 442 households in South Cambridgeshire, demonstrating that the system of prioritising and allocating social housing has continued to function despite the challenges of Covid-19.
10. The Lettings Policy sets out the process for allocating social housing and explains who can apply, the criteria used to prioritise and assess applications and how properties are nominated.
11. The policy must comply with the requirements outlined in Part 6 of the 1996 Housing Act. This includes offering 'reasonable preference' to certain categories of people when allocating properties and these legal requirements therefore cannot be changed.
12. The majority of the amendments to the policy relate to wording changes and were introduced to aid clarity and to help partners interpret and apply the policy consistently. However, more significant changes include the following:
13.
 - i) Ensuring ex-partners/spouses of armed forces personnel have the same priority given to their former partners where they move out of a Ministry of Defence property due to a relationship breakdown. This change is to ensure the partnership is compliant with the requirements of the Military Covenant.

- ii) Changes to the work element of the local connection criteria, to clarify the work requirement including the type and nature of qualifying work. (These changes are detailed in Section 3.4.2).
- iii) Greater clarity in circumstances where an applicant has sufficient financial capital or other means to find a housing solution outside of the register.

Implications

14. In the writing of this report, taking into account financial, legal, staffing, risk, equality and diversity, climate change, and any other key issues, the following implications have been considered:-

Legal

15. Prior to the start of the formal consultation, legal advice was sought from Bevan Brittain (in conjunction 3C Legal services who procured the advice on behalf of the partnership). Several small recommendations were made which have been incorporated into the final draft of the policy. These changes all involved tweaks to wording to ensure partners had not inadvertently fettered their discretion.

16. However, of particular note is the headline feedback from the lead solicitor which was communicated by email on 23rd September 2020 and which read *'In my view this is a good and detailed allocation policy. It is clear and comprehensive and, in my view, will enable applicants to understand how their application has been assessed.'*

Equality and Diversity

17. A detailed Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed and agreed with the Equalities Officer.

Consultation responses

18. A public consultation ran from 23rd October 2020 – 18th December 2020. In total 623 responses were received from across the partnership area. The majority of responses (305) were from existing applicants, although a range of people replied including Home-Link partners and representatives from interested organisations such as the Probation Service and Domestic Abuse support services.

19. The following three aspects of feedback are particularly worthy of note:

- i) Respondents were asked whether they agreed with each of the stated policy objectives. Overall, 79.9% of respondents agreed with the objectives and so no further changes were made in this respect.
- ii) 74.8% of respondents indicated that they either somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with the policy changes relating to local connection and working hours. Based on this, Home-Link Management Board decided that the proposed changes to this aspect of the policy should be confirmed.
- iii) 60.5% of respondents either somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that those with sufficient financial resources should be awarded a lower priority band. 20.5% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed and Home-Link Management Board agreed that this represented strong enough levels of agreement to retain the principle of awarding people with significant financial resources a lower priority. However, additional feedback was received in relation to people experiencing domestic abuse and the impact this could have on a person's finance. (For example, in cases of coercive control and/or economic abuse). Consequently, some minor wording changes were agreed to ensure that those experiencing abuse or harassment were not negatively impacted.

Alignment with Council Priority Areas

Housing that is truly affordable for everyone to live in

- iv) The policy is central to the fair and transparent allocation of social housing across the district.

Background Papers

Consultation Feedback – Report to Home-Link Management Board on 14th January 2021.

Appendices

Appendix A: Lettings Policy

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