

## SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

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**REPORT TO:** Leader and Cabinet 14 December 2006  
**AUTHORS:** Executive Director/ Housing Advice and Options Manager

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### AMENDMENTS TO THE CURRENT LETTINGS POLICY

#### Purpose

1. To recommend minor amendments to the Council's lettings policy to address current targets and priorities. These will be interim measures until the new policy for the Choice Based Letting scheme is introduced next year. Proposed changes are:
  - (a) A more flexible approach to the award of additional discretionary points for occupants of temporary accommodation, in particular those in hostel accommodation.
  - (b) Introducing a further category of a need to 'move on' from supported housing within the Welfare Points.
  - (c) Formalising within the policy that applicants with former tenant arrears or existing arrears are not given priority for an offer of accommodation, unless there are exceptional circumstances.

#### Background

2. In June 2005, the ODPM published a policy briefing entitled "Providing more settled homes". This highlighted the need to reduce households in temporary accommodation by 50% by 2010.
3. In November 2005, Cabinet agreed to amend the lettings policy to provide households in temporary accommodation with additional discretionary points after six months in temporary accommodation and homeless households are required to choose a minimum of 25 villages throughout the district as their rehousing request.
4. The Council is currently working with other local authorities and housing associations within the Cambridge Sub-Region to develop a Choice Based Letting scheme, which will incorporate a new lettings policy that will be implemented in November 2007.
5. There are a number of Best Value Performance indicators relating to homelessness. These include:
  - (a) Average length of time spent in B&B for families including a dependent or expected child.
  - (b) Average length of time spent in Hostel accommodation for families including a dependent or expected child.
  - (c) % reduction in the number of households with dependent or expected child in temporary accommodation.
  - (d) Reduction in the incidents of repeat homelessness.
  - (e) Number of homeless prevention cases.
  - (f) Reduction of rough sleepers
6. The Council's performance against these targets is good, except the average length of time a family with children lives in hostel accommodation.

7. The Supporting People review of homelessness services across the county identified a lack of move on arrangements. This has resulted in specialised supported accommodation being occupied on a long term basis by some residents, when adequate move on arrangements could free up these more specialised spaces. One of the recommendations from the report therefore was that all district council's seek to address this.

### Considerations

8. **Additional priority points for occupants of temporary accommodation.**

- (a) In November 2005, Cabinet agreed to amend the lettings policy to provide households in temporary accommodation with additional discretionary points after six months in temporary accommodation (rather than after two years).
- (b) The changes to the allocations scheme, coupled with the homelessness prevention work has resulted in a decrease of households in temporary accommodation as the following table shows:

Quarter/ year	Q3 – 2004/ 05	Q4 – 2004/ 05	Q1 – 2005/ 06	Q2 – 2005/ 06	Q3 – 2005/ 06	Q4 – 2005/ 06	Q1 – 2006/ 07	Q2 – 2006/ 07
Households in temporary accommodation at the end of each quarter	147	153	152	149	147	137	132	128

- (c) The Council also has the following BVPI targets for shared temporary accommodation. The performance for bed and breakfast is slightly worse than the target, but this relates largely to historic information and includes families in B&B in previous years. Use of bed and breakfast accommodation has significantly reduced during this year, with £2,377 spent on this type of accommodation during the first six months of 2006/07 compared to expenditure of £41,078 for the full year 2005/06. Unfortunately the performance for average time spent by families in hostel accommodation is much worse than the target.
- (d) The following table shows that the Council is in the bottom Quartile of the Daventry benchmark group for these BVPI's:

	Target (weeks)	Performance at end of Sept 2006 (weeks)	Daventry benchmark group – Upper quartile	Daventry benchmark group – Lower quartile
Average time in B&B (families with children)	3.00	3.69	2.06	3.29
Average time spent in hostel accommodation (families with children)	24.00	42.43	8.25	25.18

- (e) The current allocation of additional points to homeless households after six months in temporary accommodation is not helping to reach this target, which itself is six months.
- (f) The majority of hostel residents who receive these additional points are subsequently well placed on the housing register. If some residents can be rehoused within the initial six-month period it will help to improve the average performance.
- (g) Research shows that living in shared temporary accommodation can have a negative effect on families and, in particular, children. Effects can include insecurity and lack of educational achievement due to a lack of space for privacy, play and homework.
- (h) It is also important that residents of hostels are rehoused relatively quickly to increase turnaround within the hostels and reduce the risk of bed and breakfast accommodation being used. Particularly at present whilst the homeless prevention work is being hindered by the rent restrictions in the district. Whilst a number of potentially homeless cases are still being prevented, increasing numbers are seeking housing advice. There has been a significant reduction in the numbers we have been able to assist through the rent deposit guarantee scheme, due to rent determinations being returned with restrictions that make the properties unaffordable. To illustrate this, we were only able to assist with 4 placements under the scheme in the second quarter of this year, compared to 15 in the first quarter.
- (i) In addition to the issues relating to hostel accommodation, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) does not favour the use of council owned stock as temporary accommodation. It is accepted that this reduces the amount of tenancies that can be let permanently, and many families are actually adequately housed in their temporary accommodation, but they have the insecurity of being in temporary accommodation because their turn has not been reached on the housing register.
- (j) In the ODPM's publication "Sustainable Communities: settled homes; changing lives", it identifies that 25,000 households nationally were living in temporary accommodation within council or housing association stock. In a recent letter from the DCLG sent to a number of local authorities with higher use of temporary accommodation within its own stock they state; "The Government wishes to maximise the use of housing stock in the social sector to meet long-term housing needs wherever possible.... However, the [statistical] returns indicate that a large proportion of households being provided with temporary accommodation in social sector stock are not owed merely an interim duty. This suggests that there are a significant number of cases where people are being provided with temporary accommodation in social sector stock for longer periods.... The Government would like to see local housing authorities with high numbers of homeless acceptances in temporary accommodation provided in social stock take steps to reduce these numbers, and wherever possible bring such accommodation back within the allocation scheme in order that long term offers can be made".
- (k) The council does try to minimise the amount of council stock being used as temporary accommodation, although, at times, this is necessary to prevent additional use of bed and breakfast accommodation. In view of the need to reduce numbers in temporary accommodation and taking on board the comments from the DCLG, it is proposed that the additional priority points for time in temporary accommodation are awarded earlier for families living in a council property, which would be suitable for them on a permanent basis, to enable them to have the security of a permanent home.
- (l) It is therefore proposed that temporary accommodation points continue to be provided in order to give appropriate priority to applicants on the housing

register. However there should be a more flexible approach (outlined below) to when these points are awarded to help address the needs of families living in insecure accommodation and help the council to achieve its targets, minimise the cost of temporary accommodation and reduce the numbers in temporary accommodation.

**9. The provision of 'move on' accommodation**

- (a) The Supporting People review of homelessness services across the county identified a lack of move on arrangements and this recommended that all district council's seek to address this.
- (b) This will be covered in the draft sub-regional lettings policy for use with the Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme, however, it is recommended that this is also addressed by councils prior to the implementation of CBL, as this is not anticipated to be until November 2007, at the earliest.
- (c) The Council does not have any specific move on arrangements, although priority may be awarded appropriately through the lettings policy.
- (d) It is therefore proposed that this should be formalised and made clearer through an additional category under welfare grounds of 'move on accommodation'.
- (e) These points would be awarded following discussion and agreement between the support provider and the Council, and would follow a housing options approach in terms of securing alternative accommodation. Support providers will include those who the Council currently refers to for supported housing and include the Young Parent Project, Railway House and other schemes operated by Cambridge Housing Society, the YMCA and Whitworth House.

**10. Housing register applicants with debt to the Council.**

- (a) Under Part VI of the 1996 Housing Act and related guidance for housing allocations, it is possible to make provision within a letting policy to determine priorities between applicants who would otherwise fall into a reasonable preference or additional preference category. This definition can include rent arrears and therefore applicants without rent arrears would receive priority for an offer.
- (b) In practice allocations are not generally made to applicants with rent arrears or former tenant arrears, unless there are exceptional circumstances (with the approval of the Executive Director, following new delegated authorities adopted in June 2006), however, this is not specifically contained within the Council's letting policy.
- (c) The issues that are looked at when considering exceptional circumstances include the date of the debt, the amount of debt outstanding, statutory obligations, arrangements made to clear the debt and adherence to these arrangements.
- (d) It is therefore proposed that this addition to the lettings policy should be included. However this should not be a blanket policy and exceptions should be considered based on individual circumstances, as outlined above.

## Implications

11. Financial	Potential use of B&B accommodation to provide emergency accommodation if the hostels are full for long periods of time.
Legal	Consultation with applicants is only required when a major change in the allocations policy is proposed and therefore it is the officers opinion that this would not be necessary for these proposals. However, consultation will be required with RSL's with whom we have nomination arrangements in the district. Formalising the practice of reduced priority to applicants with arrears, will ensure the Council is not open to legal challenge.
Staffing	Minor in terms of implementing the amendments.
Risk Management	There is the risk that these amendments will not help to reduce the numbers in temporary accommodation, due to the increasing numbers of people who are seeking housing advice and who could potentially make a homeless application. Officers will, however, continue to work towards preventing homelessness wherever possible and schemes are being developed to help this.
Equal Opportunities	The housing register provides a clear and consistent way of assessing the housing needs of applicants.

## Consultations

12. A twelve-week consultation period has begun with RSL's with whom we have nomination arrangements in the district.
13. All households affected by these amendments will be advised in writing.

## Effect on Annual Priorities and Corporate Objectives

14. Affordable Homes	These amendments address the needs of those in the greatest need for affordable homes.
Customer Service	The amendments will help to ensure that some of the most vulnerable applicants are appropriately housed.
Northstowe and other growth areas	
Quality, Accessible Services	These amendments address the needs of those in the greatest need for affordable homes. The amendments will help to ensure that some of the most vulnerable applicants are appropriately housed
Village Life	
Sustainability	
Partnership	The amendments reflect concerns raised by partner agencies in respect of move on arrangements.

## Conclusions/Summary

15. Amendments to the current Housing Register lettings policy are required to:
  - (a) Reduce the average length of time residents spend in hostel accommodation.
  - (b) Address the concerns raised by the Supporting People team following the review of homeless services in respect of move on arrangements.

- (c) Formalise the practice of giving reduced priority to applicants on the housing register with current or former rent arrears.
16. The proposed changes will help the Council to achieve other targets, minimise costs of unsuitable temporary accommodation such as B&B and will form a short-term measure due to the introduction of a new lettings policy to accompany the Sub Regional Choice Based Lettings scheme, due in November 2007.

### **Recommendations**

17. The Housing Portfolio Holder recommends to Cabinet that the Council's lettings policy is amended by the addition of the following paragraphs:
- (a) The additional points for residing in temporary accommodation are given;
    - (i) To hostel residents either when they move into hostel accommodation or when a rehousing obligation is accepted by the Council, whichever is later.
    - (ii) To other occupants of temporary accommodation if they are adequately housed in their current accommodation and this can be provided permanently.
    - (iii) Prior to six months in other exceptional circumstances at the discretion of the Housing Advice and Options Manager in line with the delegated authorities.
  - (b) Add an additional category of 'A need for move on accommodation' under the reasons for awarding welfare points.
  - (c) Formalise the practice of giving reduced priority to applicants with current or former tenant arrears to ensure this is covered by the policy, unless there are exceptional circumstances, through adding the following into the lettings policy: "Applicants with current or former tenant arrears or other outstanding debt to the Council will receive less priority for an offer of accommodation, unless there are exceptional circumstances. In these circumstances consideration will be given to the date and amount of the debt outstanding and any arrangements made to clear the arrears and adherence to these arrangements".

**Background Papers:** the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

Cambridgeshire Supporting People review of services for homeless families  
DCLG (formerly ODPM) Code of Guidance for the allocation of accommodation  
DCLG (formerly ODPM) Sustainable Communities: settled homes; changing lives

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