

London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham

Report to: The Economy, Housing and the Arts Policy and Accountability Committee

Date: 16/07/2020

Subject: Proposed Changes to the Council's Housing Allocation Scheme

Report of: Gerry Crowley

Responsible Director: Tony Clements

Summary

The Council is statutorily obliged to adopt and operate a Housing Allocation Scheme which sets out the rules by which it allocates affordable rented accommodation. The current Housing Allocation Scheme was last amended in 2018. We propose to make some changes to the scheme which will help ensure that those residents with the greatest need are prioritised for the right housing solution.

We are proposing some changes which will help prioritise children leaving care, homeless households and those households with disabilities gain access to safe and suitable housing. We also want to create greater transparency with the introduction of an online digital platform to advertise our rehousing opportunities, this will enable residents to play a more active role in their rehousing journey.

Recommendations

- 1) We change the way we allocate our social housing with the introduction of an on-line digital platform to advertise and allocate the social housing stock within the borough. The change will bring transparency to the allocation process and allow the applicant to play an active role in their housing journey. Properties will be advertised on the platform giving qualifying residents the visibility and opportunity to express an interest depending on their own individual housing preferences and requirements. We will manage the overall process in line with the terms of the current policy, whilst incorporating technology to bring about improvements.
- 2) We want to do more to ensure that those residents living with disabilities are prioritised for the right housing solution. Therefore, we propose that accommodation which has been adapted or is deemed adaptable by our Occupational Therapy service is prioritised for those that need it most.
- 3) We want to help more young adults leaving care with the best possible start as they transform to adulthood. We therefore propose to increase their priority award to Band 1 whilst increasing the annual quota for Children Leaving Care from 30 to 40 housing lets.

- 4) The Cabinet has previously expressed its approval for officers to utilise its powers under the Localism Act to discharge its housing duty into the private rented sector. To avoid and reduce the number of households in expensive temporary accommodation. We recommend a change to the policy which will allow those homeless households that work with our housing prevention service and have their homelessness successfully prevented by accepting accommodation in the private rented sector, to remain on the housing register.

- 5) To qualify to join the Council's housing register, applicants are required to meet the local residency criteria, ie resident in the borough for 5 of the last 7 years. We recognise that some young people have had to reside outside the borough to access SEN services and these should not be disadvantaged or fall foul of the Council's residency qualification. Therefore, we propose to change the policy to ensure that time spent outside the borough to access SEN services will be disregarded, this will ensure that young people with special education needs are not disadvantaged as they transition to adulthood.

- 6) We propose that Local Lettings Plans are automatically implemented for all new housing developments consisting of five or more social housing units. The lettings plans will prioritise qualified local residents living on the effected estate or the immediate locality before opening up to the rest of the housing register.

Wards Affected: All

H&F Priorities

Please state how the subject of the report relates to our priorities – delete those priorities which are not appropriate

Our Priorities	Summary of how this report aligns to the H&F Priorities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a compassionate council 	<p>Compassion is about equipping people to live independent lives.</p> <p>The proposed changes aim to increase the number of opportunities for disabled people to access housing which is suitable and adapted for their specific requirements.</p> <p>We will also increase the number of young people leaving care and going into secure and affordable housing, thus providing the basis for a brighter future.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing things with local residents, not to them 	<p>The changes will give residents full visibility of the housing allocation process, the number of rehousing opportunities and the stock that becomes available for re-letting.</p> <p>The online digital platform will allow</p>

	<p>residents to play a more active role in their rehousing journey, as they will decide which homes they wish to apply for based on their housing requirements. The on-line platform will allow those supporting our most vulnerable residents to view and assist with choosing the correct rehousing pathway.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being ruthlessly financially efficient 	<p>The change to allow homeless households to remain on the Council's housing register will provide reassurance to applicants and ensure greater take up of PRS offers. In Summer 2018, Cabinet approved a one-off investment of £900,000 from the Temporary Accommodation reserve to secure 300 additional private rented sector properties. This is expected to enable officers to reduce accommodation costs by c£2.1m over four years by avoiding expensive costs of short term leased properties. This will help mitigate the impact of reducing government grants (anticipated to reduce by approx. £3.5m over a four-year period).</p> <p>The on-line platform will allow the Council to advertise void properties to a much wider audience, which will speed up the re-letting process and reduce rental loss on voids.</p> <p>The changes will also assist Children's Service to deliver MTFS savings as we reduce the number of children in care, particularly expensive out of borough placements.</p>

Background Papers Used in Preparing This Report

Attached is a summary report detailing the results of a public consultation exercise which took place on 29th May 2020 on the proposed changes to the housing allocation scheme.



Summary%20of%20Responses%20to%20Co

1. Proposals and Detailed Analysis

1) *Allocating housing in a fair and transparent way:*

The Council currently operates an 'assisted choice' model when allocating its housing stock. This simply means that successful housing applicants are awarded a priority band and placed on the Council's housing register. Housing is allocated in order of band priority and time spent in the band, taking into account any known housing preferences or needs. Households are then contacted when they appear on a shortlist for housing, which, depending on their assessed housing requirement could be some years after joining the register.

The proposed introduction of an on-line digital platform will enable us to better serve our residents. The change will bring transparency to the allocation process and allow the applicant to play an active role in their housing journey. Properties will be advertised on the platform giving qualifying residents the visibility and opportunity to express an interest depending on their own individual housing preference and requirements. We will shortlist and carry out viewings as we do now. The overall process will be managed where possible, in line with the terms of the current policy, but improved with the use of technology.

A working group will be formed to draw up the full design specification for the platform and ensure it has the capacity to allow residents to easily access and manage their own housing register, upload supporting documentation, automation capacity to alert households waiting for specific types of properties eg accessible housing, ringfence properties for specific groups, advertise properties on a daily or weekly cycle.

To assist and support residents, comprehensive training will be provided to colleagues located in all housing offices, libraries, jobcentres, legal, welfare and community advice centres. Support will be on hand to assist with those using the system which will allow residents to apply online, by email, text, telephone or in writing.

There are currently five known main suppliers in the market when it comes to the provision of the required housing software solutions. We will engage with those suppliers to market test and evaluate the options available to the Council.

2) *Improving access to housing for those with the greatest need:*

We want to do more to ensure that those residents with the most complex needs get access to the right housing solution. Therefore, we are proposing that accommodation which has been adapted or is adaptable goes to those that require it most. Much of the Council's housing stock was built in an era which renders it unsuitable for those with physical disabilities which has resulted in fewer rehousing opportunities for those that require accessible housing. We want to ensure that wherever possible, the supply of accessible housing is maximised and therefore those properties that have been adapted or are suitable for adaptation are identified and ringfenced for those that need it most.

We also want to create the opportunity for a better and more secure future for those children leaving care. Much work has been done recently to expediate the move-on from care to independent living, due to closer working and effective protocols between Housing and Children's Services. We propose to amend the rules to award the highest priority - Band 1, to those ready for move-on from care. We also propose to increase the annual Children Leaving Care quota from 30 to 40 social lets per year.

The Council awards additional priority – Band 2, to applicants that satisfy the community contribution criteria. To qualify through employment, the household is required to work for a minimum of 16 hours in line with DWP working tax credit rules. Whilst many people with disabilities work there may be circumstances in which a disability prevents this or the full criteria being met, in such cases we will review the individual circumstances and apply the principles of the policy.

To qualify to join the Council's housing register, applicants are required to have been resident in the borough for the last 5 years at point of application or 5 of the last 7 years. We recognise that young people that have resided outside the borough to access SEN services should not be disadvantaged or fall foul of the Council's residency qualification. Therefore we propose to change the policy to ensure that time spent outside the borough to access SEN services will not count when returning to the borough, this will ensure that young people with special education needs are not disadvantaged as they transition to adulthood.

Local lettings policies are an important tool that can be used to respond to specific local circumstances and are one of the main vehicles for the local authority to use flexibility within the overall allocation scheme for social and affordable rented housing. We propose that where social housing has been lost in a locality, we will automatically roll out a local lettings plan for all new housing developments consisting of 5 or more social housing units. The plan will prioritise those qualifying residents on the immediate estates or postal code before being offered to the remainder of the housing register across the borough.

3) Assisting those into suitable accommodation whilst remaining on the Housing Register:

The Council has seen an 127% increase in the number of households approaching for housing assistance (1,235 households in 2017/18 to 2,801 in 2018/19). Perhaps, more significantly, there was a dramatic increase in the number of homeless applications, up by 162%. The average number homeless applications made over the past four years was 511, compared to 1,011 in 2018/19. The Council has a statutory duty to relieve homelessness with a suitable offer of accommodation, which can be either temporary accommodation (TA) leased to the Council or accommodation in the private rented sector (PRS). The latter must be an Assured Shorthold Tenancy (AST) for a minimum of 12 months.

Avoiding the use of TA and continuing to reduce the current levels will realise savings to the general fund and is estimated at £392,000 in real savings (as opposed to cost avoidance) at the end of 2020/21.

Further to the Cabinet's previous approval, housing officers are using the powers as granted under the Localism Act to discharge the Council's housing duty into the private rented sector.

This proposal enables those households that accept an AST in the PRS will be allowed to remain on the Council's Housing Register rather than in TA. Any time spent outside the borough will not count against them in regards to retaining a local connection to the borough. In making this change, households are less likely to refuse the offer of an AST in the PRS. Applications will continue to be verified on an annual basis to ensure assistance is required.

The housing register currently has 2,700 households awaiting rehousing, this proposed change may result in an annual increase of approximately 300 households to the housing register every year.

4) List of Appendices:

All exempt information must be placed in an exempt appendix. As much information as possible must be in the open report, exempt appendices should therefore contain as little information as possible.

Please submit appendices with the main report. Appendices should be numbered clearly and consecutively on the top right-hand corner of the page, i.e. Appendix 1, Appendix 2, etc. There needs to be a clear reference to the appendix in the body of the report.