

THE EXECUTIVE

20 DECEMBER 2005

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF HOUSING AND HEALTH

This report is submitted under Agenda Item 7. The Chair will be asked to decide if it can be considered at the meeting under the provisions of Section 100B(4)(b) of the Local Government Act 1972 as a matter of urgency so as to avoid delay in implementing necessary changes to the Council's More Choice In Lettings housing allocations policy

MORE CHOICE IN LETTINGS - ADDITIONAL POLICY STATEMENTS	FOR DECISION
<p>Summary:</p> <p>The Executive on the 8 March 2005 approved the final report of More Choice in Lettings (MCIL), which completed the transition of the housing allocation policy from a points system to the current scheme, which empowers housing applicants. This report proposes some further policy amendments, which are necessary and became apparent through operational experience. The recommendations address issues and reflect the aspirations of our clients as well as being compliant with relevant Housing legislation.</p> <p>Wards Affected: All</p>	
<p>Implications:</p> <p>Financial: No direct implications although the proposed policy changes will contribute to reducing void levels and therefore increase rent income to the Housing Revenue Account.</p> <p>Legal: The proposals ensure compliance with recent Housing legislation and guidance from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on housing policy issues.</p> <p>Risk Management: This policy will require the support of all staff in the Housing and Health Directorate. In recognition of the importance of housing and the need to give quality service to our clients; practise and procedures will be prepared to serve as a guideline for all members of staff in various departments. Also, short training will be arranged for staff that have direct contact with members of the public.</p> <p>Social Inclusion and Diversity: The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 places a requirement on local authorities to make an assessment of the impact of new and revised policies in terms of race equality. Existing policies have already been subjected to impact assessments. This Authority has adopted an approach of extending the impact to cover gender, disability, sexuality, faith, age and community cohesion.</p> <p>A Policy Proofing process has been introduced to assess such impacts and the outcome insofar as this report is concerned is to meet the needs of all members of the community, who may not be adequately protected under the current policy. This group include single adults who are unintentionally homeless but have no priority need.</p>	

Crime and Disorder: No implications.		
Recommendations The Executive is asked to agree the proposed amendments to the Council's 'More Choice In Lettings' housing allocations policy as set out in the report.		
Reason: The proposals will ensure that the More Choice in Lettings policy serves the needs of clients and ensures best use of the Council's housing stock, and will assist the Council to achieve its Community Priority of 'Improving Health, Housing and Social Care'.		
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1. Background

- 1.1 The Executive on 8 March 2005 (Minute 321) approved the introduction of the More Choice in Lettings (MCIL) policy, which was implemented on the 4th April 2005, with the first magazine being published on the 28th April 2006.
- 1.2 This report proposes some further policy amendments. These issues have come to light during the first six months operation of MCIL and have been discussed with the Executive Lead Member for Housing and Public Health.

2. Short listing and Viewing Procedures

- 2.1 It is proposed that the process for short listing of applicants who have made property bids and visiting procedures are stated in the policy to ensure that there is openness and clarity for applicants.
- 2.2 The policy will also make clear that it will be necessary to carry out home visit to applicants in order to gather relevant and accurate information and make informed assessments. Attached at Appendix 1 is the proposed detailed guidance on home visits.

3. Extension of Direct Offer Group

- 3.1 The approved MCIL policy contains the power to make direct offers to selected categories of applicants.
- 3.2 In view of the identified needs it is now proposed that direct offers should be extended to applicants who have no priority needs under the Homelessness Act 2002 but who are unintentionally homeless.
- 3.3 Such offers will be discretionary and will be subject to the availability of appropriate Housing stock.

4. Medical or welfare grounds for re-housing

4.1 An amendment to housing law covering allocations came into effect at the end of April 2005. This provides that “medical or welfare grounds” include grounds relating to a disability. It is therefore proposed to amend the policy to comply with the new requirement.

5. Reasons and justifications to disallow certain bids

5.1 Applicants who bid will not be invited to view even if they emerge first in the bidding process if any of the following applies:-

- They have made a Right to Buy application which has progressed to a section 125 Offer Notice being signed;
- Persistent rent arrears;
- Applicants or a member of the household, who has committed unacceptable behaviour serious enough to make him/her unsuitable to be a tenant;
- Applicants with no local connection may be allowed to bid but if bids are received from applicants with a local connection, preference will be given to applicants that have local connection;
- If the financial resources available to the applicant are in excess of £50,000, such applicants will not be short-listed;
- Applicants placed in interim/temporary accommodation by other local authorities under various statutory legislations and the consideration for their applications are yet to be determined or duty discharged. Such applicants will be allowed to register for this scheme, but their application will be suspended pending the placing Authorities determining such pending application or duty discharged.

6. Private Decant and Request for a Re-housing

6.1 The circumstances under which a private decant applicant can be considered for re-housing are that such applicants should only be considered for re-housing if the works to the property justify this and will take more than 8 weeks; otherwise temporary accommodation should be provided while the repairs are being carried out.

7. Fostering Families

7.1 It is proposed that fostering families who are referred by Social Services should be included under the special scheme to award priority for rehousing so that they would receive a direct offer of accommodation to meet their needs including their potential fostering commitment.

8. Disclosure of Information

8.1 Action will be taken by the Council against applicants who give false information or wilfully withhold relevant information in order to acquire accommodation.

9. Broader Choice

- 9.1. Some 2 and 3 bed flats in high-rise blocks particularly above the 5th floor prove difficult to let to applicants with children. It is therefore recommended that bedroom requirements can be waived for these properties in order to invite a wider group of applicants to bid and avoids long-term voids. This would mean that households could under occupy such flats.

10. Variation in bed need requirements

- 10.1 Due to the acute shortage of 4 bedroom properties, applicants registered for 4 bedroom properties will also be allowed to bid for 3 bedroom parlour type houses. Applicants for these properties will be ranked according to the number of bedrooms they need, with 4 bedroom applications being ranked above 3 bedroom applicants

11. Weekly Bid

- 11.1 In view of the recent decision of the East London Lettings Company (company responsible for the printing of our Home Choice Magazine) to advertise properties weekly for other local authorities. It has now become apparent that; it will not only reduce the voids period and generate more money for the council. It will also enable us to provide quality service to our clients in line with what other authorities are proposing.

12. One Property Bid

- 12.1 In order to effectively and efficiently manage the proposed weekly bid cycle; it will be appropriate to change the current practise of bidding for 2 properties per fortnight to 1 bid per week.

Background Papers Used in the Preparation of the Report:

- Statutory Instrument Number 2005 Number 1120 (C.49)
- Executive report of 8 March 2005 entitled 'More Choice in Lettings' (Minute 321).

HOME VISIT

All applicants are subject to a visit without which they cannot be offered council property.

No Fixed Abode applicants: - Applicants who do not have any settled accommodation may apply for re-housing via MCIL. If the applicant is moving amongst friends/relatives all addresses will be visited and details checked with the host. The applicant will be required to provide proof of residence. Alternatively a letter from each host to confirm the situation may be required. Proof of residence in their previous settled accommodation must be provided in order to gather more information that may be relevant to their application.

If this is not available, the case will be passed to the Team Leader or Project Manager, Homelessness and Re-housing for consideration.

- **Homeless Applicants:** - are exempted from home visit, as in depth checks on their homeless circumstances are carried out at a point of application by the caseworkers.

Council Tenants: - We expect in future to visit all tenants who have applied to MCIL. However, until the backlogs of cases have been cleared; verification checks will be carried out using Estate Management System and Rent Accounts.

The Role of a Visiting Officer

1. Check proof of identity and date of birth of the applicant and all members of their household, child benefit book, medical card etc
2. Check proof of residence in the last five years
3. Check the rooms, facilities and tenure claimed are correct
4. Check that the applicants have all necessary immigration documents that confirm that they are eligible for housing assistance
5. Details of the landlord
6. Note any changes i.e. family make up & sight documents.

The Visiting Officer has no power to inform applicants that their application is likely to be deferred or have their priority reduced. It is the role of the visiting officer to report back to the Application and Housing Allocations Teams who will assess the priority of an application.

Short Listing Criteria

The short-listing of applicants for properties commences a day after the bidding has closed. The procedures are designed to ensure that the council achieves its target re-let time for void property. Allocations Officers are responsible for short listing of applicants. The Officer will go through the list of all applicants that bid for each property and check for the following information: -

- The property is suitable for the needs of the applicants; with emphasis on any special needs (if any)
- Check to confirm that visit has been carried out on all private sector applicants within the last year, if not request for the visit to be carried out within 2 days. If the applicant is

not available within 2 days the allocations Team will consider the next person on the queue.

- Applicants who have been previously been subject to immigration control, check that their documents are still valid
- For council tenants, check their rent accounts and records of their behaviour on the system. Any adverse information may affect the right of such applicants in securing alternative property.

Apart from the above information; what determines an applicant bidding position for a particular property are: -

- **Additional Preference:** - If more than one applicants with additional preference bids for a particular property. The shortlist will rank these applicants in order of earliest effective date first.
- **Cumulative Preference:** -Applicants with more than one reasonable preference that bids for a particular property. The shortlist will rank these applicants in order of earliest effective date first.
- **Reasonable Preference:**-If more than one applicant with reasonable preference bids for a particular property. The shortlist will rank these applicants in order of earliest effective date first.

Applicants are currently entitled to place two bids. Should an applicant be selected to view two properties, they will receive two viewing letters. They are required to notify the area office which property they intend to view. With effect from 20th January 2006 applicants will be entitled to place 1 bid per cycle.

The Council may short list up to three applicants for each property.

Viewing Procedures

The Council may short list up to three applicants to view a property. All successful applicants will be sent a letter before the viewing date informing them of the location of the property and the time of the viewing. The purpose of viewing the property is to see the internal and external features of the property and seek any further clarifications from the Estate Officer regarding the property.

All viewings will be carried out the Monday following the closing of the bidding process. Should Monday fall on a Bank Holiday then viewings will take place on the next working day.

The viewing officer will be the Estate Officer who manages the property. The Officer will explain the general principle of multiple viewing to confirm with each prospective tenant their position on the bidding list and the property will be offered in that order, subject to satisfactory identification checks.

The Viewing Officer may decide whether it is appropriate to allow all prospective tenants to view simultaneously or to conduct the viewing individually in the order of bid preference. Factors such as the type of property and who wishes to view will help determine this. It is the responsibility of the viewing officer to ensure that viewing is undertaken safely. Should

an officer, for whatever reason, decide it is unsafe to conduct the viewing then an alternative date and time will have to be arranged.

The applicants will be invited to bring one adult with them to view the property. The property may still be undergoing repairs; therefore applicants will be advised not to come with young children.

When the prospective tenants have had sufficient time to see inside the property and their questions have been answered the election process will begin. The person who is first on the bidding list should be invited to accept or decline the property. An acceptance / decline form will be completed by the Estate Officer and counter-signed by the applicant.

If the first bidder declines the property, the process will be repeated with the second bidder. Similarly if they refuse it, is offered to the third person. Where all three applicants refuse a property we want to track the reason why. This may influence any other work to be carried out in the property or how it is advertised in the future. The applicants on the reserve list will then be considered for the property, if they also refuse the property. This property may therefore be re-advertised in the next bidding cycle or let out directly to applicants under special circumstances.

If the property is ready to let, the viewing officer will telephone the Allocations Team and advise them who the successful applicant is, If the applicant is satisfied with the conditions of the property, arrangement will be made to sign the tenancy agreement

If for any reasons, the applicants could not sign the tenancy on the viewing date, arrangement should be made during the course of the week for the sign up process to be completed

However, if the property is not yet ready to let, the viewing officer will notify the Allocations Team on their return to the office advising them the name of the successful applicant. Allocations will then pre-allocated the property to the successful applicant. The sign up process will then be completed as soon as possible pending the completion of repairs.