

HOUSING ALLOCATIONS POLICY 2018

February Consultation - Draft Housing Allocations Policy

1.0 Consultation

- 1.1 Following the completion of the draft version of the Housing Allocations Policy, as required the Council has consulted with key internal teams, external partners and stakeholders on proposed key changes to the Housing Allocations Policy.
- 1.2 A number of organisations were invited to attend a stakeholders and partners focus group. Those that were unable to attend were sent the draft Housing Allocations Policy to review and submit feedback by 8 March 2018.
- 1.3 Below is a list detailing the groups that attended the Focus Group and a separate list showing the organisations that were unable to attend but received the draft Housing Allocations Policy along with a summary of key changes for comment.

Focus Group Attendees Citizens Advice Woking
Clarion Housing Group
Mount Green
New Vision Homes
Transform Housing
TVHA (Thames Valley Housing Association)
York Road Project

Consulted Organisations Accent Group
A2 Dominion
Ability-Housing
Catalyst Support
Ethical Lettings
Greenoak Housing Association
Guinness Trust
Home Support
L&Q Group
Life Charity
Paragon Astra (PA) Housing
Riverside
Sanctuary Housing
SLAP Coordinator
Surrey County Council Adult Social Care
Woking Probation Office
Woking Borough Council Staff

- Housing Options
- Housing Needs
- Housing Standards/Licensing
- Home Independence
- Sheerwater Regeneration Visiting Officers

Your Sanctuary

- 1.4 On 22 February 2018, Housing Officers presented and consulted with the Housing Task Group and the Portfolio Holder for Housing on the proposed changes to the Council's Housing Allocations Policy.

2.0 Proposed Key Changes

2.1 In summary below are the proposed changes together with the rationale for such proposals, together with an articulation of the impact that such change may have.

i. *Removal of Band E by condensing the existing five Bands (A-E) to four (A-D):*

There is no material effect to those people already in these Bands as the proposed changes effectively seek to amalgamate and disperse those priority groups into more appropriate and a smaller number of bands;

The impact of this change is considered low but positive. Ongoing review of the new categorisation will monitor the application, efficiency and effectiveness of this change.

ii. *Removal of the age limit for 'Sheltered Housing' – now Housing with Support:*

The recommendation is that the eligibility age limit of 60+ is removed, and Housing with Support be based on need rather than age.

The revised criteria for Housing with Support accommodation will ensure that there are appropriate properties for all of those people, regardless of their age, who are independent but need a low level of support. This also includes people who can live independently with the aid of an appropriate care package. Applicants who are disabled may also be considered for this type of accommodation.

The positive impact of this recommended change is the creation of an inter-generationally mixed housing community, where people of different ages and similar needs, can offer additional support to each other. Also the opportunity to socialise with different age groups will promote increased health and wellbeing.

The recommended change will allow the Council to utilise its housing with support accommodation more appropriately and to offer it to the most vulnerable people and those in most need irrespective of age requiring a low level of support.

The recommended change to 'housing with support' accommodation (previously sheltered accommodation) does not affect the right to buy as these properties remain compliant with the criteria set out in paragraphs 7, 9, 10 or 11 of Schedule 5 to the Housing Act 1985, and the Council will use the accommodation for those people who are exempt from right to buy due to a physical disability, mental disorder or who are over 60 with a low level of support need.

iii. *Greater emphasis on the use of the Private Rented Sector (PRS):*

Increasingly, with the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, enactment due 3 April 2018, the Housing Officers will have to seek options within the PRS for those we owe a Statutory Duty to. Overall, the new Policy includes a stronger thread and commentary around the use of PRS in a number of different situations.

The impact of this recommended change is to open up greater opportunity, choice and pool of properties for people based on affordability.

iv. *'Local Connection' changes:*

The recommendation is to change the current criteria for a 'local connection', from one year to two years, for both living and working in the Borough. Currently the requirement for 'Local Connection' lacks uniformity with local housing areas but by changing our criteria to reflect neighbouring authorities, this will reduce the number of applicants to our Register who are currently granted access via this route. For establishing a 'Local Connection' through a close relative, the period is set at five years in line with the new legislation, the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

The impact of this change is relatively low, however it does bring the Council's Policy in line with neighbouring Boroughs criteria, thus reducing the number of applicants attracted to the Council's Housing Register through this route.

v. *Applications from those with financial resources:*

The recommendation is for income, savings and asset limits to be reduced. Income limits to reduce in line with the average wage and Thamesway Housing Limited (THL) income criteria to £25,000 (prev. £30,000), and savings/assets levels to £16,000 (prev. £30,000) in line with Housing Benefit regulations.

In addition, the new Policy incorporates a timescale for applicants who have sold a property within the last 7 years. This clarifies the criteria regarding disposal of capital without making adequate housing arrangements.

The recommended change brings the Council's Policy into line with neighbouring Boroughs. The impact is relatively low.

vi. *Under Occupation:*

The recommendation is for under occupation to now include the following applicant group:

- Where the applicant is a tenant of a Housing Association (Registered Provider) and where they will release a home with one or more bedrooms over their current housing need under this Policy, and their landlord agreed that their vacated property will be offered to the Council for nomination by the Council, outside of established Nominations Agreements.

Currently in certain cases, those applicants who have downsized from a housing association property are accepted as Band B, without the housing association property being released for advertising via Hometrak. This recommended change now stipulates that for those people wishing to downsize from a Housing Association property that we will only accept them onto the Housing Register as long as the Housing Association releases the property for re-advertising through Hometrak.

The recommended change ensures that the Council gains benefit for the downsizing process from Housing Association properties by receiving family homes onto Hometrak.

vii. *Reasonable Preference - no 'Local Connection':*

The recommendation is for the inclusion of two further qualification criteria relating to no 'Local Connection'. Both of these additions are as a result of new legislation for which the Council is required to follow.

viii. *Refusal of offers/failure to view:*

The existing policy lacks clarity in this area and is too loose on how refusals of offers/failure to view are dealt with. Currently applicants are granted two refusals (no timescale) before applications are reassessed. The recommendation is for a clearer definition of circumstances where an applicant refuses a property and clear reasoning for re-banding applicants including timescales (12 months).

This recommended change is a positive impact for Housing Officers as procedures are clearly stated and applicants who refuse/fail to view will get reassessed sooner, more consistently and re-banding where appropriate. In terms of the impact on those applicants who are actively bidding although miss out on offers, this recommended change will ensure that they have an increased chance of being successful.

3.0 Responses to key changes

3.1 A few consultees raised concern that the period of consultation was short and did not allow reasonable time for stakeholders to comment. A positive number of responses had been received during the timeframe specified. The comments have been analysed and reviewed with no challenge or amendment to the key changes in the policy offered. A number of minor changes were accepted and implemented within the revised policy.

3.2 Following the presentation and discussion by the Council's Housing Officers, the Task Group was in clear support of the changes presented on Thursday, 22 February 2018. The changes were then sent out for consultation to all the Council's Stakeholders and Partners.

- 3.3 At the focus group a number of questions had been raised and responses given by the Housing Needs Manager. The focus group raised concerns for registered applicants in Band E following the proposed changes to remove the Band. There is no effect to those people already in this Band as the proposed changes effectively seek to amalgamate and disperse priority groups into more appropriate and a smaller number of bands.
- 3.4 The focus group were in agreement that the removal of the age limit for 'Sheltered Housing' was highly positive as it would ensure properties be available for applicants who are independent but need a level of support regardless of age. This also includes individuals who can live independently with the aid of an appropriate care package, Implementing this change would allow Housing Officers greater flexibility when placing applicants in more suitable and appropriate accommodation once support needs have been assessed.
- 3.5 Email responses had shown support for the key changes detailed in Appendix 1. Minor amendments had been received such as ensuring consistency of phrases used, for example, the use of 'Housing Associations' instead of 'Register Providers' throughout the policy. Comments also noted the policy being large and difficult to digest for some parties, where possible the Policy has been condensed. However it was felt that the Policy incorporates all legislative changes required and procedures necessary to be transparent with the public.
- 3.6 The majority of feedback from the Focus Group and email responses were positive and agreed with the proposed key changes.
- 3.7 The changes to the Council's Housing Allocations Policy have been subject to comprehensive consultation. A number of Minor amendments had been reviewed and where appropriate, added/amended in the Housing Allocations Policy.

4.0 Conclusion

- 4.1 Reviewing the current Policy offers an opportunity for the Council to make changes to our Housing Allocation Policy and exercise greater flexibility in determining those we might house. Following consultation key partners and staff we are proposing to make a number of changes, which will make the scheme fairer and firmer, in line with neighbouring authorities which would exclude some applicants that currently qualify to join the housing register. Most of those affected currently have little chance of being housed.
- 4.2 Once the Council has endorsed the new Housing Allocations Policy, it will be necessary to ensure that staff are fully trained and that IT, correspondence and leaflets are updated. We would aim to implement the new Policy with effect from 3 April 2018