

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Improving Places Select Commission – 02 February 2021

Report Title

Outcomes from Working Group on Homes Allocation – 8 January 2021

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?

No

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report

Not Applicable

Report Author

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Ward(s) Affected

Borough-Wide

Report Summary

To report on the findings and recommendations of the Working Group that reviewed the proposed changes to the Homes Allocation Policy.

Recommendations

1. That the briefing be noted and the following recommendations be submitted to Cabinet for consideration:-
 - a) That sustained funding be safeguarded for the staff who work on the temporary accommodation team whose posts do not have sustained funding.
 - b) That revisions to the Homes Allocation Policy be undertaken to ensure clarity and readability throughout the document, especially as regards application processes and shortlisting criteria.
 - c) That notation about prolific offenders be included in the information provided to the Housing Assessment Panel.
 - d) That quality standards regarding the proper completion of housing forms be reaffirmed to officers.
 - e) That rent arrears be added to the scrutiny work programme for 2021-22.
 - f) That single occupants of larger homes owned by the council be given the opportunity to downsize.

List of Appendices Included

None

Background Papers

In preparation for this meeting, Members reviewed a briefing on the proposed changes as well as familiarising themselves with the context of current housing allocations policies.

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

No

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

Outcomes from Working Group on Homes Allocation – 8 January 2021

1. Background

- 1.1 The Housing Allocations Policy has been reviewed, and 15 changes to the current policy are proposed for upcoming approval by Cabinet. There is an opportunity for pre-decision scrutiny to inform the proposed changes further; therefore, the working group of the Improving Places Select Commission was formed. The goal of the working group was to ensure the changes will lead to a fair and sustainable policy.

2. Key Issues

- 2.1 Regarding support for tenants where addiction or offenders are involved, the housing team works closely with Change Grow Live (CGL), an organisation that provides advice and support regarding alcohol and drug use. Anyone who presents as homeless with drugs or alcohol in play is referred to CGL. It was suggested that prolific offenders could be noted on forms presented to the Housing Assessment Panel.
- 2.2 To provide clarification, Band 1 cannot be transferred to a different area if an applicant decides to move. However, a section 198 referral can be made when the resident has an illness and has a local connection. Otherwise, Band 1 only applies to Rotherham allocations. It is worth noting, though, that there are other options as well.
- 2.3 The presentation summarised the extent of partnership working with private landlords in terms of homelessness. A bid had been submitted for an officer who links in with private landlords. That post is not yet in place, but the service is looking to be able to build those relationships moving forward. The service has advertised for a Vacant Homes Officer, and it was affirmed that private landlords play a key role in providing affordable housing. Many residents do go into a private rental property. A good percentage of those presenting do go into private sector housing, and the team does conduct inspections to make sure those properties are fit and decent homes for the people to move into. There are a number of actions that the service takes including bringing properties back into use to help combat homelessness.
- 2.4 The possibility was discussed that the 18 single occupants of larger homes who are rent payers may be subject to the commonly known as bedroom tax. If so, it was suggested that it would be reasonable to ask these residents if they desired to move. Further analysis was offered outside the meeting regarding these properties.
- 2.5 Members requested more information around utilisation of autobidding to help reduce voids and ensure allocations are fairly decided. It was noted that 1000 applicants are currently on autobid out of the total of approximately 6000 on the housing register.

- 2.6 Regarding supply of certain adapted properties, assurances were provided that this is an area the team is currently working to expand. It was noted that there is investment in more properties. One thing that is needed is to adapt more of the Council's existing stock. While this is not something that the housing allocations policy affects, it is worth noting that this is work that is being undertaken.
- 2.7 Clarification was provided as to the procedures where there has been a bad letting flagged as sensitive. If a new tenant is not known to the service, there is no way to know they will be a bad tenant. It then sometimes takes a long time to move them on. The service cannot discriminate on the basis of age. 50% of bungalows are allocated based on need, which usually still are allocated to elderly residents because the need has a relationship to age.
- 2.8 The role of the Housing Temporary Accommodation Strategic Board in promoting sustainability of this service was also discussed. An increase in demand for temporary accommodation had been seen based on social factors including the pandemic and based on new legislation regarding homelessness. With intensive support, people have been able to transform their lives. The team has bids out for grants, which takes a lot of time and energy to apply for, and those funds are not guaranteed. The service have more resources as a result of those efforts, but it is a bit hand to mouth, so funding could be more sustainable year to year, especially funding for staff salaries. It had been observed that valued members of the team had occasionally had to take other jobs in adjacent services to have more income security year to year. A priority of the Housing Temporary Accommodation Strategic Board going forward is to leverage other available temporary accommodation and get away from using hotels. The Board had been set up to strategically review this, with significant headway in the next two to three years. The service strive to be best in class with tackling homelessness, but it was hoped to have more sustainable funding in the future.
- 2.9 The suggestion was raised that it be added to a future work programme of IPSC to examine and ensure that rent arrears are being handled the right way.
- 2.10 Clarification was requested and provided around the Council's shortlisting process, which involves inputting of information into a system algorithm. It was suggested that this language in the document could be made clearer.
- 2.11 Members expressed desire that training about how to correctly complete the housing forms could be provided to officers who are assisting residents. Assurances were provided that the officers in the Housing Service who assist residents in completing forms are trained in proper completion of these forms. In the event that any form is not correctly completed, the form is sent back to the officer for completion. A designated member of staff delivers these trainings directly to officers.
- 2.12 Assurances were provided that feedback from the working group would be taken on board and reflected in the policy.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

3.1 Rationale for the recommendations is set out in the report.

4. Consultation on proposal

4.1 This report reflects the consultation with Members in the form of pre-decision scrutiny.

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

5.1 The timetable and accountability for implementing recommendations arising from this report will sit with the Cabinet and officers.

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

6.1 There are no financial implications associated with the report.

7. Legal Advice and Implications

7.1 There are no legal implications associated with the report.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

8.1 Implications for staffing have been set out in the body of the report.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

9.1 These have been set out in the relevant portions of the report.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

10.1 Members have had regard to equalities implications when considering recommendations and other matters arising from the working group.

11. Implications for Partners

11.1 These are set out in the main body of the report.

12. Risks and Mitigation

12.1 The purpose of the working group was to perform pre-decision scrutiny of proposed changes to the Homes Allocation Policy, thereby contributing to mitigating foreseeable risks associated with the Homes Allocation Policy and the associated proposed changes.

12.2 Members have been advised previously of risk assessments and mitigation plans, and these have been taken into account in their consideration of potential recommendations.

13. Accountable Officer(s)

Craig Tyler, Head of Democratic Services

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