

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS

1. Meeting:	Cabinet Member for Housing and Neighbourhoods
2. Date:	29th November 2010
3. Title:	Housing Allocation Policy Update
4. Programme Area:	Neighbourhoods and Adult Services

5. Summary

This report details recommendations for further amendments to both the Housing Allocation Policy and Local Lettings Policies since the last review of the Allocation Policy on 18th February 2010.

The report also details how a yearly Housing Register review will be undertaken and how changes are being implemented regarding advertising properties in Key Choices.

6. Recommendations

THAT CABINET MEMBER:

- **NOTE THE CHANGES BEING IMPLEMENTED AROUND THE ANNUAL HOUSING REGISTER REVIEW AND PROPERTY ADVERTISEMENTS**
- **AGREES AMENDMENTS TO THE PRIORITY AWARDED IN THE ALLOCATION POLICY FOR OVERCROWDED HOUSEHOLDS**
- **AGREES AMENDMENTS IN THE ALLOCATION POLICY IN RELATION TO MUTUAL EXCHANGES**
- **AGREES AN AMENDMENT IN RELATION TO HOUSEHOLDS LIVING IN ADAPTED PROPERTIES**
- **AGREES REVISIONS TO THE LOCAL LETTING POLICY DETAILED IN APPENDIX 1**

7. Proposals and Detail

7.1 Housing Register Review - Previously, the Housing Register has been reviewed every five years. Every household on the Register was contacted to determine if they wished to remain on the register. The most recent review was undertaken in July 2008, this reduced the housing register from 24,000 to 17,698.

The process involved all 24,000 households being contacted all at the same time, and those households that failed to return the review within 28 days were sent 3 separate monthly reminder letters before their application was actually cancelled. After this date the Council also allowed applicants who had not returned their review form in that 4 month period to have their application reinstated. This approach, coupled with new applicants applying, mean that the numbers on the Housing Register has gradually increased and now stand at 25,295.

The existing method of reviewing the Register is resource intensive, takes approximately 4 months to complete and costs in the region of £60K in postage and additional staffing. To alleviate this, from May 2011, a new piece of ICT software will be able to facilitate an automated yearly review which will be activated on the annual date of each housing application. This will ensure that the Register remains up to date and only contains households who wish to be considered for one of the housing options advertised in Key Choices. The process will be more manageable and will save money such as by alerting customers via email that their application is due for renewal and allowing customers to update their application online. There will still be costs associated with the new annual review process (additional staffing costs, printing and postage), however these will be spread throughout the year and it is proposed that these will be funded from savings to be made in advertising as detailed below.

7.2 Property Advertisement Arrangements - The process for advertising properties via the local media was examined as part of the Scrutiny Review of Choice Based Lettings conducted in 2009. Following this, an analysis of how many customers purchase the Rotherham Advertiser to specifically view Key Choices Property page has been undertaken. The results show that the numbers of customers using the Advertiser to view adverts has reduced with the most popular method is viewing the adverts online via the web or by visiting the Property Shop. Last year 1006 customers were asked which outlets they use to find accommodation via Key Choices in Rotherham:

- Rotherham Advertiser - 279 people
- Key Choices website - 526 people
- Key Choices Property Shop - 464 people
- Neighbourhood Office - 110 people

Over 2 week period this year - 946 customers asked the same questions again:

- Rotherham Advertiser - 144 people
- Key Choices Website - 177 people
- Key Choices Property Shop - 596 people
- Neighbourhood Office - 21 people
- Customer Service Centre - 8 people

The cost of publishing properties in the local media equates to an annual spend of £44,200. In order to reduce these costs, the service will cease advertising in the newspaper and instead will utilise savings to pay for the costs of the new annual housing register review process and broader homelessness prevention and resettlement activity. This will prevent a budget pressure in the Housing Revenue Account where previous Housing Register reviews have been charged to.

7.3 Proposed Revisions to the Allocation Policy - The new Housing Allocation Policy was launched on the 1st December 2008, was revised on, 16th February 2009 (Minute no. 153) 27th July 2009. (Minute No. 42), and a further revision was made on 18th February 2010. (Minute No. J120) In order to promote the understanding of previous changes to the Allocation Policy for both staff and customer's publicity regarding the changes was undertaken. This has included:

- Briefing notes to Elected members and staff
- Weekly liaison meeting with 2010 Rotherham Ltd
- Changes included in the Allocation Policy training
- Information published on the Key Choices website
- Revisions to the Allocation Policy Summary Booklet
- Articles in the local newspaper
- Revisions and addendums to the Allocation Policy published on the Internet.

Further publicity regarding the proposed changes will be undertaken in order to ensure customers and staff are kept up to date with the rules in the Allocation Policy. Four areas of the Policy have recently been reviewed in light of specific cases and complaints which have highlighted issues with the existing practice.

Firstly, it is proposed to amend the priority awarded to **overcrowded households**. Lack of space and overcrowded conditions have been linked to a number of health outcomes, including psychological distress and mental disorders, especially those associated with a lack of privacy and childhood development. Crowded conditions are also linked with increased hygiene risks, an increased risk of accidents, and spread of contagious disease.

The current policy and procedure is that Environmental Health Officers will assess whether the occupiers of a dwelling are overcrowded using 2 pieces of legislation, which are:

1. **The Housing Act 1985 (Part 10)**. This currently provides the only statutory standard for overcrowding and is still used by RMBC. Although still current, the standard is outdated and the Communities and Local Government (CLG) has consulted on a new standard to replace it.

2. **The Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS)** under the Housing Act 2004 considers hazards associated with lack of space within the dwelling for living, sleeping and normal family/house.

The current Allocation Policy already places statutory overcrowded households in the Priority group. However where families are assessed as statutory overcrowded but are living together on a *temporary* basis the household would only receive General Plus status in the Allocation Policy, without having had an Environmental Health Assessment. There is however no definition of the temporary nature of this arrangement, and sometimes families end up being living in these circumstances for up to 2 years or more.

It is proposed that **all** households who claim they are living in overcrowded accommodation are referred for an Environmental Health assessment. All households living in overcrowded situations who have applied for rehousing will be placed into the General group until they have had an assessment by Environmental Health. The outcomes in terms of the Allocation Policy would be as follows:

Environmental Health Assessment	Status in Allocation Policy
Statutory overcrowded	Priority
Housing that has Hazards associated with lack of space	General Plus
None of above	General

All households will be assessed in accordance with the protocol laid out by Sections 325 (room standard) and 326 (space standard) of the Housing Act 1985 Part 10. Following a positive confirmation of a ‘Statutorily Overcrowded’ status, applicant will be placed in the Priority Group. Applicants will only be considered to be in this category if the offer of accommodation will alleviate the overcrowding.

Where the household isn’t considered statutory overcrowded but the overcrowding triggers other hazards relating to accidents, fire, hygiene and dampness , the applicants housing application will be placed in the General Plus Group. Applicants will only be considered to be in this category if the offer of accommodation will alleviate the overcrowding.

2010 Rotherham Ltd will also be asked to take enforcement action where Council tenants have deliberately made themselves overcrowded and have not had permission to do so.

The impact of this recommendation is that the local definition of overcrowding will now be superseded by the statutory assessment. For example, the existing age criteria for in the Allocation Policy is currently more generous than the Environmental Health assessment in that the age of children that are counted in the assessment for local overcrowding is 8 years old as opposed to 10 years old as defined by Housing Act 1985. Living rooms are also not counted in the Allocation Policy assessment where all living areas are included by Environmental Health.

7.4 Mutual Exchanges - the policy on Mutual Exchange currently lacks clarity in relation to the grounds under which the Council can withhold consent. The currently policy states that Rotherham Council tenants can exchange like for like properties of the same size or where there are the same number of people accommodated. It states that *“an exchange can be refused if the accommodation offered by the dwelling is substantially more extensive than is reasonably required.”*

It is proposed that this is amended to provide greater clarity so that Rotherham Council tenants can exchange like for like properties that are of the “same type and with the same number of bedrooms e.g. – moving from a 3 bed House to a 3 bed House.

7.5 Adapted property or Disabled Persons Unit (DPU) households who wish to move once they no longer need the adaptation – It is proposed that the Allocation Policy Section 2.5.7 for Priority Plus applicants be amended to include these applicants as an incentive to move quicker and recycle adapted properties back into the system for letting. This will only include households who were allocated the property due to a medical need for an adaptation and the member of the household that needed the adaptation no longer lives there. For example; the person that needed the adaptation has died or moved out.

7.6 Proposed changes to the Local Lettings Policies - these were implemented in December 2008 and have been reviewed every six months led by 2010 Rotherham Ltd in consultation with Elected Members, Safer Neighbourhood teams and Community groups through the Area Assembly Coordinating groups. Consultation has also been undertaken with residents. As 1st July 2009 there were 20,968 properties in the Council’s stock and 2,096 properties with Local Lettings Policies which was 9.9% of the Councils stock. The latest review in December 2009 identified that there were more (2634) properties with a local letting policy which equates to 12.56 % of the Council's stock. The recent review in October 2010 has identified that there would now be 2754 properties with a local letting policy which equates to 13.1 % of the Councils stock.

Any recommendations for additions have been justified by supporting evidence, and where there has been significant improvement in sustainability such as reduced abandoned properties, evictions and reported crime it is proposed that the Local lettings Policy be removed. The proposed changes for period 1/12/2010 to 1/7/11 are detailed in **Appendix 1**

8. Finance

8.1 The cost of publishing properties in the local media for 1 page is £500 and £350 for an additional page. More often 2 pages are utilized, this equates to an annual spend of £44,200. Ceasing to advertise in this way will save money which can then be utilised to pay for the new annual housing register review process, resettlement and prevention activity.

8.2 By applying Local Lettings Policies to a limited part of the local authorities stock will create sustainable communities, which may lead to fewer voids. However there is a slight risk that void properties may take longer to let as some policies are quite restrictive. This will lead to a financial impact on rent loss through voids.

9. Risks and Uncertainties

9.1 Ceasing to advertise in the Rotherham Advertiser may mean that some customers, who rely on the adverts, will need to use the other outlets currently available for viewing properties. To alleviate any issues that they this may bring, the final series of adverts will clearly display where properties will be able to be viewed in the future.

9.2 The current demand for social rented housing is high which translates to pressures on the housing register. We have also seen an increase in households in urgent housing need who are affected financially by the economic downturn, by allowing households to go back onto the housing register following cancellation on review puts added pressure on the numbers on the housing register which may increase waiting time for those in housing need.

9.3 Any change to the Allocation Policy must ensure that the needs of vulnerable and hard to reach groups are addressed, and the Council's statutory obligations are met. The Allocation Policy must be delivered in a transparent way to ensure it is fair, and seen to be fair.

9.4 The change to the assessment for overcrowding will result in more referrals to Environmental Health. There are currently 874 households in the General Plus group who have not had a formal assessment. It is proposed that these applicants will retain their General Plus status and not be reassessed under the new arrangements. However their living arrangements will still be confirmed prior to an offer of accommodation. Over time, there is likely to be less households that qualify for General Plus Status. This is because the current system is open to abuse with no formal assessment in place; households are awarded General Plus status at a point of time. For example where a household stays with friends in an overcrowded situation, potentially this could be a temporary period possible overnight or less than a week.

10. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications

10.1 The Allocation Policy is delivered at a local level and via the Key Choices Property Shop and Neighbourhood Offices, which supports the Council's commitment to providing greater accessibility to services, meeting social needs by helping to ensure a better quality of life, improving fair access and choice, protecting, keeping safe vulnerable people and specifically addresses the diversity agenda, by tailoring services to the needs of hard to reach groups.

Working to improve services for Rotherham people and to ensure more effective links to the Rotherham 'Proud' theme.

Rotherham people, businesses and pride in the borough are at the heart of our vision. Rotherham will have a positive external image and its people will be renowned for their welcome, friendliness and commitment to the values of social justice. Active citizenship and democracy will underpin how Rotherham works. Achievements and diversity will be celebrated. Rotherham will be a caring place, where the most vulnerable are supported. It will be made up of strong, sustainable and cohesive communities, both of place and interest and there will be many opportunities for people to be involved in civic life and local decision making. The means to do this will be clear, well known and accessible.

The changes will lead to shorter waiting times for services and better interventions leading to the increased awareness of housing options and the prevention of homelessness.

11. Background Papers and Consultation

In monitoring the Allocation Policy we have used the Housing Assessment Panel as a mechanism to consider any changes, where possible, to seek views of others to ensure any improvements are effective and are at the heart of customer's needs and aspirations.

The review of the Local Lettings Policies, which has been led by 2010 Rotherham Ltd, has involved consultation with elected members, customers, legal services, partners and staff.

- The Allocation Policy (Revised July 2009 and February 2010)
- Local Lettings Policies (Revised July 2009 and February 2010)
- The Homelessness Act 2002.
- Housing Act 1996, Parts VI and VII
- The Code Of Guidance in Allocation [CLG 2007]
- The Homelessness Code of Guidance

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