

RECORD OF EXECUTIVE DECISION
Tuesday, 18 March 2014

Decision No: (CAB 13/14 12293)

DECISION-MAKER:	CABINET
PORTFOLIO AREA:	HOUSING AND SUSTAINABILITY SERVICES
SUBJECT:	PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE HOUSING ALLOCATIONS POLICY
AUTHOR:	Liz Slater

THE DECISION

- (i) To approve the proposed changes to the allocations policy listed in this report.
- (ii) To delegate authority to the Head of Housing Services, following consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainability, to draw up a scheme to provide 'transitional protection' for the small number of applicants affected by the proposal to align the city's eligibility criteria relating to size of property with the housing benefit regulations.
- (iii) To delegate authority to the Head of Housing Services, following consultation with the Head of Development, Economy and Housing Renewal and the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainability, to approve the proposed annual lettings plan.

REASONS FOR THE DECISION

1. A key aim of recommendations proposed in this report is to reduce the number of applicants waiting for re-housing in Southampton. The City Council's waiting-list for social housing currently stands at approximately 15,000 applications. This represents a significant growth since 2002 when legislation required the authority to move to an 'open' waiting-list. The number of properties available for letting every year through vacancies in the Council's own stock and via partner housing associations is approximately 1,700 so only a small proportion of applicants currently on the waiting-list will ever receive an offer of housing. Managing a waiting-list of applicants who are unlikely ever to be housed is a waste of the Council's resources and raises expectations that cannot be met.
2. The Authority's Policy must meet the requirements of existing legislation and government guidance in respect of allocations. In particular, the policy must take account of the Housing Act 1996 as amended by the [Localism Act 2011](#) and the statutory guidance on allocations published in June 2012 [Allocation of accommodation code of guidance 2012](#). This report identifies measures to ensure the authority both meets the requirements of and makes best use of the recent legislative and advisory changes. The policy changes proposed here comprise a set of fixed rules but, as previously, officers will retain the discretion to deal with any exceptional cases which fall outside of the provisions of the policy.

3. The Authority is currently in the process of transforming the way services are delivered. This will enable service improvements but will also require services to adapt to new methods of provision. The new processes are likely to include increased emphasis on web-enabled services and on-line access to information and application processes. The changes to policy proposed here are crucial to enabling the authority to move more easily to new ways of working.

DETAILS OF ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

1. **Leave the allocations policy as it is with no changes**

This was considered and rejected because of the increased number of applicants on the waiting list, reducing housing stock, reduced resources to administer applications and the need to respond to changes in central government policy.

2. **Give priority to families living in the private rented sector who are adequately housed**

The authority is aware of and sympathetic to cases where families struggle to pay higher rents in the private sector, but giving priority to applicants in the private rented sector who are otherwise adequately housed has a number of undesirable consequences which would make it difficult for the authority to satisfy other policy and statutory objectives.

The problems that such a change in policy would present include:

- The waiting-list and processing of unsuccessful applications would rise significantly but empty properties would not.
- The Council is required by law to make sure that some categories of applicants are given 'reasonable preference' over others. Giving adequately housed private sector applicants priority would mean that the Council would be less able to provide 'reasonable preference' to other applicants and would significantly compromise the Council's ability to satisfy statutory requirements.
- The private rented sector is an important and often high-quality housing source in Southampton so sending the message that it is 'inadequate' would not be appropriate or helpful.
- The introduction of such a policy in Southampton would be likely to attract additional numbers of applicants from neighbouring areas to compete for the private rented sector in Southampton and, subsequently, to the authority's housing waiting-list.

Consultation results show agreement with the Council's stance that renting in the private sector does not constitute a housing need. There is, however, support for recognising housing need for those with higher rents in the private rented sector. It is intended such cases will be addressed by providing advice and assistance on housing options and money advice and where their home may be at risk, help will be made available to prevent homelessness.

3. **Introduce income related criteria**

The introduction of any income-related conditions has been rejected at this time. Southampton has not previously collected any income information from applicants when they apply for housing so being able to implement a scheme at present would be very difficult. As an alternative, it is proposed to begin

collection of such information through a re-designed application process to enable examination of this idea in the future.

4. Introduce additional priority for applicants for working or volunteering

This proposal was rejected because the majority of the Council's existing tenants of working age are already either in employment or actively seeking work. Also, one major aim of changing the allocations policy is to make it simpler, speed up the process and reduce the officer time required to handle applications, and this would undermine that aim. Such a policy could also inadvertently penalise those unable to work, for example, those with severe disabilities. We acknowledge that there is support from respondents to the consultation for some preference for social housing for those in work but views are mixed about what should qualify as work. Difficulties in adopting a set of assessments that are fair and consistent are considered too onerous to adopt within available resources. However, it is possible to introduce similar criteria in a more limited way, through local lettings schemes in new developments where the aim is to create a balanced community from the outset. The authority also already supports a number of schemes aimed at addressing worklessness on the City's estates.

OTHER RELEVANT MATTERS CONCERNING THE DECISION

None.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None.

CONFIRMED AS A TRUE RECORD

We certify that the decision this document records was made in accordance with the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2000 and is a true and accurate record of that decision.

Date: 18th March 2014

Decision Maker: The Cabinet

Proper Officer: Judy Cordell

SCRUTINY

Note: This decision will come in to force at the expiry of 5 working days from the date of publication subject to any review under the Council's Scrutiny "Call-In" provisions.

Call-In Period expires on

Date of Call-in *(if applicable) (this suspends implementation)*

Call-in Procedure completed *(if applicable)*

Call-in heard by *(if applicable)*

Results of Call-in *(if applicable)*