

Forest Heath District Council

(This report is a key decision. This report has been subject to appropriate notice of publication under the Council's Access to Information Rules)

Report of the Cabinet Member for Planning, Housing and Transport

CABINET

4 DECEMBER 2012

CAB12/051

REVIEW OF THE CAMBRIDGESHIRE SUB-REGION LETTINGS POLICY

(Key Decision Reference: DEC12/09)

1. Summary and reasons for recommendation(s)

- 1.1 The lettings policy document was first approved by St Edmundsbury's Cabinet and Forest Heath's Council in August 2007 with the introduction of the Home-Link, the Sub regional choice based lettings scheme. The document sets out how St Edmundsbury and Forest Heath Councils working in partnership with Registered Providers who have properties in the area will allocate them through the Home-Link Choice Based Lettings scheme. The Government, as part of its social housing and welfare reforms, have changed the policies and regulations about who should be given priority to go on the Housing Register and what size property they can claim housing benefit for. Due to these changes, the seven partner Councils who operate the Home-Link scheme were compelled to review their Lettings Policies to ensure compliance with the new changes. The changes also offered the opportunity to carry out a complete root and branch review of the current policy to consider other areas of possible change based on Home-Links previous four years of operation. The revised West Suffolk Lettings Policy is attached to this report at **Appendix A**.
- 1.2 A review group began work on the project in the Autumn of 2011. The task was to review the current lettings policy and produce a new draft lettings policy for approval and consultation. The main areas of government policy changes centred upon Welfare Reform and the Localism Act.
- 1.3 A consultation exercise took place from 20th July to 28th September 2012 and covered the changes to the Lettings Policy, it also consulted on improvements to the Home-Link IT system and the withdrawal of the Home-Link magazine. In addition to this a sub regional Housing Portfolio Holders meeting was held on the 17th July to outline the reasons for the review, to discuss the main proposals and to give the opportunity to ask questions.
- 1.4 The new lettings policy will come into force on 1st April 2013.

2. Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 That the changes to the current lettings Policy, as detailed in Section 4.2 of the report be noted.**
- 2.2 That the new West Suffolk Lettings Policy, contained in Appendix A to the report, be recommended for approval.**
- 2.3 That the Head of Housing, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Transport, be authorised to make any minor typographical, factual, spelling and grammatical changes to the document, provided it does not materially affect the substance or meaning of the Strategy.**

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3. How will the recommendations help us meet our strategic priorities?

- 3.1 The recommendation helps to deliver the following strategic/corporate priorities:

Help manage the district's existing housing stock

4. Key issues

- 4.1 The West Suffolk Lettings Policy sets out how the Councils of Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury in partnership with Registered Providers will allocate their properties through the Home-Link choice based letting scheme.
- 4.2 There are five key areas within the policy that have been amended as a result of the social housing and welfare reforms and have been consulted on. They are as follows;
 - a) Applicants will need a local connection with one of the Council areas to be eligible to apply to the housing register. At the moment anyone can apply for housing even if they don't have a local connection with any of the districts. **(See s.3.1.2 and s.3.3)**
 - b) Former Armed Forces personnel will be allowed onto the Housing Register even if they don't have a local connection. They will be awarded additional priority by backdating their date in band by the amount of time they spent in the Armed

Forces instead of the normal use of the date they were placed in that band.
(See s.2.4 and s.3.3.1 (e))

- c) There will be increased priority for households in social housing who are under-occupying their homes. This is to ensure best use of housing stock and to help people move into housing that is the right size for them. **(See s.4.6 (e) and s.4.7 (d))**
 - d) There will be new assessments of overcrowding based on the new Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rules; making it more difficult to be considered as overcrowded. However, once assessed as needing extra bedrooms a higher priority will be awarded. **(See s.4.6 (f) and s.4.7 (c))**
 - e) Applicants will only be offered properties that are the right size for them and/or their family; depending on which area they live in, using the new LHA rules coming into force in April 2013. **(See s.5.5, s.7.3 and Appendix 1)**
- 4.3 The banding and priority system will remain unchanged except as outlined above. The way properties are let through the Home-Link scheme will also remain unchanged.
- 4.4 The new West Suffolk Lettings Policy will come into force on the 1st April 2013.

Conclusions

- 4.5 The new West Suffolk Lettings Policy has undergone a robust review taking into consideration the Government changes in social housing and welfare reform. There has been a comprehensive consultation period and the results of this exercise have shaped the final lettings policy document. There are five key areas affected within the policy which have been changed to reflect new regulations about who is given priority to go on the housing register and the size of the property they can claim benefit for.

5. Other options considered

- 5.1 A complete review of the current policy was undertaken including consideration of other options and areas of possible change based on Home-Links previous four years of operation.

6. Community impact

- 6.1 **Crime and disorder impact** *(including Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998)*

6.1.1 None

- 6.2 **Diversity and equality impact** *(including the findings of the Equality Impact Assessment)*

- 6.2.1 The Lettings Policy has undergone an Equalities Impact Assessment to ensure accessibility to all.

6.3 Sustainability impact *(including completing a Sustainability Impact Assessment)*

6.3.1 None

6.4 Other impact *(any other impacts affecting this report)*

6.4.1 The West Suffolk Lettings Policy has been developed in partnership with other Districts and Registered Providers in the sub region with the aim of having a consistent approach to the letting of social housing across a diverse geographical area. The policy aims to ensure that all those seeking social housing in West Suffolk are able to exercise choice in deciding where they wish to live and to find a home to meet their needs. The policy enables the Councils of Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury to consider the individual needs of applicants whilst making the best use of the scarce resource of housing stock.

7. Consultation *(what consultation has been undertaken, and what were the outcomes?)*

7.1 The lettings policy was subject to consultation for a ten week period from 20th July to the 28th September. In addition to this a sub regional Portfolio Holders workshop took place on the 17th July to explain the changes and give Councillors an opportunity to ask questions. Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury held a local consultation event on the 11th September with partner organisations from West Suffolk.

8. Financial and resource implications *(including asset management implications)*

8.1 Officer time has been the major resource required in the review process.

8.2 There are no additional financial resource requirements expected from the implementation of the West Suffolk lettings Policy.

9. Risk/opportunity assessment *(potential hazards or opportunities affecting corporate, service or project objectives)*

Risk area	Inherent level of risk <i>(before controls)</i>	Controls	Residual risk <i>(after controls)</i>
Inappropriate allocation of homes to meet housing need	High	Monitor the implementation of the policy meets its stated objectives and complies with legislative changes	Low
Withdrawal of Home-Link Magazine limits the ability of some people to bid for properties	Medium	Ensure availability of properties is publicised wider and is available in hard copy to those without access to the internet	Low

10. Legal and policy implications

10.1 All applicants for housing will be assessed to determine their eligibility to be placed on the housing register. This is to ensure homes are let to those in the highest assessed need and ensures the Councils meet their legal obligations as set out in the Housing Act (1996) as amended by the Homelessness Act (2002) and the Localism Act (2011).

11. Ward(s) affected

11.1 All

12. Background papers

12.1 None

13. Documents attached

13.1 Appendix A - Sub-Regional Partner Lettings Policy Document