

WIGAN AND LEIGH HOUSING BOARD 5TH JANUARY 2010

Report of the Director of Housing Needs

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Allocations Policy Review

Purpose/Summary:
To update Board on progress of the review. To present a draft Allocation Policy for discussion.
Recommendations:
That Members consider the content of this report and the draft Allocation Policy and, subject to any comments or amendments, agree that it be referred to the Council for consideration.

For decision, discussion or information?	Discussion and decision.
For the open part or the press and public excluded part of the agenda? If press and public excluded please state reason.	Open

Resource and Value for Money Implications:	The adoption and implementation will be done within existing resources.			
Employee Implications:	None.			
Key Risks incl. Company reputation, business relationships, health and safety and legal implications	The Council has entrusted WALH with developing the policy, so the key risk is that the implementation may not run smoothly which would damage the company's reputation.			
Equality & Diversity and Community Implications:	The impact on the groups affected by the changes has been considered and implications are contained within this report. Impact assessments will be undertaken throughout the implementation of this policy and reported to Committee annually.			
Environmental Implications:	None apparent at this stage.			
Area Forums Affected:	All			
Tracking/Process	Consultation	Area Forum/s	Committee	Board
	Aug – Oct 2009	Aug – Oct 2009		Jan 2010

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The Council's housing allocation policy is implemented, under the ALMO contract, by Wigan and Leigh Housing and is used by staff to determine 'who gets a council house'.
- 1.2 The policy has been reviewed on several occasions over recent years. In September 2004 we moved to a policy which gave customers more choice in line with the Government's policy on Choice Based Lettings. In October 2005 and November 2006 further minor amendments were made such as replacing 'first come first served' and introducing 'time based lettings' where priority is given to those who had been on the Housing Register longest.
- 1.3 The Council asked WALH to carry out a full review of the allocation policy and in February 2009 an initial presentation was made to WALH Board.
- 1.4 A Working Party was formed comprising Tenant Board Members, Council Board Members, Independent Board Members and Officers from WALH and the Council.
- 1.5 The Working Party met on several occasions, and put together a draft framework on which to consult. WALH Board considered the framework at their meeting in July 2009 and agreed that it be referred to the Council as a basis for consultation.
- 1.6 Following Cabinet approval on 30th July 2009, Officers from both WALH and the Council's Housing Strategy Team embarked on a 3 month period of consultation from August to October 2009 on the draft framework for allocations.

2.0 The Consultation Process

- 2.1 A wide range of stakeholders were consulted including:
 - Councillors
 - Housing Forums (including Area Forums, Sheltered Forum and High Rise Forum)
 - Housing Associations that provide accommodation and housing services within the Borough
 - Refugee and Migrants Forum
 - Children and Young People Services
 - Support Providers
 - Connexions
 - All members of the Homelessness Forum
 - Communities and Local Government
 - Wigan and Leigh Housing Staff

3.0 Outcome of the Consultation

- 3.1 Comments received during the consultation process were considered by the Allocation Working Party in December 2009.
- 3.2 A significant number of the comments made apply to the procedure and implementation of the policy and have no direct relevance to the policy itself. Comments included: different housing application forms should be used for council tenants and non council tenants and people should be deterred from going to loan sharks to help clear their debts. Subject to policy approval, these issues will be addressed during implementation.
- 3.3 Several points made were in relation to the enforcement of tenancy conditions. Again, this has no direct relevance to the policy. These are being dealt with by changing allocation and housing management procedures.
- 3.4 With only a few exceptions, the majority of those consulted were in favour of a scheme that reflects cumulative need. A few people raised concerns about the complexity of the scheme, both in terms of understanding the rules and the administration of the scheme. Consequently, a Plain English Summary of the policy together with a comprehensive training programme for relevant staff will be an integral part of the policy implementation.
- 3.5 Anti-social behaviour featured very strongly with many of the stakeholders. The key message being that, wherever possible, those people guilty of serious anti-social behaviour should be prevented from taking up a tenancy until their behaviour had improved. A similar view was taken with applicants who have outstanding rent arrears.
- 3.6 People gave different views on specific points. For example, that for owner occupiers selling their home, the equity figure set should either be *higher* or *lower* than the £85,000 proposed cut off, above which priority on the Housing Register is reduced.
- 3.7 Several suggestions have been taken on board and adopted in the draft policy. For example, reducing priority or excluding those applicants who provide false or misleading information; awarding more points for those with urgent medical priority or those wishing to move from an adapted property where the household no longer needs the adaptations.
- 3.8 Many people were in support of visiting applicants on the register prior to an offer of accommodation being made to check their housing circumstances and identify any support needs. However, within existing resources this will not be possible although procedures will be reviewed to try to carry out some targeted checks.
- 3.9 Using feedback from the consultation the draft Allocation Policy has been amended. The revised policy is appended to this report.

4.0 Impact of the Draft Policy

4.1 The table below shows the likely outcome of existing banded applicants compared to the proposed new groups. This does not take into account those applicants who may have their priority reduced and are referred to later in this report.

Current Band	Group A	Group B	Group C	Total
Band 1	107	341	0	448
Band 2	21	1002	11	1034
Band 3	1	1881	2	1884
Band 4	0	784	2531	3315
Total	129	4008	2544	6681

4.2 As would be expected, most of those applicants currently in Band 1 will go into either Group A or have a high number of points in Group B. Most of those applicants in Band 4 will go into Group C.

4.3 Applicants whose priority may reduce

There will be several groups of applicants whose priority on the Housing Register may fall as a result of this policy. They are:

Owner occupiers with equity between £85,000 and £120,000

The current threshold above which priority is reduced is £120,000. The proposed threshold is £85,000. There are approximately 120 applicants currently in Band 1, 2 or 3 whose equity falls between these limits and therefore their priority may be reduced. The majority are elderly single people or couples.

It is proposed that each will be contacted and their individual circumstances re-assessed. They will either be allowed to retain their priority if there are no suitable properties to buy or rent in their area of choice, or their priority will be reduced.

Applicants who live outside of the Borough

There are 99 applicants in Band 1 or 2 and 104 in Band 3 who live outside the Borough and who potentially could have their priority reduced. It is likely that the majority will have a local connection with the Borough and so it is proposed that each one be contacted and their circumstances re-assessed. Once this exercise is complete, we will decide how best to implement any proposed reduction.

Families with a child(ren), aged 8-10, living in a flat above ground floor

At present, priority is given to those applicants with a child up to age 10 living in a flat above the ground floor. This age limit would be reduced to 7 years;

which would affect 9 households. Each would be contacted and their circumstances re-assessed.

Roofless applicants who have no access to basic facilities

These applicants are currently placed in Band 2 where we are satisfied that the applicant is sleeping rough, such as living outside, in a car or outhouse. There are 14 people in this group and it is proposed that each is contacted and their circumstances re-assessed. If we are satisfied that the applicant is still roofless, then a welfare priority will be awarded.

Applicants with a Medical 3 award

Up until 2004, there were 3 levels of medical award – 1,2 and 3. When Med 3 was withdrawn, those already awarded a Med 3 were allowed to retain it and their application was placed in Band 3. There are 42 such cases outstanding and it is proposed that each be contacted, their current circumstances re-assessed and either awarded a Med 1 or 2 or their medical priority withdrawn.

4.4 Other changes resulting from the policy

Clearly there will be changes to the relative priority of each applicant, but these cannot be readily measured as other need factors may also influence someone's position on the list. For example:

- Long standing applicants may benefit from time spent on the housing waiting list
- Those with several levels of need are likely to be in a higher position on the list under the proposed scheme
- Recognising the need of under-occupiers in social sector tenancies is likely to result in people living in private properties falling further down the queue
- The change in the measurement for overcrowding will affect the priority for some applicants on the waiting list.

The impact of the new policy will be monitored with a view to making slight adjustments to the scheme if it is considered that the priority of one or more groups should be amended. Dependent on the extent of the proposed changes, they will be agreed at Officer level or referred back to the Council.

5.0 Recommendations

- 5.1 That Members consider the content of this report and the revised draft Allocation Policy and, subject to any comments or amendments, agree that it be referred to the Council for consideration.