

## Meeting of the Executive Member for Housing 27<sup>th</sup> January 2009 and Adult Social Services and Advisory Panel

Report of the Director of Housing and Adult Social Services

### **Amendments to the Lettings Policy**

#### **Summary**

1. To consider amendments to the allocation and lettings policy that aims make the best use of the council stock in light of the need to tackle the demand for public rented housing.

#### **Background**

2. The council has recently reviewed and published its Homelessness Strategy for the next 5 years, an overriding priority with the strategy is to reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation by ½ by 2010 (equates to 121). The Local Area Agreement (LAA) also identifies this as a priority and it is included as one of the 35 key national indicators.
3. At the end of December 2008 there were 184 households in temporary accommodation. The target for 08/09 is to reduce the numbers to 170 by March 09.
4. Within the homeless strategy there are 4 strategic aims that have been identified:
  - a) Ensure that people who are at risk of homelessness are aware of, and have access to, the services they may need to help them prevent homelessness;
  - b) Ensure the provision of, and fair access to, accommodation sufficient to meet identified housing needs;
  - c) People with housing related support needs have these needs fully assessed and have access to the support services required to sustain independent living and prevent homelessness;
  - d) Ensure the effective co-ordination of all service providers, across all sectors, whose activities contribute to preventing homelessness and/or meeting the accommodation and support needs of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

5. The current Registration and Lettings policy was introduced in May 2006, the new policy moved away from a points based priority system to a banding/date based priority system.
6. The new policy introduced several changes that were helpful in addressing some of the homelessness issues, particularly the priority that is given to the resettlement cases and giving potentially homeless applicants the same priority as homeless applicants, encouraging households to remain in their existing accommodation and adopt a planned approach to their housing needs.
7. The number of casual vacancies (turn over) that occurred in the council stock last year was 523. The authority has seen a significant reduction in the number of casual vacancies over the last five years (30%).

## **Consultation**

8. There has been extensive consultation with stakeholders and resident associations. The proposals have been supported in principle by all stakeholders. The most controversial part of option 2 is the first point, however it was felt that it was unreasonable to treat homeless families any differently to those who are on the transfer list in a similar position.

## **Options**

9. **Option One** - Maintain the existing policy and address these issues as part of the development of the sub regional choice based letting scheme.
10. **Option Two** - Adopt the following changes to the lettings policy.
  - i. Of the 184 households in temporary accommodation 47 are either single people with one child under the age of 2 or they are pregnant. It is proposed that the policy is changed so that they can be offered a one bed roomed property. As an incentive they are allowed to maintain a transfer application with a start date from when they accepted the one bed property. Their application would be kept on a pending status until the child was 2. It would then be switched to live and they would be placed in Band C with one offer.
  - ii. To encourage people to accept tenancies in the private rented sector. If potentially homeless accept a privately rented property for 12 months or more they will be allowed to maintain a waiting list application which will be kept on pending while they are adequately housed. If they receive notice from the landlord their application will be made live in Band B with two offers. It is estimate that this may prevent 15 presentations in a year.
  - iii. At present 16/17 year olds are excluded from registering on the waiting list. It is proposed that they should be allowed to apply to the housing register however their applications will be put on pending until they are 18 when their application will be made live from the date of their original application. The intention is to try and encourage a planned approach to rehousing.

- iv. In line with the recently launched offender protocol, an offender who is to spend 13 weeks or more in prison should be encouraged to relinquish their tenancy at the earliest opportunity thereby avoiding arrears. Where the offender has no history of breaches of the terms and conditions of their tenancy they will be given a guaranteed offer upon release providing they agree to work with probation. All Offenders should be encouraged to apply for housing far enough in advance of their release date to give a reasonable chance of them being provided with planned housing. Applications should be verified and made live 2 months before the release date. In circumstances where there are former tenancy debts the discharge money should be used to reduce their arrears.
- v. The council currently operate an payment incentive scheme to encourage people who are in temporary accommodation and owe former tenancy debt to pay the debt. If the person pays for 26 weeks on regular basis their application will be made live and they will be eligible for permanent accommodation. 6 people have taken up this approach and have been housed permanently although there are currently 37 customers on the scheme and paying regularly who potentially will be re-housed. The figure of 26 weeks is not an absolute and given that the objective is to encourage a culture of regular payment it is therefore proposed to give the Head of Housing discretion to reduce this to 13 weeks if justified.

11. **Option 3** - Introduce a combination of those proposed in option 2

## **Analysis**

- 12. Option 1 - The changes to that will result from the Choice Based Scheme will not be realised until the implementation in the autumn of 2009. If these proposals were included in the new scheme the authority is unlikely to realise the reductions in temporary accommodation in time to meet its target of reducing the number in temporary accommodation by half by 2010.
- 13. Option 2 - The implications of the proposed changes are self explanatory. The most controversial being point (i) which is the issue of the authority being seen to be increasing the numbers in overcrowded conditions. However, the shortage of available two bedroomed accommodation means that families can find themselves on a temporary licence in one bed self contained for over a year and in some cases living in shared accommodation in one of the councils homeless hostels. The effect of this action would be that an applicant would have a permanent tenancy rather than a licence, where they were previously living in shared accommodation they would have their own tenancy and would still be able to apply for a move to larger accommodation.
- 14. Option 3 - As option 2

## Corporate Priorities

15. The Homeless strategy is closely link to various strategies and priorities. In terms of the corporate priorities it is critical to the following priorities:
- Increase peoples skills and knowledge and improve future employment prospects;
  - Improve the economic prosperity of the people of York with a focus on minimizing income differentials;
  - Improve the health and lifestyles of the people of York, particularly amongst groups whose levels of health are the poorest;
  - Improve the life chances of the most disadvantaged and disaffected children, young people and families in the City;
  - Improve the quality and availability of decent affordable homes in the City;
  - The Council will provide strong leadership for the city using partnerships to shape and deliver the Sustainable Community Strategy for the city.
16. The reduction of the number of people in temporary accommodation is one of the key 35 national indicators in the councils Local Area Agreement

## Implications

17. The implications arising from this report are:
- **Financial** - None
  - **Human Resources (HR)** - None
  - **Equalities** - An equalities impact assessment would be required
  - **Legal** - The introduction of point (i) would not constitute a family being statutorily overcrowded
  - **Crime and Disorder** - None
  - **Information Technology (IT)** - There would need to be some amendments to the iworld system.
  - **Property** - None
  - **Other** - None

## Risk Management

18. The risk is that the council does not achieve its targets to reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation. These target are set out in the action plan and are in the council's Local Area Agreement. Within the strategy and the action plan there are measures to ensure that the risks are mitigated.
19. The risk/s associated with the recommendation of this report are assessed at a net level below 16. The risks have been assessed as moderate at 14, the strategy will be regularly monitored at the Homeless Strategy Steering Group.

## Recommendations

20. That the Advisory Panel advise the Executive Member to approve Option 2.

Reason: To enable the Council to do all it can to increase the quality of life for homeless applicants and reduce the number of homeless applicants living in temporary accommodation.

## Contact Details

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Report Approved  Date 14/1/09

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Report Approved  Date 12/1/09

**Wards Affected:** *List wards or tick box to indicate all*

**All**

**Background Papers:** None

**Annexes:** None