

Appendix 5:

Review of Housing and Homelessness Strategies (Part 2): Housing Allocation Scheme and Tenancy Strategy & Policy

Summary of consultation

Consultation has been carried out with a range of stakeholders on the Housing Allocation Scheme and the Tenancy Strategy & Policy and their feedback has been taken into account when developing the new documents.

There was a strong emphasis on the need to be clear, fair and transparent in policy changes and decisions in relation to housing and homelessness.

Choice in the allocations process was valued. There was mixed feedback on the use of flexible tenancies, acknowledging both the challenges of their use and the aim to facilitate the release of large family homes.

There was also a focus on the importance of addressing specific issues, such as under-occupation, while recognising that this type of work is resource intensive.

Cross-party Members Working Group

Members:

- Councillor Phillip O'Dell, Portfolio Holder for Housing
- Councillor Camilla Bath, Shadow Portfolio Holder for Housing
- Councillor Christine Robson
- Councillor Maxine Henson
- Councillor Sachin Shah
- Councillor Sarah Butterworth
- Councillor Sasikala Suresh

Members asked questions, raised concerns and made suggestions on a range of topics.

The topics discussed over six meetings in 2019 were:

1. Scene setting, current strategies and changes since 2012
2. Homelessness and rough sleeping
3. Housing Allocations Scheme
4. Private sector housing
5. Tenancy strategy and policy
6. Housing strategy including affordable housing

An additional meeting was held on 22 October 2020 to further discuss the Housing Allocation Scheme and the Tenancy Strategy & Policy.

Residents Board

The Residents Board is a strategic group made up of volunteer council tenants and leaseholders. Consultation was held with this group on 9 January, 15 May, 9 July and 22 October 2019 and 29 September 2020.

The group provided feedback and suggestions regarding how to bring empty properties back into use, encouraging under-occupiers to move to smaller properties and on low-cost home ownership.

In relation to the review and renewal of flexible/fixed-term tenancies the group highlighted the need to be clear about the purpose of the review (i.e. not intended to be negative) and the importance of explaining that rent arrears and ASB will be dealt with throughout the tenancy, not just at the point of review. This was later superseded by the proposal to end the use of flexible fixed-term tenancies, with group members expressing mixed views.

In relation to succession of tenancy the group explained that it is a cause of worry for some tenants and that it is important to provide clear information.

Housing Matters

Housing Matters is the residents meeting for council tenants and leaseholders. Consultation was held at this meeting on 7 March 2019 regarding the Tenancy Strategy and Policy.

There were mixed views but broadly speaking the feedback and concerns of the residents present about tenancy succession and the review of flexible tenancies mirrored those of the Residents Board. The proposal to end the use of flexible fixed-term tenancies was not discussed.

Survey in Homing In

Homing In is the magazine for council tenants and leaseholders. A survey was sent out inside the magazine in July 2019 regarding the review of the housing and homelessness strategies. 173 responses were received.

The feedback on tenancy succession and the review and renewal of flexible tenancies was mixed. The proposal to end the use of flexible fixed-term tenancies was not discussed.

In September 2020 information about a new online survey was published in Homing In magazine.

Online surveys

Two online surveys were conducted, in August 2019 and in October 2020. They were open to any interested respondent. There were 18 respondents to the first survey and 11 respondents to the second survey. The number of responses is too small to be statistically significant.

In the first survey respondents commented on proposed changes to the housing and homelessness strategies, including the Housing Allocation Scheme, and commented on tenancy succession for council tenants and the review and renewal of fixed term tenancies.

In the second survey 10 respondents supported the proposal to retain CBL. 8 respondents supported the proposal to phase out the use of flexible tenancies and revert to awarding lifetime tenancies.

Comments from respondents on the use of Choice Based Lettings and the challenges of refusals and non-bidding include:

‘Better continuous contact with those in Band A and not bidding required’

‘We strongly oppose the proposal to “implement more robustly the penalties for not bidding and for repeated refusals” which we consider to be contrary to a Choice Based Lettings Scheme. This is an applicant’s choice and sometimes applicant’s do not bid due to a range

of complex reasons. Rather than channelling resources into punitive measures we would advocate for more investment in human resources to empower Harrow Residents to understand and make full use of the Locata system. We are unaware of the Council having any hard to let properties and do not accept giving applicants choice will lead to more voids if lettings are managed efficiently.'

'It does feel as though the borough is slightly out of line with practice elsewhere and would agree that not bidding should be penalised providing all necessary safeguards and support is in place for those who struggle with bidding due to digital exclusion, accessibility/disability barriers.'

'Agree as long as the non-bidders, those that don't show up for viewings and refusers are actively monitored and reported on, and penalties are stringently imposed if there is no acceptable reason for their behaviour. This is the type of action that gets dropped to a low priority for housing officers and can then get forgotten about over time, reinforcing the message that there is no consequence.'

'Discretion should be applied to applicants who prefer to avoid particular parts of the borough for personal reasons especially so for vulnerable applicants i.e. people with mental/physical health issues and single parents. If applicants are coerced into accepting tenancies in areas not of their choosing it may lead to long term negative outcomes for householders i.e. they are less likely to be invested in the home or area, increased pressure on services such as tenancy management/social services/NHS, cause social isolation etc.'

'Expectation needs to be managed more robustly at the outset, with a strong focus on realistic prospects of the standard of accommodation and the number of properties that become available each year. It appears that many on the housing register prefer to remain in temporary accommodation for lengthy periods in the expectation that an ideal property might become available 'soon' and that, despite being 'homeless' they are unrealistically choosy and waste council resources, particularly those that don't show up for viewings or refuse offers.'

Comments from respondents on the use of flexible tenancies include:

'...secure tenancies are needed to build communities and fixed term 'flexible' tenancies merely introduce insecurity into the lives of our clients at a time when they face more insecurity in the workplace coupled with the negative impact of welfare reform.'

'Flexible tenancies lead to instability, a lack of personal 'investment' in the home and mitigate against tenancy exchange that assists employability for families and support for those who need it.'

'The main benefit of flexible tenancies is that this is the only way to ensure that larger council properties do not, in future, become under-occupied for decades when they are in such short supply for the many families in need of them. It is too early for this benefit to be apparent now, as the vast majority of families allocated larger properties on flexible tenancies since 2011 still need 3+ bedrooms, but current downsizing incentives are not successful in freeing up larger properties once children have grown up and moved out.'

Voluntary & Community Sector organisations

A meeting was held on 5 June 2019 to consult with voluntary and community sector organisations on the housing and homelessness strategies. A further meeting was held on 8 October 2020 to discuss the Housing Allocation Scheme and the Tenancy Strategy & Policy.

Key points included that if the decision is made to move away from CBL to direct offers then transparency is imperative, as well as a robust change management plan, initial transition period, clear rules for refusals and what is reasonable, consideration of the impact on under-occupiers and consideration of the impact on cross borough moves.

Registered Providers (housing associations)

A meeting was held on 11 July 2019 to consult with registered providers of social housing on the housing and homelessness strategies. A further meeting was held on 8 October 2020 to discuss the Housing Allocation Scheme and the Tenancy Strategy & Policy.

Key points included:

- Nominations and Lettings- there was concern about RPs asking for deposits and rent in advance but the RPs who attended have different approaches (e.g. only rent in advance, asking for 1 week in advance, asking for 1 month in advance, allowing this to be paid over time, requiring at least a small amount of credit even if less than 1 week of rent), discussion around use of affordability checks, guarantors and Universal Credit. RPs raised importance of sharing information about applicants and their support needs.
- Flexible Fixed-Term Tenancies- some RPs are moving away from fixed term tenancies and going back to assured tenancies.
- Choice Based Lettings- discussion about alternative option of direct officers, what other social landlords are doing, other ways to sanction applicants who do not bid.
- Downsizing- suggestion that some flats could be ring-fenced on a new development for under-occupiers, lessons learnt from regeneration schemes could be applied to the approach to under-occupiers, discussion about direct matching (especially when under-occupiers want to stay on the same estate or street), how under-occupiers get housing options information, discussion about older under-occupiers concerned about moving away from their GP, hospital, health clinics, social activities (e.g. bingo), higher rents may put under-occupiers off, some occupiers say they need a bigger home for family or carers.

Homelessness Task Force

This group is made up of representatives from different services across the Council. The Task Force has discussed a range of topics relating to homelessness and rough sleeping and has made recommendations.

Officers across Housing Services

Consultation was held with Housing colleagues on 8 August and 3 September 2019. A further meeting was held on 6 October 2020 to discuss the Housing Allocation Scheme and the Tenancy Strategy & Policy.

Feedback from officers included that applying the existing measures to deal with refusals and non-bidding more robustly could address these challenges without needing to suspend CBL.

Officers across other Council services

Colleagues from different services such as Adult Social Care, Children's and Planning, joined some of the consultation meetings listed above. A briefing was delivered to Adult Social Care colleagues on 3 October 2019.

Labour Group

Consultation was held with the Labour Group on 9 September 2019 (Housing Strategy-Affordable Housing and Tenancy Strategy & Policy), 7 October 2019 (Homeless & Rough Sleeping Strategy and Allocations Scheme) and 24 February 2020 at the request of the Portfolio Holder for Housing.