

**REPORT FOR: TENANTS',
LEASEHOLDERS' AND
RESIDENTS'
CONSULTATIVE FORUM**

Date of Meeting:	11 January 2012
Subject:	INFORMATION REPORT - Designation of Vacant One Bed Flats for Over 50's
Responsible Officer:	Lynne Pennington – Divisional Director of Housing Services
Exempt:	No
Enclosures:	Appendix 1 – Breakdown of general needs studio and one-bed lettings 2010/2011

Section 1 – Summary

This report seeks the TLRCF's views on the proposal that, in the forthcoming new housing allocation scheme, the council should cease the practice of designating one bedroom flats in some council blocks for people aged over 50.

That the TLRCF give consideration to the pros and cons of this policy because it affects council tenants and residents as close neighbours of incoming new tenants selected according to the allocations scheme.

FOR INFORMATION

Section 2 – Report

Introduction

About half of the council homes that are let in Harrow have only one bedroom or are studio flats. Of these half are either sheltered flats for people aged 60 and above or are, under the current policy, designated for allocation to people either 50 and above, or 55 and above. This is classified in housing allocations law as a “local lettings policy”. In Harrow the policy was originally introduced in the 1990’s because, in blocks with mostly one bedroom homes, many residents were getting older and found the lifestyles of many of the new younger tenants difficult to cope with. It was said that this caused a number of neighbour disputes, mainly about noise and how the properties were used.

The allocations scheme is being reviewed and will go out to formal consultation in the spring, giving us a chance to review this policy and to decide whether it still meets the council’s policy objectives.

Background

There is a housing crisis in Harrow that is particularly acute at the moment. We currently accommodate well over 50 homeless families in bed and breakfast (from a comparative position this time last year of 5). This is because, with recent changes to housing benefit rules and the uncertainty in the private rented sector, we have insufficient permanent social housing and private rented homes within local housing allowance levels in which to accommodate people threatened with homelessness.

Single people and couples in priority need are also affected, so there are many high priority demands on our studio/one-bed permanent properties. 2010/11 was a slightly higher than average annual number of available properties because of some extra newbuild housing association units that became available. Yet of the 259 studio/one-bed permanent properties allocated, only 124 (under half) were available for general needs letting, as shown in table 1 below:

Code	Type of alloc’n	nos. 10/11	% of total	% nonsup
1	General needs	124	48%	83%
2	Supported (non age restricted) housing not advertised on Locata	3	1%	
3	Over 55’s to Extra care sheltered housing (Watkins House and Ewart House)	35	14%	
4	Over 60’s to sheltered housing	72	28%	
5	Over 55’s to over 55 designated flats	6	2%	4%
6	Over 50’s to over 50 designated flats	19	7%	13%
	Total	259	100%	149(100%)

Table 2 below shows the ages of applicants on the housing register (bands A to C), illustrating that for every vacancy there are many more properties (over the space of a year) available to each older person than to those who are

younger. Put another way, for every non-age restricted property being advertised there are at any one time $1\frac{1}{2}$ people with a recognised housing need under 50 seeking a home, competing with all the other age groups who are also eligible to bid for those properties, whereas for those over 60 there is only $\frac{2}{3}$ of a person to each available property. For those between 50 and 59 there is only $\frac{1}{3}$ of a person to each available property, which explains why some of the designated 50+ properties go to people in band D, because of lack of demand from this age group, who can also bid on general needs flats and bungalows.

Registered in bands A to C (which properties they can bid for – from table 1)	nos.	Properties available in 10/11	Ratio demand to supply
Age under 50 (1 only)	172	124	$1\frac{1}{2}:1$
Age 50-59 (1, 5 & 6)	45	149	$\frac{1}{3}:1$
Age 60+ (1, 4, 5 & 6)	163	221	$\frac{2}{3}:1$
Total	380		

Section 3 – Further Information

Options considered

Option 1: stay the same. This will mean that every year between 20 and 30 non sheltered/ supported one bedroom flats (around 17% of the total non-supported vacancies) will continue to be unavailable for allocation to single people under 50, with the associated unfairness highlighted in Table 2 above. It is important to note that many flats in the designated blocks have been sold under right to buy, and that it is impossible for the council to control who lives there from this point onward. This means that many of the sold units already have younger residents, making the allocations policy look somewhat out of touch with reality.

Sub option 1a – lower the age threshold to 45. This would produce the following (very minor) changes:

Registered in bands A to C (which properties they can bid for – from table 1)	nos.	Properties available in 10/11	Ratio demand to supply
Age under 45 (1 only)	153	124	$1\frac{1}{4}:1$
Age 45-59 (1, 5 & 6)	64	149	$\frac{1}{2}:1$
Age 60+ (1, 4, 5 & 6)	163	221	$\frac{2}{3}:1$
Total	380		

Option 2: stop the blanket designation of age limits for blocks and only implement age limits where there is an unusually sensitive issue which would be exacerbated by allocating a particular flat to a younger person, or where a specific potential tenant is deemed a risk to older neighbours. It would

produce a demand to supply ratio of 1:1 for all those under 60. ***This is officers' preferred option.***

It should be noted that 5 of the age-designated properties last year were ones connected to the Harrow helpline (e.g. Juxon Close, Harrow Weald). However, although they were advertised for 55+, we are not always able to find a tenant for the property who actually needs the helpline service. It might be a better use of resources to designate these particular flats for vulnerable people in need of the helpline service, regardless of age.

Section 4 – Financial Implications

There are no direct costs associated with this decision, although opening up more properties to homeless people could shorten expensive stays in hostels and hotels while they wait for suitable settled housing to move to.

Section 5 - Equalities implications

A full Equality Impact Assessment has not yet been carried out, because this report is only covering one aspect of the new allocations scheme. When the draft new scheme is published for consultation in the New Year an EQIA will be done to cover all the different policy aspects.

However, consideration of changing the property age designation policy is driven by our awareness that age discrimination legislation, introduced since the policy was first introduced, makes it difficult to justify continuing as a blanket policy. Other local authorities are therefore reviewing their policies on this. Spelthorne, for example, have decided to avoid the use of age icons on all property adverts unless the properties are sheltered units. Vale of Aylesbury have told us that, although they still advertise their general needs bungalows using the icon on Locata to specify a minimum age restriction of 60, their bungalows which have adaptations are not advertised with an age restriction.

The underlying principle of discrimination law that is that we can continue to discriminate (against younger people, in this case) so long as it is justifiable. We can justify, in the interests of creating sustainable communities, some age restrictions. For example, where there is a new-build scheme a Local Lettings Plan may require an age restriction on some lettings in order to produce a balance of new tenants, and this can be done by age limiting some of the adverts so that applicants know what properties to express an interest in and not to waste their bid.

Appendix A (table 3) shows how last year's 124 general needs vacancies were allocated and how we expect to allocate a similar number of vacancies next year.

One of the aims of this report to TLCF is to give tenant and leaseholder representatives the opportunity to put forward other reasons that they

consider might justify keeping age restrictions on some general needs properties.

Risk Management Implications

There are no direct risks associated with this decision, although it is arguable that there is an increased risk of neighbour disputes if younger people move into flats previously occupied by older people.

If a decision is taken as part of the new allocation scheme to scrap the previous policy on age designation this potential risk will be added to the Directorate risk register so that any resulting adverse effects can be properly monitored.

Section 6 - Corporate Priorities

The report incorporates the corporate priority of “Supporting and protecting people who are most in need”, by weighing up the balance of needs of people in different age groups for social housing.

Allocation of social rented housing is directly related to the council’s aim of “supporting and protecting people who are most in need”. Just over 10% of those in bands A, B and C on the housing register have been flagged as vulnerable, reasons for which include:

- frailty caused by old age
- disability
- severe mental health issues
- other severe medical needs
- ex-offenders
- drug and alcohol abuse
- people coming out local authority care or other institutions
- other severe welfare needs.

It is generally considered that another 20% are borderline “vulnerable”, while the remaining 70% of those seeking housing are people without special needs who happen to be undergoing difficulties in their lives leading to a re-housing need – e.g. homelessness, unemployment, domestic violence, family breakdown, etc.

The report also has regard to the corporate priority of “Keeping neighbourhoods clean, green and safe”, by asking TLCF members to consider whether a change in policy on property age-designation could lead to safety and security issues on council estates.

Name: Roger Hampson

on behalf of the
Chief Financial Officer

Date: 8 December 2012

Section 7 - Contact Details and Background Papers

Contact: Rosy Leigh, Housing Assessment Manager, 020 8420 9209

Background Papers:

- **Appendix 1 attached** - Table showing allocation of non-age-limited studio and 1-bed allocations in 2010-2011
- Lettings and Transfer Scheme - http://www.harrow.gov.uk/downloads/file/6657/letting_and_transfer_scheme
(relevant section is on page 27: "Older Peoples Dwellings - These are specifically designated for older people who can live independently. To be eligible the member must be meet the advertised age criteria, which may be 45+, 50+ or 55+. For some flats fairly good mobility is necessary, as many are on the first or second floor without a lift.")

Appendix 1 – Table 3 – Allocation of non-age-limited studio and 1-bed allocations, 2010-2011

Type of allocation	nos. in 10/11	Likely to increase in future yrs?	12/13 likely nos.
Underoccupying social tenants to non designated elderly flats & bungalows	9	Many go to sheltered but many require general needs: policy is to maximise the number of moves	18
Young people leaving care	20	Yes: corporate policy to end expensive placements	30
People moving on from Harrow Supporting People funded supported housing (agreed via a panel)	6	Likely to remain around the same level, up to 8 p.a.	8
People with disabilities ready to move on from expensive residential placements	6	Pressure around this category, although 2-beds are often required	8
Severe need/ Social hardship (exceptional circumstances or multiple needs that warrant emergency or urgent priority)	11	Likely to remain around the same level, up to 12 p.a.	12
Management transfers/ decants/ vulnerable non statutory successors	7	Consistently around 7-8 p.a.	8
Accepted homeless "part 6" offer	4	Yes: We are doing 20 single child homeless family allocations to 1-beds in the current year	20
Urgent medical need – band B (includes mobility/ adaptation needs & mental health needs)	20	Likely to remain around the same level,	20
Other medical needs – band C (includes mobility/ adaptation needs & mental health needs)	9	This group will be squeezed by the increases in allocations to some of the other groups, above.	0
To assist social services to fulfil a care plan	2	This group will be squeezed by the increases in allocations to some of the other groups, above.	0
Unsatisfactory housing conditions (such as lacking or sharing a bedroom/ no fixed abode/ etc - who wait around 3 years for an offer)	26	This group will be squeezed by the increases in allocations to some of the other groups, above.	0
Band D	4	All but one of these was an RSL allocation we were unable to control – hopefully none going forward	0
Total	124		124