



Environmental Health
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Dear Ms Walker

Fair and Flexible – draft statutory guidance on social housing allocations for local authorities in England

Thank you for providing us with the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the new draft statutory guidance, our response to the consultation questions is set out below.

1. Do you agree with the objectives and outcomes which local authorities should seek to achieve through their allocations policies?

Yes. This authority is fully committed to achieving the objectives and outcomes which are detailed in the consultation document.

2. What can local authorities do to raise awareness and understanding of social housing allocation among local communities?

Having relatively recently introduced Choice-Based Lettings (CBL) as part of the countywide *Kent Homechoice* initiative, we are very conscious of the need not only to raise awareness and understanding of the allocations process, but also to maintain it on an ongoing basis. To be fully effective therefore the process must be continuous, recognising that false perceptions can develop only too easily.

CBL went live in Tonbridge and Malling in April 2009, simultaneous to a full review of the allocations policy. A comprehensive communications strategy was agreed at the outset and in the months that preceded implementation (and which followed a separate consultation exercise on the allocations policy review) partners,

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stakeholders customers and members of the public were provided with detailed information and the opportunity to discuss forthcoming changes with staff and local Members. Key elements of the communications strategy included:

- § The inclusion of a strap line to Council letterheads advising that CBL was coming to the borough, signposting readers to further information on both the Council and *Kent Homechoice* web sites
- § A series of articles in the local press and also the Council's own publication, *Here and Now*
- § A series of briefings which were held at different locations across the borough for specific groups including those registered for housing, existing tenants, statutory and voluntary agencies, advocates, RSLs, Council staff and elected Members. Each briefing was chaired by the Cabinet Member for Housing and was attended by representatives from Locata, who are delivering CBL on behalf of *Kent Homechoice*
- § The distribution of posters, flyers, Kent Homechoice business cards and information leaflets to key locations across the borough
- § The identification of customers who considered themselves to be in need to specific assistance with the bidding process
- § Comprehensive staff training (Council and RSLs) delivered by Locata
- § A CBL open day immediately prior to the launch which provided all members of the local community with the opportunity for further discussion with key staff, demonstration of the on-line bidding process etc.

Subsequent to the introduction of CBL, staff from the Council's Housing Service have maintained an ongoing dialogue with local groups and agencies e.g. Citizens Advice Bureau, Parish Councils, Age Concern etc to ensure that they are best placed to advise members of their local communities. The allocation of social housing is also a frequent item for discussion at the sub-regional private landlord's forum.

3. How can local authorities engage most effectively with local communities in order to shape local allocation policies?

Experience to date has shown that the most effective engagement comes from face to face contact with specifically targeted groups. Focus groups are invaluable, especially when it comes to engaging with groups in the community that can sometimes be excluded, and/or find it more difficult to participate through wider and more general consultation methods. Recognising that different parts of the community will have different priorities is also important. For example, Tonbridge and Malling is a borough with a largely rural population, whose priorities and aspirations are not necessarily the same as those of the more urban communities.

A further example of ongoing engagement is a pre-tenancy training programme that the West Kent YWCA has developed in partnership with Russet Homes and with input from local Members. Aimed at young women who are registered for social housing, the scheme provides training in the skills they will need to live independently

and maintain a tenancy. The programme comprises five separate modules which are delivered over a number of weeks and includes training on understanding the housing register, tenancy agreement and the role of organisations that provide housing and support. It also covers safety in the home, budgeting, working with support providers and dealing with neighbours and anti-social behaviour. Staff from the Council's Housing Service have been actively involved in delivering the training on housing and tenure, and this has provided a valuable opportunity not only to obtain ongoing customer feedback but to develop a greater understanding of the issues that are significant to customers who have yet to access social housing.

Staff have also provided training to other groups for example the Homestart Support Group for young parents, which is supported by a number of local agencies.

4. What is the best way for local authorities to provide information and facts about how the allocation process is working in their area?

The introduction of CBL has enabled greater transparency in this area – in particular the feedback report which follows each fortnightly bidding cycle, providing information on the number of bids that were made for each property, and the points/banding of the successful applicant. Evidence so far shows a high level of customer satisfaction with the information that is provided, although obviously the one question that can't be answered is *how long will I have to wait?*

The Council's allocations scheme summary provides a breakdown of the type, size and location of stock held by Russet Homes, which includes the former Council stock. Whilst information about how often a property becomes available and an estimated waiting time can be helpful, it can also be double-edged sword in as much that lower waiting times will potentially attract more applicants, thereby increasing the time that the majority will then have to wait.

5. Does the draft guidance provide sufficient clarity on the extent of flexibilities available to local authorities when formulating allocation policies?

Yes it does, and the Council welcomes this flexibility.

In terms of local lettings policies, these are agreed with partner RSLs in respect of all new developments of 20 affordable homes or more and are vital to ensuring that each new community is both balanced and sustainable. One of the key issues emerging from the *2008 West Kent Strategic Housing Market Assessment* was the need to tackle under occupation in the social housing sector and local lettings policies have a significant role to play here.

6. How effective, currently, is cooperation between RSLs and local authorities over the allocation of social housing? What further measures could help?

In our view there is room for improvement in the relationship between many local authorities and RSLs operating in their areas, and this would go a long way to eradicating much of the confusion that customers and other stakeholders frequently experience.

For example, inconsistencies between the allocations policies operated by local authorities and RSLs. When an applicant applies to join the housing register their housing need is assessed in accordance with the Councils' allocations policy, and points/bands identified accordingly. However once they start bidding for vacant properties the decision as to whether they are successful or not rests with the RSL, whose decision will reflect their own allocations policy and procedures. This is understandably confusing for applicants, and particularly so when there are anomalies between the policies. We have had examples recently where our own policy differs with those of partner RSLs:

- § Our policy requires two children of the same sex to have separate bedrooms where there is an age difference of ten years or more, however at least one of our partners requires that same sex children share a bedroom regardless of age.
- § The approach taken by another partner limits a pregnant woman to one bedroomed accommodation until the birth of her baby, whereupon she is eligible to apply for a transfer to larger accommodation. Under the Council's own policy, this household is eligible for two-bedroomed accommodation prior to the birth of the child.

The situation is far from clear for transfer applicants as well. Some RSLs have retained separate transfer registers, whilst others require existing tenants to register with the Council and then bid for vacant homes in the usual manner.

Previous rent arrears are also a significant issue, with the approach taken by RSLs varying considerably.

7. How have you involved your local community in putting together your response to this consultation document?

The opportunity to raise the consultation with local stakeholders has been limited in the time that was provided. The consultation was launched on 31 July, however the consultation document was not received directly by any of the officers within this Council and we became aware of it during the early part of August. You will appreciate that August is generally a quiet month with many of the regular meetings suspended due to holiday absence, however it has been possible during September to raise the consultation with some partners and stakeholders, for example some parish councils and RSLs. Key Members have also contributed to this response, and the consultation was discussed at the most recent *Kent Homechoice* Project Board meeting, which represents all participating local authorities and RSLs.

Had time permitted and ideally, this response would have been informed by a more detailed dialogue with customers and stakeholder, most probably through a small number of focus groups.

8. Do you intend to revise your allocation scheme in light of the new statutory guidance?

Yes the Council does intend to revise its allocations scheme.

9. If so, what changes will you be considering, and how might you engage local people and organisations in this process?

As the current allocations scheme was only recently introduced to coincide with the introduction of CBL, we will need to incorporate a number of minor procedural changes. Alongside this, we will be reviewing the priority awarded to existing tenants wishing to transfer, where parity with others on the housing register may not be appropriate, in order to increase mobility within the stock. We will also review whether the current complex mechanism for determining cumulative preference can be simplified.

Local people and organisations will be consulted on the changes that are proposed, and they will be advised subsequently if/when they are approved and take effect. To a large extent the type of engagement will depend upon how significant the proposed changes are, and the timescale available following the publication of revised guidance in November.

10. Do you agree with the estimate in the impact assessment on the one-off familiarisation cost associated with this policy?

This would appear reasonable on the face of it, although it would be interesting to know what the estimated staffing time was for this exercise.

11. Is there any further evidence or analysis relating to the initial assessment in the impact assessment of the wider costs and benefits of this new guidance which we should consider for the final impact assessment?

None that we are aware of.

12. Is there any further evidence or analysis relating to the initial assessment in the impact assessment of the impact on race, disability and gender which we should consider for the final impact assessment?

None that we are aware of.

13. Is there any further evidence or analysis we should consider for the full equalities impact assessment which we will be undertaking in light of this consultation in the autumn?

None that we are aware of.

14. What impacts, costs and benefits do you think might be associated with any changes to your policy which you will be considering in the light of this guidance?

- § The cost of policy amendments – staff time, consultation, publication and circulation of revised policy documents which will need to go to all registered applicants and other stakeholders with the request that the earlier version be disregarded
- § Benefits – customers and other stakeholders are better informed, and more confident in their understanding of the process, which is seen as fair and transparent. Less avoidable contact within the definition of NPI 14.

Yours sincerely



Janet Walton
Chief Housing Officer