

REPORT TO: Executive Board
DATE: 15 March 2007
REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director Health & Community
SUBJECT: Housing Allocations Policy
WARD(S) Boroughwide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 To seek approval to change the Council's Allocations Policy with regard to offers to homeless households and undertaking first stage reviews of homelessness decisions.

2.0 RECOMMENDED: that the Board agrees to the changes outlined in the report for consultation purposes, and that a further report be brought back to the Board when the consultation exercise has been completed.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

OFFERS TO HOMELESS HOUSEHOLDS

- 3.1 Over the last 18 months the number of homeless households having to be temporarily accommodated in bed and breakfast has increased significantly. Early work to examine the reasons behind this has revealed that whilst the number of homeless acceptances in 2004/05 and 2005/06 was relatively static, there has been an increase in 2006/07.
- 3.2 More significantly the supply of relets to accommodate homeless households and others in housing need has declined by more than 20% over the last 4 years. It is believed that this is because of the effects of the Right to Buy, and increasing house prices inhibiting the usual movement out of the rented sector into owner occupation. This has resulted in an inability to move homeless households into settled accommodation quickly enough, so that when Grangeway Court is full, Bed & Breakfast has to be used.
- 3.3 This problem is compounded by the Council's Allocations Policy (see Appendix 1) which to some extent seeks to offer homeless households the same degree of choice in housing as other applicants on the waiting list. A homeless household is entitled to up to 3 offers of accommodation in their preferred areas, but if they are still homeless after 12 weeks, their position is reviewed and they may be given one final offer within the Borough in discharge of the Council's legal duties.
- 3.4 Under homelessness legislation the Council is only required to make one offer of suitable accommodation in order to discharge its duty, and there is guidance and case law for what constitutes a "suitable offer" to protect the client's

interests. Halton operated the “one offer” approach for many years but changed this in May 2000 as part of a review of the Allocations Policy. The 12-week limitation was introduced in January 2005 at a time when the average time spent in temporary accommodation was rising, but not as acutely as recent times.

- 3.5 With the current reducing supply of housing the position has clearly worsened since the Board last considered the matter, and there are now Government targets to reduce the use of Bed & Breakfast, particularly for families. It is therefore proposed that the policy be amended to restrict the number of offers to statutory homeless households to one suitable offer within the Borough.

HOUSING REGISTER REVIEWS

- 3.6 A homeless applicant has the right to request a review of most decisions made in relation to their homeless application. The Allocations Policy currently states that an officer of Halton Housing Trust (HHT) will undertake any first stage reviews. If an applicant is still dissatisfied they have an opportunity to request a second stage review, which is considered by a panel of Elected Members.
- 3.7 It is proposed that the Council’s Service Development Manager for Homelessness conduct future first stage reviews with respects to homelessness decisions. This will provide a greater degree of independence to the process, and be a valuable tool in terms of monitoring the quality of decisions made by the Trust. The second stage review by Elected Members would remain unchanged.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There is a duty to consult with Housing Associations, and recommended good practise to consult other stakeholders, on any significant changes proposed to the Council’s Allocations Policy, and to notify them subsequently of any adopted changes. This will have to be undertaken before the proposals contained in this report can be formally agreed.

5.0 OTHER IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Any agreed changes will need to be reflected in the Council’s Contract with HHT, which currently provides the Homelessness and Housing Advice service on behalf of the Council.

6.0 RISK ANALYSIS

- 6.1 If the policy remains unchanged homeless applicants’ length of stay in temporary accommodation may increase, which will be detrimental to the aim of reducing reliance on Bed & Breakfast accommodation, and financial pressures on the Council may increase.

7.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

7.1 There is a risk that the change will be seen as detrimental to homeless households as they will be eligible for only one offer of suitable accommodation. However in reality applicants are not currently offered three properties, as the turnover of available properties is insufficient at this point in time.

8.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

Document	Place of inspection	Contact Officer
Housing Allocations Policy	Runcorn Town Hall	Service Development Manager Homelessness