

REPORT TO: Executive Board

DATE: 29 November 2007

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director Health and Community.

SUBJECT: Housing Allocations Policy – Local Connection Criteria.

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 To inform the Board of Halton Housing Trust's (HHT) intention to amend its housing allocations policy so that points are no longer awarded to reflect a residency connection with the Borough, and to set out the implications of this decision for the Council in terms of HHT's management of the Councils waiting list and allocations policy.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION

RECOMMENDED: That the Board agree in principle to removing the residency criterion from the Council's housing allocations policy, and that following a stakeholder consultation, a further report be brought to Board to determine whether or not to formally amend the policy.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 On transfer of the Councils housing stock in December 2005, HHT adopted a housing allocations scheme almost identical to the Council's policy. The benefit of this approach for the Council was that there were minimal IT/cost implications in terms of HHT managing the Council/HHT joint waiting list and managing nominations to other Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) post transfer.

3.2 During the course of a series of Housing Corporation regulatory inspections it was noted that HHT's policy included provision to award points to applicants that have lived in the Borough for any 5 year period – what is termed a local connection criterion.

3.3 The Housing Corporation has deemed this provision to be potentially discriminatory, and has advised HHT to remove the criterion from its policy by the end of this year. HHT has now written to the Council advising of its intention to change its policy with effect from the 1st January 2008.

3.4 The Governments Code of Guidance on housing allocations implies that Councils have discretion to maintain local residency criteria

provided they do not prejudice their general duty to give assistance to persons in certain statutory need categories, and this is reflected in a diverse approach amongst neighbouring authorities. However this guidance has no force on RSLs who must comply with the Housing Corporations own guidance.

- 3.5 The implication of this change for the Council is that when HHT change their policy they will find it difficult to meet the Council's requirement for them to select applicants for nomination to RSLs in strict accordance with the Councils policy, as their Academy IT system is not capable of automatically short listing applicants for rehousing using two different allocations policies.
- 3.6 HHT say they can overcome this problem by manually checking application files and making necessary adjustments to points totals each time a shortlist is produced for a nomination, but have questioned whether it might be appropriate for the Council to also consider changing its policy at the same time.
- 3.7 Local connection criteria have historically been used by Councils to ensure that the bulk of local housing provision goes to local residents, or to those who need to move to the area for support, employment, or other pressing medical/social reasons. In practice few people make purely speculative applications to move to another locality, preferring to be housed near where they live, work, or have family ties, or to give/receive support.
- 3.8 Currently the HBC/HHT joint housing register contains nearly 2,800 applications (excl. transfer requests), 799 (29%) of which do not qualify for residency points. During 2006/07 55 (13%) of those housed did not have residency points. This shows that the relatively small number of points awarded for this criterion does not necessarily achieve the intended outcome anyway.
- 3.9 Whilst it is not possible without investing substantial time and resources to model the impact of removing the local connection criterion, it is not envisaged that the relative position of applicants on the register would be significantly changed.
- 3.10 In recent years Government statute and guidance has increasingly prescribed the framework for housing allocations policies, to determine who may and may not be housed, which needs should be prioritised, and increasing stress has been placed on the need for equality of access to housing registers. RSLs are now the exclusive providers of social rented accommodation in Halton, and the Councils policy is increasingly isolated in retaining a local connection criterion.
- 3.11 The Council and RSLs in the Borough are currently collaborating to jointly develop a Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme, hopefully to

be introduced in the second half of 2008/09 ahead of the Government target date of 2010. One of the underpinning reasons for introducing CBL is to create transparency and clarity for those seeking housing, and there would therefore be merit in moving toward common principles of access etc. in terms of the housing register.

3.12 CBL will in any event require a totally new allocations policy to be developed, and in the interim it is proposed that the Council's housing allocations policy be changed to remove the 25 points awarded for local residency, and that a consultation exercise be undertaken to seek stakeholders views. A further report will be brought to Board to advise of any responses before Board is asked to formally adopt the change.

4.0 **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 The Council is required to formally consult RSLs and other stakeholders before adopting such a change to its housing allocations policy.

5.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 HHT have indicated that if the Council decide to retain the local connection criterion, they will not seek any additional payment for the additional work involved in handling the process manually as outlined in 3.6.

6.0 **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

6.1 **Children and Young People in Halton**

None.

6.2 **Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton**

None.

6.3 **A Healthy Halton**

None.

6.4 **A Safer Halton**

None.

6.5 **Halton's Urban Renewal**

None.

7.0 **RISK ANALYSIS**

7.1 Paragraph 3.8 highlights the current position and introducing such a policy should not have an adverse effect on individuals.

7.2 In addition, the introduction of Choice Based Lettings before 2010 could mean that this Policy be introduced.

7.3 Affordability issues could mean more people applying for social housing and this could have an impact on local people. This needs to be considered against the worklessness agenda.

8.0 **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

8.1 The proposed policy change will help to demonstrate equality of access in terms of access to the HBC/HHT joint housing register, and help ensure accommodation is allocated purely according to need.