

EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCILCABINET3 June 2021Report by Director of EnvironmentCOVID 19 – ALLOCATIONS UPDATE AND POLICY REVIEW**PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1. To advise the Cabinet of the steps taken by Housing Services to deliver the housing allocations service during COVID 19 and to advise on the proposed policy review.

RECOMMENDATIONS

2. Cabinet are asked to
- a) Note the impact of COVID 19 to East Renfrewshire Council's Allocation Policy that were required to address homelessness; and
 - b) Note the proposed review of East Renfrewshire Council's Allocation Policy which will be presented to cabinet for approval in autumn 2021.

BACKGROUND

3. In March 2020 national lockdown restrictions put in place by the Scottish Government due to the COVID 19 pandemic resulted in significant disruption to all services provided by the Council.

4. For the allocation of council homes this meant:

- Homeless households were unable to move on from their temporary accommodation into their new permanent homes from March 2020 until July 2020.
- During this time repair work for empty homes was only permitted for emergency homeless accommodation
- A considerable backlog of applicants waiting for housing. This was exacerbated as social distancing rules reduced the productivity of the workforce.

5. Over the last two years there has also been a 22% increase in the number of homeless households that East Renfrewshire Council has a legal duty to offer permanent accommodation to. In 2020/21 the council had a legal duty to 275 households with approximately only between 200-250 empty homes becoming available each year. This presents a significant challenge for the Housing Service in its ability to address homelessness and also meet other needs from the general waiting list.

6. The restrictions on house moves at the start of 2020/21 increased the number of homeless households waiting for permanent housing increasing from 57 to over 100 by June 2020. Whilst the backlog of empty homes has now been reduced to normal levels, the demand

for re-housing from homeless households on the waiting list has remained at over 100 applicants.

7. During the pandemic the Scottish Government requested that housing homeless applicants be prioritised by Local Authorities.

REPORT

8. East Renfrewshire Council's Allocation Policy was reviewed in June 2018 and this review introduced a new policy of choice based lettings (CBL). Choice based lettings places applicants into priority groups based on their housing need. Appendix 1 details the priority groups.

9. The policy set targets of lets for each priority group. However, due to the increased demand from homeless households and the request from the Scottish Government to prioritise homeless households, the percentage of lets awarded to Priority A (mainly homeless households) applicants was increased during lockdown. The table below demonstrates the target lets for each group detailed in the East Renfrewshire Council's Allocation Policy and the number and percentage of lets allocated to each group in 2020/21.

Priority Group	Target % Lets (excludes new build housing)	April 2020 to March 2021 no of lets	April 2020 to March 2021 % of lets
Priority A	55%	155	67%
Priority B	28%	34	15%
Priority C	8%	12	5%
Priority D	8%	21	9%
Priority E	1%	10	4%

10. The changes required to address homelessness has meant that the number of lets to applicants in priority B (highest priority for waiting list applicants, including applicants with medical priority) has been impacted. Lets to lower priority groups were available to group B applicants but these lets tended to be lower demand properties such as 2 bedroom tenement stock in Levern Valley and sheltered housing in Eastwood and often Priority B applicants are either not eligible or don't apply.

11. As the service continues to recover from the impact from COVID 19 and with the current policy being in place for two years, a review of the existing policy is required. The review will consider what housing need exists from homeless households and what needs exists from the general waiting list. Members should note allocations policies in Scotland must take note of a number of key areas of legislation and in particular the Social housing allocations in Scotland: practice guide published by the Scottish Government.

12. It is recognised that some aspects of this legislation can cause frustration for households who are on the non-homeless waiting list especially given the shortage of family sized houses available for social rent within East Renfrewshire. No amount of changes to the allocation policy can address an overall shortage of social housing.

13. Reductions in the number of properties being allocated to non-homeless waiting list applicants had led to an increased request for "special cases" to be awarded. The policy defines a special case as "housing circumstances requiring urgent rehousing that do not fit with our published policy". This is an area that the review will consider.

14. The Housing Service has seen a substantial increase in its waiting list in recent years from just under 500 per year in 2017/18 and 2018/19 to just under 1400 per year in 2019/20 & 2020/21. This is as a result of both the availability of new build council housing which has proved extremely popular and the ease of access of an on line waiting list application system.

15. The policy review will seek views on which groups of applicants and what type of circumstances should be given additional priority. It should be further recognised that, with a finite supply of housing, additional priority for one group can often be at the expense of another group. As such the Housing Service will seek as many views as possible when reviewing the policy and will provide anonymised data detailing the current supply and demand of council housing. Particular areas for consideration will be to ensure that the policy appropriately meets the needs of those experiencing domestic violence, physical and learning disabilities, child poverty and Care Experienced Young People.

FINANCE AND EFFICIENCY

16. The initial restrictions placed on house moves and the repair of empty homes has increased the amount of rent lost on empty council properties. This has been addressed and the increase in void rent loss as a result of COVID 19 has now been reduced.

CONSULTATION

17. When setting allocation policies, social landlords are legally required to undertake a full consultation exercise. Therefore before returning to Cabinet with any changes, Housing Services will consult with the following groups:

- existing ERC tenants;
- those on our housing waiting list;
- registered tenants' organisations in East Renfrewshire
- East Renfrewshire Health & Social Care Partnership
- relevant organisations, including other housing providers and voluntary agencies operating in the area, e.g. Shelter Scotland.

18. The consultation will be undertaken in summer 2021 with a policy review being presented to Cabinet in autumn/winter 2021.

PARTNERSHIP WORKING

19. It is vital that all social landlords in East Renfrewshire contribute towards addressing housing need and homelessness. Therefore Housing Services will engage with local Registered Social Landlords to review referral and nomination agreements for the allocation of new and existing social housing.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROPOSALS

20. There are no implications with these proposals in terms of staffing, legal, property or sustainability.

21. The existing housing management IT system is in the process of being replaced and will provide applicants with greater online access to their waiting list application and the online bidding system.

22 An Equalities Impact Assessment will be required for any new policy changes

CONCLUSIONS

23. The restrictions placed on services due to the COVID-19 pandemic created a backlog of both homeless and waiting list applicants being able to access accommodation. In addition the increased demand from homeless applicants meant allocation of properties had to be prioritised to homeless households.

24. A review of the existing policy is underway to ensure it addresses the housing concerns of those most in need. A full consultation exercise will be undertaken and the policy presented to Cabinet for approval.

RECOMMENDATIONS

25. Cabinet are asked to

- a) Note the impact of COVID 19 to East Renfrewshire Council's Allocation Policy that were required to address homelessness; and
- b) Note the proposed review of East Renfrewshire Council's Allocation Policy which will be presented to cabinet for approval in autumn 2021.

Director of Environment

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May 2021

Appendix 1

Priority Pass A

- Unintentionally homeless or threatened with homelessness
- Moving from ERC young person's supported housing
- Special cases not covered by the allocation policy

Priority Pass B

- Intentionally homeless or threatened with homelessness
- Living in East Renfrewshire or with a local connection and:
 - living in unsatisfactory housing or cannot meet housing needs
 - a social housing tenant with 2 or more bedrooms than you need
 - existing home unsuitable and delaying discharge from hospital
 - overcrowded - 2 or more bedrooms less than you need
 - has a medical need for more suitable housing
 - living in one of our adapted homes and no longer need adaptations
 - leaving the Armed Forces

Priority Pass C

- Need to move to give or get support
- Live in East Renfrewshire or with local connection and:
 - sharing facilities and don't have own bed space
 - overcrowded - 1 bedroom less than you need
 - a social housing tenant with one more bedroom than you need
 - experiencing harassment in current home but safe to stay for a time
- 2 ERC tenants combining to make 1 household

Priority Pass D

- Live in East Renfrewshire or with local connection and:
 - sharing facilities and have own bed space
 - has a current home unsuitable for children who sometimes stay overnight but live somewhere else
 - lives in a private rented house
- Don't live in East Renfrewshire but want to move here because you:
 - work here
 - have been offered a job here
 - are looking for work here and have proof
 - want to be near a relative or carer
 - have a social or medical need to live in the area

Priority Pass E

- No circumstances in A to D apply. Order of priority:
 - Lives in East Renfrewshire or with a local connection to area and no housing need
 - No local connection and has a medical need for more suitable housing
- No local connection and no medical need for more suitable housing