



COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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Northumberland Homefinder Common Allocation Policy

Report of: Rick O'Farrell, Interim Executive Director of Regeneration, Commercial and Economy

Cabinet Member: Councillor John Riddle, Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing & Resilience

Purpose of report

The report provides an overview for Members of the Common Allocation Policy and its use in allocating homes across the county through the Northumberland Homefinder system.

Recommendations

It is recommended that Members note the content of the report.

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the "We want you to feel Safe, Healthy and Cared for" [LIVING] " priority included in the NCC Corporate Plan 2018-2021 which states:

Having a decent roof over your head is fundamental to health and well being.

Key issues

- 1) Northumberland Homefinder has been in place as a partnership of the primary housing providers in Northumberland since April 2009 and is the name of the service under which the housing register sits.
- 2) The Common Allocation Policy is the policy that the Homefinder officers use to assess and determine the eligibility of a housing application.
- 3) The intention is that there is one route to social housing for the residents of Northumberland; that there would be just one waiting list, one application form and that the use of the Common Allocation Policy (CAP) would ensure that all properties were allocated on an equitable basis for both the applicant and the housing provider.
- 4) The policy has been reviewed and updated on a regular basis, most recently in September 2019 when, with delegated approval, it was updated to reflect the

legislative requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017), introducing 'qualifying' and 'non qualifying' applicants and the ability to make direct lets in certain circumstances.

- 5) Other amendments were also made throughout the policy to give clarity in some sections and in others to make distinctions between different categories.
- 6) Revisions were made to the definition categories within the priority Bandings relating to homelessness, enabling direct let offers to be made in certain circumstances and introducing Qualifying and Non Qualifying applicants.

Background

Northumberland Homefinder is a Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme offering increased options for housing by including private rented properties and low cost home ownership properties.

Northumberland has agreed a common housing allocation policy, developed and reviewed in partnership with Registered Providers.

The key aims of Northumberland Homefinder are to:

- Increase housing choice and meet housing need;
- Create a single point of access, through a common housing register, to all social housing, including accredited private sector properties and low cost home ownership options in Northumberland;
- Provide an open, fair and transparent housing allocations system that is easily understood, accessible and easy to use;
- Ensure consistency in the way in which applicants access accommodation;
- Help to prevent and tackle homelessness in Northumberland; and
- Create sustainable communities.

Legislative Framework

The Common Allocation Policy functions under the legislative framework set out in the Housing Act (1996) as amended by the Homelessness Act (2002) and the associated statutory codes of guidance. This policy forms an "allocation scheme" described in the Act.

The legislative framework applies to the Council although it requires Registered Providers to cooperate in offering accommodation and to assist the council to discharge its statutory duties to homeless people.

The legislative framework requires the policy to give reasonable preference to some groups. Where the CAP refers to housing need, it also means reasonable preference.

The current statutory reasonable preference categories are set out in s.167(2) of the 1996 Act. These were rationalised in the Homelessness Act 2002 (and further refined by the Housing Act 2004) to ensure that they are squarely based on housing need. The reasonable preference categories are:

- a) people who are homeless (within the meaning of Part 7 of the 1996 Act). This includes people who are intentionally homeless, and those who do not have a priority need for accommodation;
- b) people who are owed a duty by any local authority under section 190(2), 193(2) or 195(2) of the 1996 Act (or under section 65(2) or 68(2) of the Housing Act 1985) or who are occupying accommodation secured by any local authority under section 192(3);
- c) people occupying insanitary or overcrowded housing or otherwise living in unsatisfactory housing conditions;
- d) people who need to move on medical or welfare grounds, including grounds relating to a disability;
- e) people who need to move to a particular locality in the district of the local authority, where failure to meet that need would cause hardship (to themselves or to others).

The legislative framework also restricts who can be considered as eligible to be allocated housing and allows financial resources, behaviour and local connection to be taken into account when considering eligibility.

Reasonable preference

All applicants will be placed in the appropriate Housing Needs Band based on an assessment of their needs. This will ensure that the Council and the Partner Organisations (Registered Providers) let homes to those with the highest assessed need and ensure that they meet their legal obligations. The scheme may award reasonable preference to applicants who meet the requirements as defined by statutory requirements and the relevant Code of Guidance on allocations.

Northumberland Homefinder defines their reasonable preference bands as Band P, 1, 2, 2R and 3. The bands are categorised as:

- Priority Band P for those with an urgent and severe housing need;
- Band 1 for those who are in high housing need;
- Band 2 for those who are in medium housing need;
- Band 2R for those in reasonable preference categories but whose priority is reduced; and
- Band 3 for those who are adequately housed

Who can apply

All applications to join the Housing Register will be considered, including existing council and other housing provider tenants, provided that the application has been made in accordance with this scheme and in accordance with Section 166(3) of the 1996 Act.

The Register is open to anyone aged 16 or over, unless they are specifically ineligible. Some Registered Providers (RPs) due to their internal policies on minimum age of tenants

may be unwilling to consider applicants under the age of 18; this will be clearly labelled on property adverts.

Registration does not bind the Council or any of its partners to offer the applicant a particular property or any property at all.

To be registered with the scheme a Homefinder application form (online or paper) must be completed.

Local connection

An applicant does not need to have a local connection with Northumberland to join the Northumberland Homefinder scheme; however, preference will be given to those with a local connection.

The applicant, their partner or a person who might reasonably be expected to reside with the applicant will be defined as having a local connection to Northumberland if they meet one or more of the following criteria:

- They are normally resident in Northumberland and have lived here for 6 out of the past 12 months or 3 out of the past 5 years;
- They are currently employed in Northumberland and the employment is not of a casual nature. Applicants will only be considered to have a local connection in these circumstances, if it is unreasonable to expect them to commute to their place of work from their existing home; or
- They have a close family connection to Northumberland. A close family connection is defined as parent, non-dependent child, grandparent, or adult sibling who has lived in Northumberland continuously for the past five years.

Only in exceptional circumstances would the residence of relatives other than those listed above be taken to establish a local connection.

Local connection (special circumstances)

Where the council has a statutory duty to rehouse, local connection criteria may not be required; this is dependent upon the individual's circumstances.

There are special circumstances which the authority may consider to establish a local connection with Northumberland. Where, for example, an applicant seeks to return to Northumberland where he or she was brought up or lived for a considerable length of time in the past, there may be grounds for considering that the applicant has a local connection with Northumberland because of special circumstances.

Northumberland Homefinder will need to exercise its discretion when considering whether special circumstances apply when:

- The applicant is a person who is serving in the regular forces or has done so in the five years preceding their application for an allocation of housing accommodation;
- Is a bereaved spouse or civil partner of those serving in the regular forces where their spouse or partner's death is attributable (wholly or partly) to their service and the bereaved spouse or civil partner's entitlement to reside in Ministry of Defence accommodation then ceases; or
- Is a seriously injured, ill or disabled reservist (or former reservist) whose injury, illness or disability is attributable wholly or partly to their service.

Local Lettings Plans

Landlords may draw up Local Lettings Plans where local tenants, staff, or other key stakeholders have identified that it would benefit the community. Local Lettings Plans may be used to achieve a wide variety of policy objectives such as to address imbalances in the community or to ring fence new developments.

Rural Allocation Criteria

It is recognised that there may be a lack of affordable homes in rural parishes and measures are in place to support rural communities by awarding additional preference to families with a strong local connection.

A rural allocations criteria may be used to let homes in rural parishes where the landlord, or a Section 106, indicates that this is appropriate.

A close connection to the rural parish is defined as the applicant meeting one of the following criteria:

- Living in the parish continually for at least 3 years immediately prior to the date of selection for an offer;
- Been in continuous full or part-time work (excluding seasonal work) in the parish for at least the last 3 years immediately prior to the date of selection for an offer (part-time work means a minimum of 16 hours per week);
- Lived continuously in the parish for at least 3 years immediately prior to being accepted as homeless but have been placed in temporary accommodation outside of the parish for up to 2 years;
- Having parents, children or siblings who have lived continually in the parish for at least 3 years immediately prior to the date of selection for an offer.

Properties subject to the rural allocation criteria will be offered to applicants in the following order;

1. To applicants with a connection to the parish or adjoining¹ rural parish in bands P, 1, 2 or 2R.

¹ Where there is no accommodation in the adjoining rural parish we will consider applicants in other local rural parishes.

2. To any applicant in bands P, 1, 2 or 2R.
3. To applicants with a connection to the parish or adjoining² rural parish in band 3.
4. To any applicant in band 3.

To ensure fairness, the policies in the document are applied consistently.

The individual circumstances of each applicant are considered in every case using the information provided by the applicant on their Housing Register application form, and subsequently in any ensuing additional information that is requested and/or provided.

The policy allows for any provision to be considered and waived in exceptional circumstances and at the discretion of a Senior Officer who has responsibility for managing the Housing Register.

Updates to the Northumberland Common Allocation Policy ensure that the Authority is compliant with Government legislation and fit for purpose.

Implications

Policy	Supports the delivery of the Corporate Plan and Housing Strategy for Northumberland 2019-2021
Finance and value for money	There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.
Legal	The draft Policy will clearly demonstrate the legal framework through which the Authority assess applications for social housing
Procurement	none
Human Resources	none
Property	none
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	As part of the consultation an EIS will be completed to ensure that fair access to housing for all residents is considered.
Risk Assessment	none
Crime & Disorder	none

² as footnote 1

Customer Consideration	The policy shows that all applications for social housing are assessed in a considered and equitable way.
Carbon reduction	none
Health & Wellbeing	The Common Allocation Policy enables the allocation of properties based upon housing need, ensuring that it supports the health & wellbeing of residents.
Wards	All

Background papers:

Northumberland Homefinder Common Allocation Policy - Version 6 23rd September 2019 (appendix 1)

Report sign off.

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

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