

Statement of

Scrutiny Board
(Environment and
Neighbourhoods)

Changes to the Lettings
Policy

Introduction



Introduction

1. At its June meeting, the Board agreed to continue its inquiry into the Lettings Policy (initiated by the previous Board in 2007/08) by reviewing the proposed changes to the Lettings Policy. We have commented on a number of occasions that housing-related issues form the majority of issues raised at ward level. For this reason we are keen to be involved in the consultation process around policy development. We believe that Councillors have a unique insight into how tenants and potential tenants engage with the system and the difficulties sometimes faced. We also fully understand the department's task in allocating a limited number of homes to an oversubscribed register of potential tenants. As such, we feel we are uniquely placed to help the development of the Lettings Policy at a strategic level.

2. The Board has already issued an interim report with recommendations from last year's work, and this includes a number of issues now covered by the proposed changes in the Lettings Policy. We are pleased to note the work the department has done on the initial recommendations.

3. Due to the detailed nature of the exercise, the Board agreed to review the proposed changes to the Lettings Policy as a working group, reporting comments and potential recommendations to the full Board.

The membership of the working group is:

Cllr Anderson
Cllr Blackburn
Cllr Rafique
Cllr Castle

4. Consultation on the changes to the Lettings Policy has been ongoing. The document reviewed by the working group is available on the Council's internet site and we are aware the key groups such as the Leeds Tenants Federation have had the opportunity to comment. We also noted that a number of changes to the Lettings Policy have been proposed in order to reflect current practice.

5. Overall, we are in favour of the changes being proposed, which in our view aim to address a number of issues within the lettings process. We have not commented on all the proposed changes as a number of changes are being made to keep in line with current practice and to clarify existing policies. We have commented on a number of policies here in order to underline the benefits as seen by Ward Councillors.

Comments and Recommendations



1. From the outset we were pleased to note the methodical nature with which the department has approached the proposed changes to the Lettings Policy, particularly with respect to the recommendations made by the previous Board following an inquiry into the Lettings Policy.
2. Our first query was regarding the policy to establish photo identification for each tenant. We discussed the rationale behind this and agreed that this approach would help the Council to combat subletting. Whilst we understand some tenants will be uncomfortable with the introduction of this policy, we feel that this is in line with other forms of identification, such as Leeds Card or library cards. Whilst we note that this approach cannot be enforced, we feel that it is in line with our previous recommendations.
3. Whilst we wholeheartedly support robust procedures that aim to combat fraud, we would urge the department to exercise sensitivity in implementing this policy, particularly where potential tenants may have strong objections to having a photograph taken in a public office.
4. We were pleased to note the widening of the reduced preference criteria. We note that this will help the department better control the offers made to potential tenants who have been convicted of anti-social behaviour in other areas away from the residence.
5. We also welcome the renaming of the priority bands. We believe this will prove easier to understand and will eliminate confusion over priority status.
6. We were interested in the change to the advertising cycle which will now allow a one day 'breathing space' for the ALMOs. Whilst we appreciate this change will be beneficial, we recommend that particular care is taken to communicate the change to those who are engaged with the lettings process, to avoid confusion. We wish to extend this recommendation to include all the changes that are being proposed, to ensure those involved in the lettings process are fully aware of changes which may affect them.

Recommendation 1

That the Strategic Landlord and the ALMOs communicate the proposed changes to the Lettings Policy effectively to tenants and prospective tenants.

Comments and Recommendations



7. We discussed the proposal to introduce assisted bidding. We note that this is designed for those who are seeking accommodation, but do not engage with the system effectively, either by bidding on unsuitable properties or failing to bid on any property. We understand that by allowing officers, in some circumstances, to make bids on behalf of a potential tenant, more offers can be made to those in the most need who have been waiting for a substantial period of time. We would urge caution in the use of this tool as there are consequences should a property offer be turned down. We suggest that robust monitoring of the implementation of this policy is required.

discussed in detail how Ward Councillors are often required to deal with housing issues and we feel it is necessary to have a very clear policy about the nature of our role.

9. In conclusion, we support all the proposed changes to the lettings policy as detailed in the consultation document. We feel that it is a valuable exercise for the Scrutiny Board to be able to pass comment on policies being developed and we look forward to receiving updates on the implementation of these changes.

Recommendation 2

That adequate monitoring of the implementation of the assisted bidding system is undertaken.

8. We were particularly pleased to note that the role of Elected Members in the lettings system has been reviewed. Whilst we note that the underlying principles are not new, we support the clarification of the Member's role. We have