

Local Lettings Initiative

Area covered by Local Lettings Initiative : Beech House & Sycamore House, Hollybush Estate, Whitchurch

Implementation date : 1st July 2016

Next Review Date : November 2018

Legislative setting

The statutory basis for 'local lettings initiatives' is set in section 167(2E) of the 1996 Housing Act. This allows for an Allocation Scheme to include policy priorities other than those specified in legislation provided that:

- they do not dominate the scheme; and
- overall, the scheme operates to give reasonable preference to those in the statutory reasonable preference categories over those who are not.

Local lettings initiatives can be used to support these locally identified priorities and can be applied to certain types of property or those within a specific area.

Background

Under previous Allocation Schemes households including children were not eligible for high-rise accommodation in Cardiff. The Council's **two bedroom** general needs high-rise flats were therefore offered to couples or single people if there was no other applicant whose housing needs they more closely met – resulting in under-occupation. However, in response to the introduction of social housing size restrictions for Housing Benefit in April 2013 the City of Cardiff Council introduced the requirement for a financial affordability assessment to be undertaken where a formal offer of a property larger than a household needs is made. This restricts the number of applicants qualifying for 2 bedroom high-rise flats resulting in a situation where such flats are becoming 'hard to let'.

The Council's Allocation Scheme dated 11th April 2016 supports the use of local lettings initiatives to 'address sustainability and community issues in defined areas to ensure that a housing allocation scheme based on need helps to build sustainable communities, and does not de-stabilise local communities'. The Scheme states 'All high-rise units in the city will be subject to local lettings initiatives, set to achieve sustainability. Where such Initiatives allow the accommodation of families with children, the child/ren must be aged 8 or over'.

Research into letting arrangements for highrise accommodation in other local authorities indicated that it is commonplace for there to be no restrictions on the type of household rehoused in such blocks. Housing Benefit records also show that there are a number of children already living in Beech House & Sycamore House.

Consultation on the potential introduction of a local lettings initiative at the Hollybush Estate was therefore undertaken. This included liaison with Ward Members, and the Tenant and Resident Group (HETRA) who supported the proposals. An on-site open door session was held for residents to give their views. Although the session was poorly attended approximately 64% of respondents were broadly supportive of the extension of letting criteria for Beech House & Sycamore House to include families with a child aged 8 or over.

Aims of the Local Letting Initiative

Choice & sustainability

Cardiff Council aims to build mixed, sustainable communities and to give applicants as much choice as possible about where they want to live.

The Council has limited accommodation available for families with a 2 bedroom need in Whitchurch – only 7% of the available properties are houses, and over 50% are high-rise flats. Interrogation of the Waiting List shows that, in the absence of a local lettings initiative, only approximately 7% of the 730 households registered for 2 bedroom accommodation in Whitchurch would be considered for 2 bedroom high-rise flats. Offering households with a child aged 8 or over available 2 bedroom flats in Beech House & Sycamore House would therefore provide additional choice for many families.

Making best use of stock & minimising voids

Social housing is in short supply and the Council aims to make the best possible use of available properties. Restricting offers of highrise accommodation at the Hollybush Estate to households without children makes it more difficult to identify suitable applicants from the waiting list who would not be under-occupying the 2-bedroom accommodation. An average of 8 offers are needed to achieve a let (compared with 5 for non-high-rise properties in the area), and an average of 53 applicants are by-passed compared with 14 for non-high-rise properties.

This local lettings initiative aims to address these issues by extending the opportunities for offering flats at Beech House & Sycamore House to families who meet the criteria set out below.

Criteria

Applicant Criteria

Under this Initiative properties that become available at Beech House & Sycamore house may be offered to applicants :

- who have chosen Whitchurch as one of their preferred areas for accommodation
and
- who have a 2 bedroom housing need (in line with current Housing Benefit size criteria)
and
- whose household does not include a child under the age of 8 (and is not expecting a child)
- whose household does not include more than one child.

Offers will be made to applicants identified from the Common Waiting List in line with the current Allocation Scheme and the above criteria, bringing the letting of highrise flats in Beech House & Sycamore House in line with lowrise 2 bedroom flats in the city. This will ensure that reasonable preference is afforded to the groups specified under legislation when letting these properties.

Under this initiative a refusal of an offer of highrise accommodation by a household including a child aged 8 or over will be treated as a 'reasonable refusal'. The refusal will not affect the number of further offers they are made, or their situation on the Common Waiting List.

Operational criteria

- This local letting initiative will be effective from 1st July 2016.
- The initiative will operate for one year in the first instance, after which it will be subject to formal review. This review will be led by the Assistant Director for Housing & Communities in liaison with Ward Members for Whitchurch, and tenants' representatives. The review will determine whether the initiative should

be amended, terminated or extended.

- Interim monitoring reports will be produced quarterly including information on the number of offers made for each available property, the reasons for refusal, and the number of resulting lets (with details of household make-up for all offers, refusals and lets); vacant rates; vacant turnover times and incidents of anti social behaviour. These statistics will be made available to Ward Members for Whitchurch.
- Ongoing monitoring of child density at Beech House & Sycamore House will ensure that a density of 40% of flats accommodating children is not exceeded. Should this density be reached consideration will be given to whether the local letting arrangements should be discontinued, amended, or remain unchanged.