

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

**Agenda
Item No. 8**

9 November 2023

Local Authority Control of Housing Waiting List

Ward(s): All

Portfolios: Councillor Perry – Deputy Leader, Resilient Communities

1. Aim

The purpose of this report is to provide the Scrutiny Overview Committee with information about why the Council has taken control of administering the local Housing Waiting List. It also seeks to inform the Committee about the policy and processes through which officers will prioritise housing applications, and nominate households to receive offers of social housing owned by Housing Associations, where the Council has retained nomination rights.

2. Recommendations

That the Scrutiny Overview Committee considers the contents of this report and decides whether any further information or updates are required.

3. Report detail – know

Context

3.1 Walsall Housing Group (WHG) is a not-for-profit housing association founded in 2003, and is currently responsible for more than 21,000 homes, primarily in the borough of Walsall. These homes were previously controlled by the Metropolitan Borough of Walsall, but were transferred to the housing group following a vote among tenants in 2003. Under this Transfer Agreement the Council receives 50% of nominations for all properties that become available for re-let each year. Similarly, the Council receives 50% of nomination rights with all other housing associations operating within the borough. This type of nomination arrangement enables the successful discharge of homelessness duty for many of the Council's homelessness applicants.

3.2 In accordance with the Transfer Agreement in 2003, whg agreed to manage the Council's Waiting List on behalf of the Council. During February 2023, whg notified the Council of their intention to close the waiting list (to non whg tenants) due to the significant number of applicants, whilst they looked to review their Allocations Policy. This meant it was necessary for the Council to launch a new housing register to ensure that customers were still able to apply for housing. Following positive negotiations between whg and Council officers, it was recognised that it was a significant piece of work for the Council to open a new housing register, and whg agreed to keep their list open until September 2023 to allow this to happen. The Council successfully met this deadline and Walsall Council's new housing register was launched on 4 September 2023. We have

continued to work in partnership with whg since that time and whg have continued to process nominations for us during an interim arrangement period which will end January 2024.

- 3.3 In line with national trends, the number of people leaving social housing has reduced significantly, with the number of re-lets in Walsall reducing from 2,530 in 2017/18 to 1,881 in 2021/22, and estimated to be approximately 1,500 in 2022/23. Working in partnership with our housing association partners, particularly the 4 largest (whg, GreensquareAccord, Watmos, Longhurst) we were able to nominate to at least 50% of their total relets. However the overall reduction in social housing re-lets has made it harder for the Council to discharge its statutory duty under homelessness. The reduction in re-lets is believed to link to the cost of living pressures which means more social housing tenants are choosing to remain in their existing home, as they are less likely to be able to buy their own home, or secure other forms of accommodation in the private rented sector which has become more unaffordable. The Council taking back the administration of the housing waiting list does not mean that the Council will receive additional nominations to social housing properties. It is anticipated that the number of nominations will remain in line with the levels seen in 2022/23.

Walsall Council Housing Allocations Policy

- 3.4 Part VI of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended) sets out the legislative framework through which Local Authorities should maintain and operate their Housing Registers and allocate social housing properties. In accordance with this legislation and the Council's constitution, the Council's Housing Allocations Policy for allocating social housing has been agreed and reviewed in accordance with the timeline below:

- 2010 - Agreed by Cabinet 15 December 2010.
- 2022 - An amended Policy (reconfirming priority for armed forces and homelessness relief applicants, and adding priority for foster carers and adoption cases) was agreed by Cabinet 16 March 2022, whilst also approving delegated authority to make additional changes.
- 2023 - A review of the 2022 Housing Allocations Policy was undertaken in summer 2023 at the point whg advised officers that they wanted to hand back management of the waiting list. As a result, amendments were identified that would be needed to ensure that it would be possible to manage local demand. These amendments were made under delegated authority following a targeted consultation exercise with some customers, Housing Associations, and Council staff. Accordingly, this amended 'interim' Housing Allocations Policy (2023) at Appendix A, will be adopted in January 2024, which is the point that the Council intends to commence direct nominations from its own Housing Waiting List without support from whg. The Council's revised Policy makes the following amendments to the existing Scheme:

i Introduction of Bands A, B, C & D (instead of Gold, Silver, Bronze and Pewter).

- ii. Removal of all references to WHG and Choice Based Lettings
 - iii. Introduction of Direct Offers of accommodation from the Council.
 - iv. Introduction of a required 2 year local connection (with some exemptions e.g. for victims of domestic abuse/armed forces).
 - v. Right to suspend Band C (general needs) when required.
 - vi. Right to introduce property quotas for individual Bands.
 - vii. Additional management discretion.
- 2024 - The Council will then carry out a full review of this interim housing allocation policy (Appendix A), during 2024, following any lessons learnt from the first 3 to 6 months of managing its own Housing Waiting List. It is anticipated that in Quarter 2 of 2024/25 full formal consultation with all stakeholders will begin on this new Allocations Policy, with the aim of that being considered formally by Cabinet in October/November 2024.

Operation of Housing Register

- 3.5 To enable the Council to manage the Housing Waiting List a new Housing Allocations Team has been established consisting of:

1 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) x Housing Allocations Team Leader (G10)
 2 FTE X Housing Allocations Officers (G7)
 2.5FTE x Customer Advisors (G5)

- 3.6 Although the Council opened its Housing Waiting List in September 2023, whg have continued to process nominations on behalf of the Council in line with the existing published Council Allocations Policy (2022), and will do so until January 2024. In the period from September 2023 to January 2024 the Council will assess all new housing register applications in accordance with the attached interim Allocations Policy (Appendix A), to have a waiting list ready for it to commence direct nominations in accordance with this Policy from January 2024. In the meantime, any applications for housing we receive from households in urgent need, including homelessness, are being identified and sent to whg for nomination in line with the existing published Policy (2022) online.

- 3.7 It was agreed that in September 2023 WHG would write to the households on their Choose and Move waiting list asking if they provide consent for them to transfer their data to the Local Authority to enable a swift transition from the Choose and Move list to the Council's waiting list. There are approximately 12,000 Walsall households on the Choose and Move register. To date, 3307 households have provided consent for their data to be transferred to the Council. It is anticipated that WHG will send this data across by mid-November 2023.

4. Financial information

An investment requirement of £225,000 per year from 2024/25 has been submitted as part of the Medium Term Financial Outlook (MTFO) budget setting process to fund the Allocations Team in its current form.

5. Reducing Inequalities

By having control of its own housing waiting list, the Authority is able to closely monitor all cases that are put forward for nomination. This will help support the Council to meet its overall mission of reducing inequality and maximising potential.

An Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) was completed for the interim Allocations Policy which will be effective from January 2024. An EQIA will also take place in quarter 1 2024/25 in readiness for the new Allocations Policy later that year.

6. Decide

That the Scrutiny Overview Committee considers the contents of this report and decides whether any further information or updates are required.

7. Respond

Any recommendations made by the Committee, will be assessed, and where appropriate included in the future implementation plan.

8. Review

There are established regular performance monitoring meetings that take place between the Manager and Team Leader. These meetings are held on a weekly basis. The Project Implementation plan is overseen by the Customer Engagement Senior Management Team via Departmental Management Meetings held monthly.

A cross-party members group has been established to help support the successful implementation of the new Housing Waiting List and support the development of proposals which will become the basis of future consultation on the future Housing Allocations Policy scheduled for quarter 2 of 2023/24.

Background papers

None

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