

Meeting: Secure Sub-Committee

Date: 25 September 2023

Title: Review of the North Tyneside Lettings Policy

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Service: Housing and Property Services

Wards affected: All

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The North Tyneside Council Lettings Policy Review is due for biennial review. The last review was completed in 2021, where no material changes were identified. Since then, housing demands have increased, with a significant growth in the number of housing applications received, more households owed a statutory priority rehousing duty and a reduction in the number of homes that are available to let.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 The Sub-Committee is recommended to:
- (a) Note the information set out in this report regarding the review of the Lettings Policy
 - (b) To update the format of the Lettings Policy to include an Introduction and align with new Corporate branding (font etc).
 - (c) Change the frequency of the Lettings Policy Review to every four years to align with the Tenancy Strategy.
 - (d) Review Bandings to increase customer satisfaction levels and reduce the number of band appeals and enquiries.
 - (e) Implement reviews to band 2 responsible tenants to ensure a qualified housing register of applicants actively seeking rehousing.
 - (f) To introduce the option to discharge statutory rehousing duties outside of the Borough of North Tyneside, where required, with the caveat of a priority status to rejoin the housing register and bid for

rehousing in North Tyneside to reconnect as and when something suitable is available.

The recommendations proposed would help manage the current demands on the housing register and ensure that all lettings are focused on those in most urgent and high need.

3. Introduction

- 3.1 The demand for our Council homes has been the focus of the review as it's important to ensure the review reflects the demands for accommodation and prioritises lettings to those in the highest need.
- 3.2 The Affordable Homes programme is being rolling out at the same time of this review which will, in time, increase the number of homes available to let however this will still not resolve the pressures on the housing register and discharging statutory housing duties in the short to medium term.
- 3.3 This report will address the current pressures on the Local Authority's housing register and proposals to alleviate the pressures on the service, manage customer expectations and ensure that our homes are allocated to those customers in the highest need.

4. Background Information

4.1 Format of Lettings Policy

The format of the current Lettings Policy feels outdated and doesn't align with the Council's new Corporate Branding. Other published Council documents such as the Our North Tyneside Plan are aligned with branding and include an Introduction.

The Lettings Policy is a published Council document and would benefit from being updated to include an introduction as well as being reformatted to align with corporate branding for consistency.

4.2 Frequency of Policy Review

The current commitment to review the Lettings Policy is to complete every two years, which is more frequent and unlike other Policies within the housing service which are reviewed every four or five years.

Policy / Strategy	Current Frequency of Review	Comment
Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2023-2028	5 years	For purposes of comparison only
Tenancy Strategy 2021-2025	4 years	For purposes of comparison only

Lettings Policy	2 years	Proposal to extend review period to every 4 or 5 years <i>or</i> as appropriate to reflect any change in legislation which may impact
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The commitment to a biennial review of the Lettings Policy seems to be too frequent. While it is recognised that the housing market and economic climates may influence the demands on the housing register this is kept under regular review and unless there are any statutory changes in legislation, or sector best practise, it would seem reasonable to maintain regular ongoing reviews and monitoring within the service between the four or five yearly reviews.

4.3 Housing Register: Bandings

There are currently six bands on the North Tyneside Homefinder and are awarded to applicants based on their level of need for rehousing. These bands are outlined in and awarded in line with the North Tyneside Council Lettings Policy.

Housing Applications Received	963
Housing Applications Closed	704
Direct Lets (awaiting offer)	20
Active Housing Applications	3455
Band 1	10
Band 2	313
Band 3	1319
Band 4	223
Band 5	1290
Band 6	299

Due to the high demand for housing in North Tyneside, the Homefinder Team deal with an increasing high volume of requests for banding reviews and appeals against banding.





Many appeals received by the Homefinder Team are from customers in Band 3 or Band 2, hoping to further increase their priority.

While it is recognised there are a high number of applicants with a band 3 status, band 3 is a good priority banding and of all lets across 2022/23, the highest number of lettings from the housing register were in band 3 (see section 4).

The volume of appeals and enquiries in relation banding awards would indicate that customers are not satisfied with the decisions being made around their rehousing priority although with a low number of decisions being

overturned, we can see that the team are making correct decision against the Council's policy.

The bandings may benefit from a review; while this will not make a difference to the total number of bands or significant difference to the volume of people bidding it may give applicants more satisfaction in our assessment of their housing need.

Current Criteria	Current Band		Proposed Band
Time-limited 3 months -Severe illness -Hospital discharge -Care/ residential care -Child experiencing abuse -Statutory overcrowding -Property condition (Enviro Health) -Witness Protection -Domestic Abuse/ MARAC	1		1+
Time limited for 3 months -Medical or welfare (high) -S21/ end of non-secure tenancy -Armed forces -Overcrowded by 2+ bedrooms -Adoption -Anti-social behaviour -Domestic Abuse -Leaving care -Leaving supported accommodation	2		1
-Homelessness relief duty -Medical need (eased) -Sharing facilities/ overcrowding -Property condition -Employment in borough -Flat above ground floor & child under 5	3		2
No local connection, but would meet priority need (band 1, 2 or 3)	4		3

Has local connection, but no priority need (adequately housed)	5	➔	4
No local connection & no priority need	6	➔	5

The number of housing applications continues to rise week on week with approximately 200 applications being received each week. 52% of the applications active on the housing register are in non-priority bands 4, 5 and 6.

The Homefinder Team have reviewed and adopted different ways of working to achieve the most effective way of managing the volume of applications however customers are still having to wait between four and six weeks for assessment.

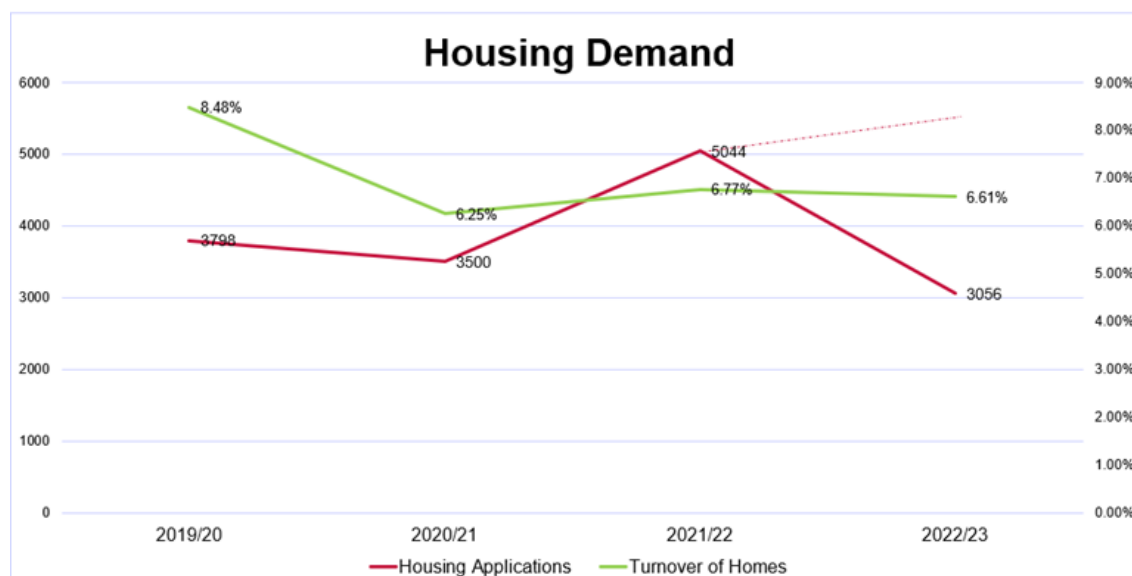
Of those applicants with a band 2 priority status, 36.6% are responsible (10 year) tenants, wishing to transfer for reasons other than medical or welfare.

4.4 Allocations and Lettings

There is pressure on the Council for housing is due to a decline in the turnover of homes with social housing being the most affordable and appropriate housing option to low income and many vulnerable households.

The turnover rate of existing Council properties since the Covid-19 pandemic has been has not recovered since the pre-pandemic period, and it is expected to remain low and is not expected to recover in the medium term.

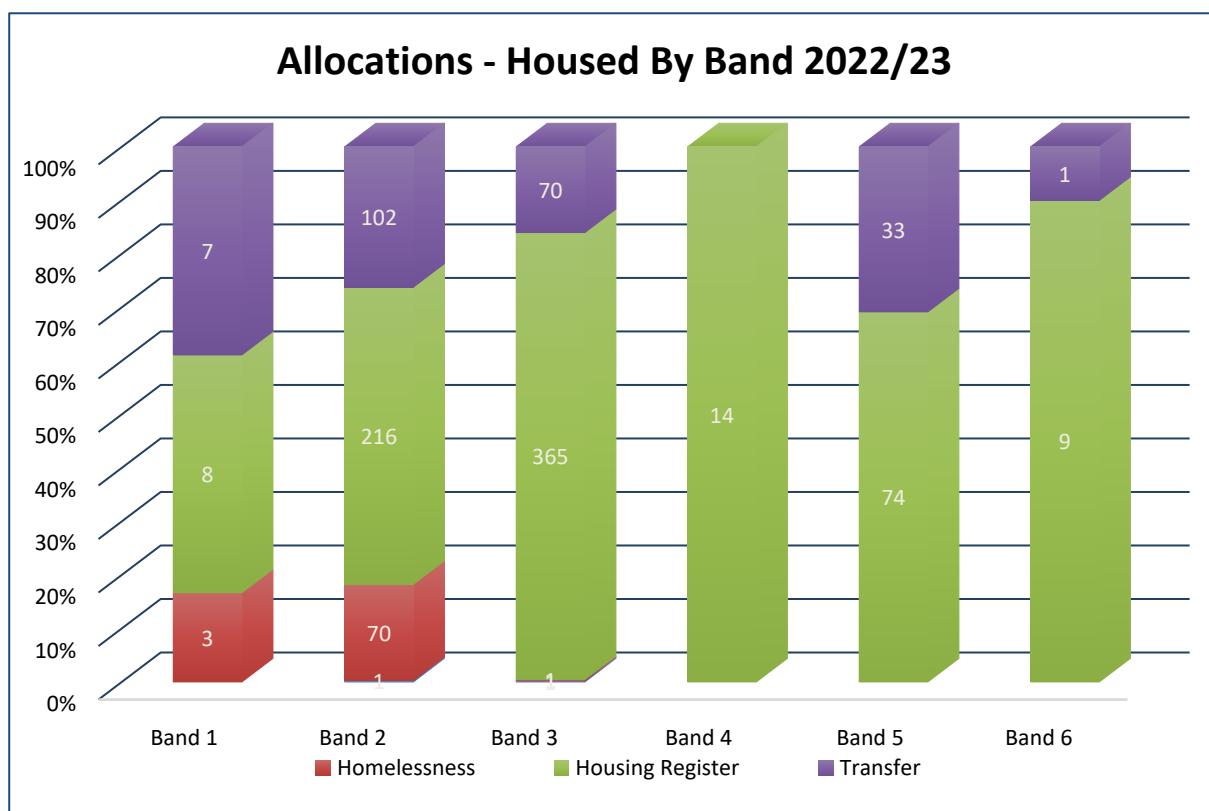
Banding	Rehoused 2022/23	Rehoused 2023 (to date)
Band 1	18	8
Band 2	388	161
Band 3	435	149
Band 4	14	6
Band 5	107	47
Band 6	10	5



It is possible to see from the data forecast that the number of housing register applications is going to continue to rise and the number of homes coming available for lettings is continuing to reduce or remain at lower levels.

21.85 % of all lettings 2022/23 all to general register transfers, with a notable number of transfers being awarded to customers who are adequately housed in bands 5 and 6 with no medium or high need for rehousing. It is also likely that there are responsible (10 year) tenants in band 2 being rehoused ahead of customers with a band 2 high medical or welfare need.

Applicants in priority bands 1 and 2 are all subject to review every three months to support high need or urgent moves. The current Policy does not require a review of the band 2 status for responsible tenants and many applicants remain active on the housing register with a high priority, without regular bidding, awaiting a preference coming available, rather than actively bidding for homes because of housing need i.e., downsizing or accessibility etc.



A priority for the Lettings Policy review is to ensure customer expectations are managed, those in greatest housing need are supported to find a home and ensure statutory housing duties can be fulfilled.

New standards and legislation through the Social Housing White Paper and the Private Rented Sector White paper are driving changes across the housing sector and impacting on the demand for social housing.

4.5 Homelessness and Domestic Abuse

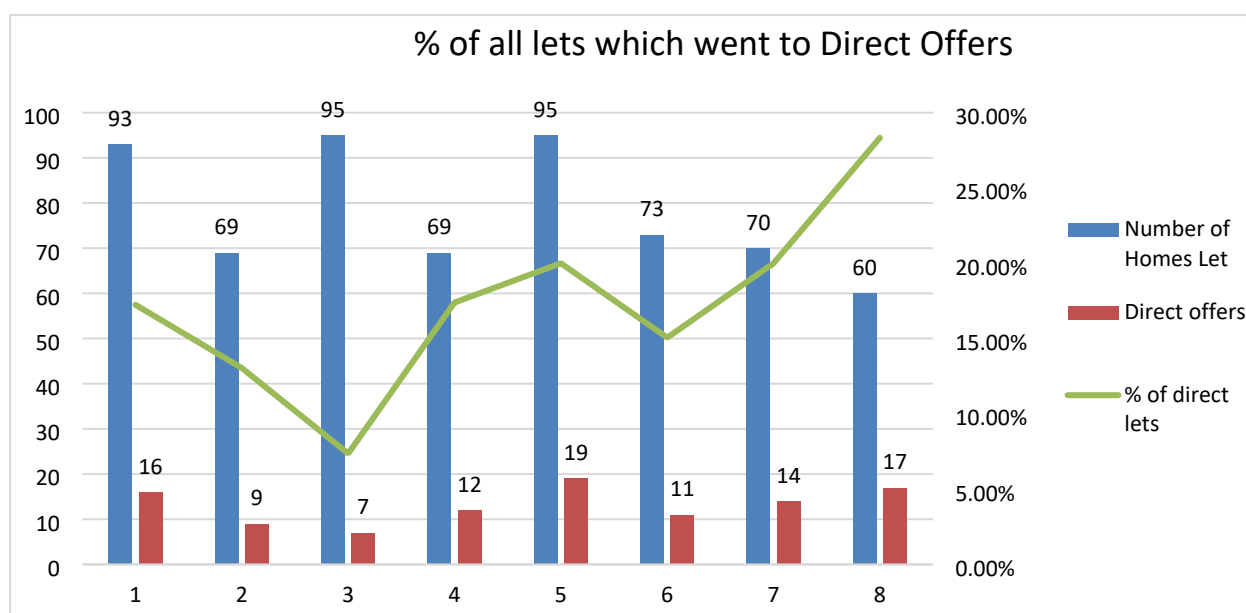
	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Homeless due to Domestic Abuse	79	204	83	25 (100)
Temporary Accommodation Placements	304	341	288	114 (456)
Families in Temporary Accommodation	8	74	104	39 (156)
Average Nights in Dispersed	N/A	N/A	83	105
Average Nights in B&B	N/A	N/A	14	22
Rehoused: Council Tenancy	193 (%)	271 (%)	267 (%)	21
Rehoused: Private Rented	103	120	145	12

Pressures within the Private Rented Sector such as affordability, the ending of Section 21 evictions and heightened expectations on Private Landlords is seeing Landlords choosing to exit the market and leaving an increasing number of households facing homelessness and in need of affordable accommodation.

As a direct result of the increased number of homeless acceptances, there has been increase in households placed into temporary accommodation, and the time households are remaining in temporary accommodation is increasing.

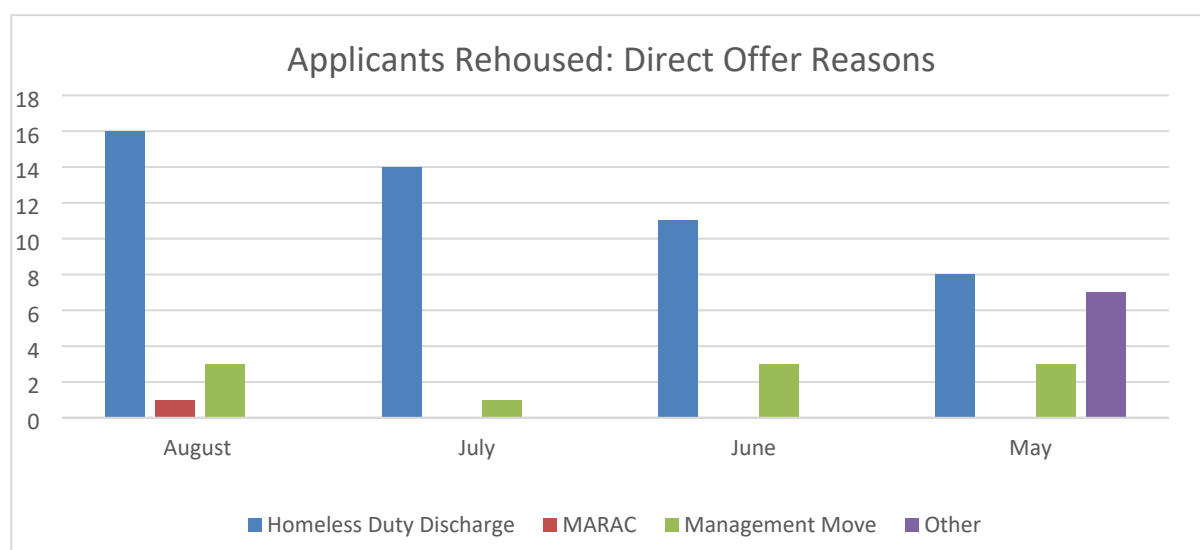
The cost to the Authority for the Temporary Accommodation provision is rising significantly and is a financial pressure to the Authority. This is partly due to the extended time it is taking for homeless households to receive an offer of suitable accommodation and longer stays in Bed and Breakfast provision.

In response to the increase in the demands to discharge statutory duties to those in the highest priority need, the number of Direct Let requests has gone up. Fewer homes are going out to advert through North Tyneside Homefinder with a high number of homes being held back from advertising through Choice Based Lettings each week.



The Direct let process is adopted under exceptional circumstances outside of the housing register lettings scheme. The process removes the element of choice from applicants as they are restricted from bidding through North Tyneside Homefinder.

The Housing Advice service work intensively with customers during the 56 Homeless Prevention Duty period to support customers to prevent homelessness however with fewer options available in the Private Rented Sector either through availability or affordability, the demands on the Council for accommodation continue to rise. The main reason for Direct Let requests recorded between May 2023 and August 2023 was statutory homelessness discharge.



Since the Introduction of the Domestic Abuse Act in 2021, there have been further statutory expectations placed on Local Authorities in relation to housing. There has been a rise in the number of Domestic Abuse cases presenting to the Housing Advice Service as homeless, or supported through the MARAC process, for rehousing. This further impacts on the number of Direct Lets requested to safeguard survivors of Domestic Abuse.

Due to the lack of available accommodation in North Tyneside, considerations from across the sector, would look to consider suitable housing options to discharge statutory housing duties outside of the Borough of North Tyneside. With that, the Policy would allow customers a priority banding to rejoin the housing register, giving the opportunity to connect back to North Tyneside as and when successful with bidding on a Council home. This would help reduce the time households and families are spending in emergency Bed and Breakfast accommodation, getting them into settled accommodation and reducing overall costs on Temporary Accommodation.