

ALLOCATIONS POLICY REVIEW

CONSULTATION FEEDBACK

1. Focus Groups
2. Tenant responses
3. Summary of Questionnaire responses
4. Summary of consultation responses (letters/emails)

## The Choice Based Lettings

### Summary Report of Focus Group Consultation August 2004

The focus group consultation was carried out, independently by Community Consultants Limited who are experienced in conducting focus group consultation.

#### Objectives

This report presents the findings of six focus groups conducted with various 'hard to reach' communities to examine their views about Southwark Council's decision to introduce a Choice Based Lettings scheme for its property allocation.

There were three main objectives for the consultation:

- to examine participants awareness of the existing housing allocation policy ;
- to explore participants reaction to:
  - ◊ the new bidding process for properties
  - ◊ the information
  - ◊ the new priority bands used for determining housing need
  - ◊ to identify ways in which the Choice Based lettings scheme could be improved

A total of six focus groups were conducted with communities selected by the Council. The group discussions were held between 30<sup>th</sup> July to 9<sup>th</sup> August:

#### Advantages and disadvantages

*Advantages of the new bidding scheme: Once explained, the consultation found a high degree of satisfaction with the new bidding process from participants in all six focus groups. The process was seen to be both transparent and empowering as people could actively select the property of their choice rather than an allocation officer making the decisions for them.*

*"This is a simple way. You have a choice of properties whereas with the system now you were blind folded." (Somali Men's group)*

*The new system was perceived to offer more flexibility and choice, as applicants were no longer limited to a single offer.*

*"You can see how many people have bid and if it's worth bidding for a property." (Homeless group 1)*

**Disadvantages of the new bidding scheme:** *Despite the high degree of satisfaction with the proposed bidding process, participants expressed a number of reservations. The first was that the bidders would be unable to view properties prior*

to making a bid. This was perceived to be unfair because a photograph showing the outside of the property was no indication of the interior.

*“The numbers of people looking for a property can cause disappointment because you might have no chance.” (Homeless group 1)*

*Some participants also saw the bidding process as raising expectations which could not be fulfilled because, whatever the allocation process, it would not affect the basic imbalance in the supply and demand for properties. Nor could it suddenly produce the types of homes desired by most applicants:*

*“The system isn’t changing anything because there still aren’t the homes.” (Caribbean group)*

*Thirdly, some participants thought it was unfair for the Council to transfer responsibility for seeking and applying for accommodation onto applicants:*

*“Under this system you have to find the accommodation yourself.” (Homeless group 1)*

*Clearly, some see a downside side to empowerment!*

*Finally, a small minority felt the system was still open to abuse because applicants will lie and Council officers will continue to be responsible for (inaccurately) inputting applicant details:*

*“I think there will be corruption by tenants and the Council.” (Caribbean group)*

*“I think the system will be corrupt because it’s the humans who are keying in the information.” (African group)*

## **Bidding Process**

*Automated telephone helpline: This was the preferred method for most participants as it was both simple and easy to use. Crucially, the consultation found that almost everyone had access to a telephone, be it a mobile or landline, to make their bids. A minority in the Somali Women’s group initially expressed reservations because they were non-English speakers. However, these reservations were removed once it was explained that they could bid in Somali with assistance from housing officers. In contrast, participants in the Somali Men’s group felt most elders would continue to prefer face-to-face interaction due to their lack of confidence in using telephones.*

**The Internet:** *This method appealed primarily to the younger participants, as they were familiar with using information technology. People liked the idea of being able to make a bid at any time and from any location. The older participants were less likely to use this medium, in part because of fears of using new technology. ? It was felt that some of these fears can be removed if the Council were to provide appropriate training?*

**Repair Kiosks:** *Of the three mediums tested the kiosks were the least appealing to participants. Low awareness of the kiosks and reservations about using new technology were cited as the main reasons for non-use.*

### **Venues**

*Whilst there was high degree of support for the list of accessible venues highlighted by the Council, a wide range of additional venues were also suggested such as Hostels, Schools, GP surgeries, Health centres, Hospitals, Newsagents, Southwark News, The Voice and Caribbean Times, Tube Stations, Poster campaigns at bus stops and Job Centres.*

*In addition, a minority of participants suggested the Newsletter be posted to applicants.*

### **Information in the Newsletter**

*Participants said that they wanted both more detailed information about the property, as well information about the surrounding area including, Crime statistics for the surrounding area; History of previous tenants and any anti- social neighbours; If the property had been 'black listed' by financial companies; League tables of local schools; Photographs of all the rooms within the property; Detailed measurements about the size of kitchen and bathroom and pest control issues.*

*Also there were requests for the Newsletter to include properties on offer by other Councils. "I want to move out of Southwark. Could they include Council properties in other areas?" (Homeless group 2); "I'm looking to move out of Southwark. Would they include properties in other areas?" (Caribbean group)*

### **The New Priority Bands**

An initial, and surprising, problem was that, when comparing the old and the new systems (Lists A and B), some participants could not see much, if any, difference between the existing and proposed allocations policies. *"It doesn't seem much different." (Caribbean group)*

The Somali Men welcomed the changes because it appeared to offer single people (like them) the opportunity to secure Council accommodation: *"I like this policy because before we couldn't get housed." (Somali Men's group)*

For others the existing system was perceived to be cumbersome and slow to re-house people, so any changes, which can simplify the process was welcomed: *"The old system ain't working. It can only get better." (Caribbean group)*

However, the vast majority of participants opposed the new bands because they felt that they discriminated against those in greatest need. The ranking of homeless people (in Band 3) and those in urgent medical priority (in Band 2) were heavily criticised in all six focus groups. Homeless families were perceived as being some of the most vulnerable people in society, so that extending the length of time it takes to re-house them was universally held to be unacceptable. *"Homeless people are vulnerable. How can the Council put them in band 3?" (Homeless group 1)*

Homeless participants argued that both tensions and anti-social behaviour would increase the longer applicants remained in hostels. Many of the hostels were also deemed to be unsafe places to raise children because they were full of “druggies and criminals.” *There needs to be more sensitivity to how people are placed in hostels.* (Homeless group 2)

Similarly, participants felt the Council was insensitive in expecting those with serious medical conditions to live in unsuitable premises. *“Sick people need special accommodation. Why is the Council doing this?”* (Somali Men’s group)

Because of the high levels of dissatisfaction with the proposed new system, respondents were asked what changes they would make to the priority bands. Unsurprisingly, the majority of participants advocated moving the homeless and those in medical priority to Band 1. *“Homeless, urgent medical priority and medical priority should be moved to band 1.”* (African group)

There was also some support for moving the under occupiers to another band because: *“These people already have places so why is the Council giving them such a high priority?”* (Homeless group 2)

### **Conclusion**

The consultation found that participants were broadly in favour of the proposed new bidding process and thought that the Newsletters offered applicants greater choice and freedom in selecting their accommodation. However, there was little understanding of, or sympathy with, the new system for determining housing needs as the four bands were seen to penalise those in most need, such as homeless families and those in medical need, whilst appearing to give priority to those in low need, such as under-occupiers. The Council will therefore need to be sensitive in communicating the new allocations policy to applicants.

## TENANT RESPONSES

Neighbourhood Forums were consulted over the summer and their recommendations are attached.

Additionally, the Allocations Policy review consultation was included on the agenda of Tenant Council on 13 September 2004 and the following issues were raised:

- Concern about the best properties being snapped up and leaving the worst properties as hard to let
- Tenant Council did not agree with the word "bid" and wished this to be changed to "apply".
- Questions on the following were raised during the meeting and responses provided
  - When and where the magazine would be available
  - Frequency of bidding cycle
  - Cost of temporary accommodation
  - Participation of RSLs
  - Support for those with language difficulties

## RECOMMENDATIONS OF NEIGHBOURHOOD FORUMS

### Allocations Policy Review Consultation

#### **Abbeyfield (24 August 2004)**

Abbeyfield Neighbourhood Forum supports the new allocation policy referred to as choice based letting and will request that process should have designated old peoples dwellings.

#### **Acorn (12 July 2004)**

#### **Alfred Salter (27 July 2004)**

Alfred Salter Neighbourhood Forum broadly welcomes the report though make the following recommendations:

1. All reference to "bid", "bidding" and "bidder" should be removed and replaced with applicant expressing an interest.
2. Adding to range of support being offered to vulnerable applicants and add and undertake home visits as required.
3. Further clarification on vacancies becoming available when overcrowded applicants are rehoused - is it because more smaller properties will become available?
4. The housing department directly approaches people to encourage and facilitate mutual exchanges.
5. Insanitary conditions - clarification sought on what this means exactly.
6. That there has to be regular advertising (possibly every week and, not every fortnight), to ensure that properties are let quickly and prevent squatting; and properties pre-allocated as soon as possible.

#### **Cherry Gardens (13 July 2004)**

#### **Crown House (29 July 2004)**

#### **Denmark Hill (06 July 2004)**

#### **Harris Street (23 August 2004)**

Harris Street Neighbourhood Forum received the report and the presentation but deferred their recommendations until their September meeting to enable individual Tenants and Residents Associations to discuss it with their membership.

**Leathermarket Gardens (09 August 2004)**

1. Introducing a new prioritising structure – the Forum thinks that the choice based system is a good idea and better than the previous Allocation System.
2. Advertising most vacant properties and inviting applicants to bid.
3. Offering properties to the highest priority household.
4. That the Forum has considered and accepted the recommendations of the new letting policy with the proviso that the T&RAs and TMC will need to speak to its membership and will raise any queries at a later stage.

**Library Street (20 July 2004)**

**Lynton Road (No Forum meeting since 22 April 2004)**

**Parkside (27 July 2004)**

Received and noted.

**Pelican (20 July 2004)**

**Rodney Road ()**

**Rosemary Gardens (10 August 2004)**

Rosemary Gardens Forum request that the current allocation policy be forwarded with the new proposed changes to the allocation policy to tenants before a decision is made.

Rosemary Gardens Forum believes that the schedule to implement the policy by early next year is not workable.

This Forum recommends that Tenant Council make an application to the government to allow Southwark Council to release money from capital receipts to build additional council housing.

Rosemary Gardens Forum also recommends that the position on under-occupiers be reviewed further.

The Forum recommended that they receive more information on the matter, with the Executive Report to be forwarded to CL.

**Taplow (03 August 2004)**

**West Camberwell (11 August 2004)**

**West Walworth (05 August 2004)**



The meeting was not quorate but the following comments were made:

A review of how Old Person Dwellings are designated and allocated across the Borough would be helpful. A report to come to Area Forums in the future.

15 September 2004

### Housing Allocation Policy Questionnaire: Summary

**Q1 Do you understand the information in this leaflet and how the process will work?**

	<b>Total (number)</b>	<b>Total (90)</b>
	<b>90</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>How the properties will be advertised</b>		
<b>Yes</b>	76	<b>84</b>
No	5	6
No Reply	9	10
<b>Priority bands</b>		
<b>Yes</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>82</b>
No	12	13
No reply	4	4
<b>How to make a bid</b>		
<b>Yes</b>	69	<b>77</b>
No	11	12
No Reply	10	11

**Q2 Do you like the idea of advertising vacant properties**

	<b>Total (number)</b>	<b>Total (90)</b>
	<b>90</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Like the idea of advertising vacant properties</b>		
<b>Yes</b>	68	<b>76</b>
No	14	16
No reply	8	9

**Q3 We intend to advertise properties in a specially produced newsletter. Where should this newsletter be made available?**

**In order of preference:**

- 1. Local Housing Office and other Council buildings (town hall, homeless reception, one stop shops)**
- 2. Libraries**
- 3. Post offices**
- 4. Supermarkets**
- 5. Voluntary organisations and community centres**
- 6. Other – including via post, via internet/website, surgeries, via local newspapers, banks and building societies and newsagents**

**Q4 Do you think you would need assistance to make a bid? If so, please specify which of the services below would be most helpful to you.**

	<b>Total (number)</b>	<b>Total (90)</b>
	<b>90</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Do you think you would need assistance to make a bid</b>		
<b>Housing Officer to explain the process</b>	42	<b>47</b>
<b>Support from carer or Council officer</b>	27	<b>30</b>
<b>Access to the Internet</b>	26	<b>29</b>
<b>Translation into your own language</b>	7	<b>8</b>
<b>Other</b>	9	<b>10</b>
<b>No Reply</b>	31	

**Other Services most helpful:**

- Community organisation.
- If you live in the UK you speak ENGLISH and therefore, do not require a translator.
- Transport to help people move away to the seaside, etc.
- Please explain in simple English.
- A contact number to check results.

- Support from special community groups.
- Those that need help should get it but sometimes people pull the wool over the Council's eyes. Seems that only one type of family gets all the help.
- It is better to give support to everyone so that no-one is left out

**Q5.What do you think about the new bands and changes in priorities?**

- Good idea.
- If it creates more choice and more people move then it is good.
- Concern over the low priority of the homeless and it is a burden for them to continually reapply for properties.
- Quite nice, let's hope it works!
- It's okay but only if it is going to be fair and less discriminatory and draconian. People need a choice.
- Sheltered housing not banded.
- Age banding not shown.
- I think it sound fair but will it work?
- Very good as it would give everybody an equal chance to make a choice. The question of fear and desperation of being refused an offer would be removed.
- A good idea spoilt by the usual LB's incompetence in wishing to incorporate good practice from other more competent housing authorities with taking too many conflicting issues on board.
- Don't know.
- Sounds like a good idea that tenants can bid for properties in the areas that they want to live.
- More informative than previous council methods.
- A good idea although it does not state how those who have been on the list for a long time will be pushed up it.
- We need to understand more. More help should be given to old people. A chance to move from here.
- Do not quite understand the new priority categories.
- The previous bands were unfair. The new bands are just right.
- Cool, but how about individual assessments? You tend to give less priority to the young homeless, people who in turn are turning into antisocial behaviour hooligans. Why not have a special band for young vulnerable people and thus solve ASBO problems.
- I am always a little concerned about computer selected priority. This may on occasions be to the detriment of humane reasons for rehousing. Different individuals can have very unique reasons, outside the categories, but may be disadvantaged.
- Good if it works. Southwark Housing has good ideas but can't seem to make any schemes work.
- Insanitary conditions (band 3) should be moved to band 1.
- It makes sense.
- I have no information. A friend in North London has just used the system and told me all about it.

- I feel that care leavers should be in band 1.
- A step in the right direction.
- Not in favour of the changes in priorities.
- Don't understand them.
- I think it's a good way of prioritising those with the most needs and putting them into other categories.
- Simpler system which is easier to understand. An effective way to ensure the best use of available housing in the Borough.
- I am concerned that people who do not have high needs will be left living in unsuitable conditions, e.g. young people 18-25 years of age that cannot afford to move out of the family home.
- I think this is going to be good if it works out.
- Bands are fair. People like myself may have a quicker chance of being rehoused as we are living in overcrowded accommodation. We also need to move on medical grounds.
- Excellent.
- Do think this is much different to the categories we have now.
- Good idea. Many people have special needs but individual urgent cases should be given priority.
- Recipe for 21st century racism.
- Please put my name on the waiting list
- I have been on the transfer list since 1993. Have 67 points which has been no help to me. I think this will be a better and fairer way, hopefully.
- They seem okay in theory and hopefully when put into practice will work and give people like myself, with a very grim outlook, a more positive chance of being rehoused. Look forward to it.
- Do not agree with doing away with the point system.
- Seems okay but the Council needs to be flexible and assess needs.
- I think more priority should be given to older people living near noisy and antisocial neighbours and thus might like to live in a quieter area. None of the bands mention older tenants.
- Good as it gives everyone a chance to find what they need. Bad however, because by advertising everything that is empty gives squatters opportunities.
- The banding system is good but what about those that are single, with no dependents and over 29 years of age? Which band will they fall into? They seem to be overlooked.
- Excellent idea. It would enable individuals to choose properties where they like and would help families who need a larger property.
- Okay in some respects but what about a couple with two older family members of say 21 and 25 years of age who are sharing one bedroom? What if you want to move to another Borough but they don't? It seems to be either unmarried mothers or asylum seekers or foreigners or drug users who pay little or no rent that get all the available places. It seems like a fiddle all round. Some foreigners deserve it but others don't. Decent homes for decent people. No difference if black, white, pink or green just as long as they are decent and hard working.
- Reasonable but do not totally approve of the changes.

## **CONSULTATION – emails, letters and telephone calls**

A range of responses to the new proposals have been received by letter, email and telephone. Generally, respondents were positive:

“I positively support scheme – think its brilliant if it works properly” (tenant)

“I am happy to see .....introduction of choice-based lettings. Would it not be a good idea in the meantime to stop imposing draconian penalties on people like me who, though desperate, have good reasons for refusals and hope for dignity and choice for themselves and their children” (overcrowded tenant)

“I agree with your system and the sooner it is put into operation the better it will be for a lot of us who are living under over-crowded situations – which is hard to cope with” (housing applicant)

“Just to say this scheme sounds really good and can you please let me know when it will be starting” (registered on housing list for 9 years with medical problem)

“I would be very grateful if I can be considered for this scheme. I would love to receive adverts and listings of properties on offer” (applicant with daughter diagnosed with Lymphoma)

“I think the new ideas will solve many problems” (tenant awaiting transfer)

“It’s a good idea, but I have many questions” (housing applicant who requested further information about banding, advertising, bidding cycle etc)

“I think the new system..... to bid for a property sounds really interesting” (housing applicant responding to article in Your Housing Options newsletter)

“This is the best news for many people, who are intolerably pressurised by staff to accept the property they have viewed, having to make the decision on the spot, pressurised by staff who know nothing of their circumstances. The current allocations and viewing system is inhumane, inflexible, degrading and much too stressful for many applicants to cope with. I cannot cope with it” (tenant)

However, reservations were expressed:

“I find it hard to believe that it will work” (overcrowded tenant with clinically depressed husband)

“I am slightly concerned at the new Bands, and how inflexible they will be. Support for vulnerable applicants is essential, as is continual monitoring of the process to ensure applicants are not losing out due to various disadvantages” (tenant)

“As a tenant I am not very happy with the proposed key changes you plan – I don’t quite understand this strategy of bidding”