

**REPORT TO:** Cabinet

**MEETING DATE:** 13 March 2007

**BY:** Director of Community Services

**SUBJECT:** Local Lettings Plans

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## **1 PURPOSE**

- 1.1 To seek Cabinet approval for the Local Lettings Plan model, development approach and review mechanism demonstrated by the Northfield Local Lettings Plan.
- 1.2 To seek Cabinet approval of the Northfield Local Lettings Plan.

## **2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 That Cabinet approves the Northfield Local Lettings Plan development approach and review mechanism.
- 2.2 That Cabinet agrees to limit the number of Local Lettings Plans for East Lothian as a whole to a maximum of five, consistent with paragraph 3.8.
- 2.3 That Cabinet agrees that each Local Lettings Plan will require Cabinet approval prior to implementation.
- 2.4 That Cabinet approves the Northfield Lettings Plan effective from 2 July 2007.

## **3 BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 states that all social landlords must let houses in such a way that gives reasonable preference to those in housing need, makes best use of available stock, maximises choice, and helps to sustain communities.
- 3.2 However, in meeting the Council's legal obligations as landlords under the Housing (Scotland) 2001 Act, and allocating property to those in most housing need alone, this can often create a community that becomes unbalanced and difficult to sustain.

- 3.3 The main objective of the new Allocations Policy is to meet the Council's legal obligations specified in allocations and homelessness legislation but also recognise that there are applicants on our housing list who are not covered by this legislation.
- 3.4 Applicants to the housing list with low housing need have limited opportunity to secure Council housing but are often applicants who are able to contribute to promoting balanced and sustainable communities.
- 3.5 The new Allocations Policy addresses this by the introduction of the Sustainable Communities Group, which uses Local Lettings Plans to allocate property.
- 3.6 A Lettings Plan will operate alongside the Council's new needs based Allocations Policy but will allocate vacancies according to the particular circumstances of the estate or area by letting to a household that will contribute to the sustainability of that community. A Lettings Plan may be required where there are subsequent issues that have occurred within an established community, and action is required to assist that community to become sustainable.
- 3.7 A Local Lettings Plan proposal can come from Community Housing & Property Management staff, elected members or tenants & residents groups within the Musselburgh, Prestonpans, Tranent and East areas.
- 3.8 Where there are proposals for more than one Local Lettings Plan for an area, agreement must be reached that gives one Plan priority in the year ahead. Community Housing & Property Management will take a flexible approach to the number of Lettings Plans and consider one further Lettings Plan in addition to the original four.
- 3.9 In order for a Lettings Plan to be adopted there should be strong supporting evidence from housing management systems that would allow Cabinet to approve each Lettings Plan. This could include stock turnover, refusal rates or anti-social behaviour.
- 3.10 Local Lettings Plans will select appropriate applicant attributes to allocate properties that will contribute to the sustainability of the community. Those applicants with the appropriate attributes will be selected and priority given to the applicant with the earliest date of application.
- 3.11 Local Lettings Plans will not be used in isolation, but will form part of other regeneration and local initiatives and also work alongside other policies such as estate management and anti-social behaviour.
- 3.12 There will be a need to monitor and review the aims and objectives of a Local Lettings Plan at each stage of development and implementation. In addition, each Lettings Plan will be monitored and reviewed at its conclusion, against the supporting evidence provided at its outset, to gauge whether the aims and objectives of the Plan are achieved.

#### **4 POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 In the development of Local Lettings Plans, attributes may be selected to balance and sustain a community that may not meet with current good practice, for example, the age of the applicant. Careful consideration will be given when selecting attributes within a Lettings Plan and only used when the needs of the local community require doing so.

#### **5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 Financial – Local Lettings Plans should align with relevant local initiative and environmental improvement budgets as set.
- 5.2 Personnel - None. Development work, monitoring and review will become part of the new workload of Community Housing & Property Management Staff.
- 5.3 Other - None.

#### **6 BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 6.1 Attached Appendix 1 - Northfield Local Lettings Plan.

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Lettings Plan: Northfield, Tranent

Date: July 2007

Review: July 2008

### Policy Framework

Tenant Participation Strategy  
Partnership Working  
Advice & Information Provision  
Homelessness Strategy  
Links to the Local Housing Strategy  
Allocations Policy  
Void Management Policy  
Suspension and Deferment Policy  
Anti-Social Behaviour Policy  
Local Initiatives  
Estate Management & Inspection  
Community Support Officers work plan

### Introduction

A lettings plan operates alongside the Council's needs-based allocation policy but allocates vacancies according to the particular circumstances of the estate or area by letting to a household that will contribute to the sustainability of that community. A lettings plan may be required where there are issues that have occurred within an established community, and action is required to assist that community to become sustainable. There will be clear evidence of the need to vary the overall policy and a time limit for review.

By sustainable communities we mean places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. Communities, which meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a higher quality of life.

East Lothian Council's cabinet sets percentage allocation targets for the sustainable communities group and lettings plans on an annual basis and this lettings plan will operate within those targets.

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## Proposal for development of lettings plan

The proposal for development of a local lettings plan was suggested by the following: -

- Northfield Tenants & Residents Group proposes that a lettings plan is developed in response to issues arising through their meetings.
- The Community Housing team for Tranent propose the development of a lettings plan for Northfield due to issues in relation to Anti Social Behaviour, turnover etc.

## The aim of the lettings plan

The Northfield area includes two streets, Northfield and Northfield East in Tranent and has been problematic, both from a housing management and tenant and resident perspective. Statistics show that there continues to be issues relating to antisocial behaviour and neighbour nuisance, along side higher turnover of properties.

A lettings plan for Northfield would aim to alter the profile of people living in it to promote greater sustainability for the community. A percentage target of allocations would be made to those who are able to assist in this aim and have been unable to secure Council housing, currently occupying housing in the private rented sector with its high rental costs or living with friends and family, prevented from entering the pressurised housing market. Fewer allocations in Northfield would be made to vulnerable households. The lettings plan will also attempt to exclude those with a history of antisocial behaviour who might pose a risk to the local community.

East Lothian Council does not wish to exclude any prospective tenant from accessing housing and uses this only as a measure of last resort but within this particular lettings plan there is a need to balance the needs of the community against those of individuals who may pose a risk to it.

In addition to the above, the lettings plan aims to deliver the Local Housing Strategy Objectives: -

- To promote and enable sustainable communities
- To promote and enable sustainable housing
- To prevent and reduce homelessness

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## **The objectives for the lettings plan**

In developing a lettings plan for Northfield, the objectives are as follows: -

- To reduce the levels of antisocial behaviour
- To reduce the levels of neighbour nuisance/complaints
- To reduce the level of crime/vandalism
- To increase access to social housing for those with lower housing needs
- Promote social inclusion
- Making best use of housing stock
- Increase tenant satisfaction
- To reduce void periods
- To reduce turnover rates

All of the previous indicators and objectives will be reported upon at each stage of the lettings plan development and implementation phases. This will also assist in identifying whether the plan is having an impact on the area.

## **Lettings Plan Area Profile**

East Lothian is a desirable area to work and live given its proximity to Edinburgh, which amongst other factors has led to a pressurised housing market. East Lothian as a whole is facing a shortage of affordable housing and current demand for social housing stock is high. Northfield in Tranent has proven to be an exception to this. The Community Housing Officer for the area reports that prior to the previous allocations action, general housing list applicants refused or excluded this area from their applications due to their view of Northfield as having high levels of anti-social behaviour, neighbour nuisance and crime. The tenants and residents group that includes Northfield support this statement and also report significant concerns and problems in the area.

## **Stock Profile**

Constructed in 1934, Northfield consists of 119 properties made up of four in a block stock, the majority being 3 apartment (99) with a smaller number of 4 apartments available (20). The housing stock is generally of a good standard.

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## Tenant Profile

During the previous allocations action, offers of 3 apartment properties were primarily being made to homeless applicants.

Frequently, vulnerable people were re-housed away from where they wanted to be housed and sought to move-on as soon as possible or avoided putting down roots. As a result some neighbourhoods, such as Northfield, have a higher stock turnover, therefore failed to stabilize and became stigmatised places where vulnerable tenants continued to be concentrated. Over half of all current tenants have now been housed via this route. Northfield is one of 3 data areas within East Lothian that is included within the most deprived 20% of the Scottish Executive's Indicators of Multiple Deprivation report.

## Current Indicators for the Lettings Plan Area

Summary Table of Indicators	Northfield
Percentage of allocations to vulnerable households <sup>1</sup>	52%
Transfer requests due to area	21%
Tenant dissatisfaction recorded via minutes of meeting	Noted
Percentage of total Tranent stock	6%
Stock Turnover	21%
Right to Buy	5.8%
Scheduled Evictions	28%
Housing benefit claims	60%
Staff time spent dealing with antisocial behaviour	52%

<sup>1</sup> Vulnerable households are defined for this purpose as externally reported homeless allocations plus Re-housing Panel and known housing support cases.

- **Tenant dissatisfaction** was noted through tenants groups and by community councils and evidenced by the minutes of their respective meetings.
- **Higher turnover of stock.** In the last nine months, Northfield has accounted for 21% of the total stock turnover in Tranent, whilst having only 6% of stock. 1 property in Northfield was allocated twice over the last nine months.
- **Refusal rates.** The previous allocations action has masked the refusal rates for Northfield, as only one offer of housing was made homeless applicants at that time.
- **Right to Buy.** Figures for Northfield show that 5.8% of total stock has been sold via Right to Buy.
- **Evictions.** In the last nine-month period, 23% of scheduled evictions for the Tranent area were addresses in Northfield, which again has only 6% of total stock.

- **Anti Social Behaviour.** Statistics collected by the Community Housing Officer over the last nine months show that of all ASB complaints received by the officer for their housing area or patch, 83% relate specifically to Northfield - which in itself is under 25% of the patch area. This results in the Community Housing Officer spending over half of their time dealing with anti-social behaviour in Northfield (52% of staff time).

### Comparison Indicators

- **Turnover.** The Northfield area forms part of a Community Housing Officer patch within Tranent. As stated less than a quarter of the total properties managed by the officer are located in Northfield.

There are three other Community Housing Officer patches. When we look at another patch (managing similar type properties) for comparison, we see that turnover rates for the *complete patch* equate to 16% of total Tranent voids, against 26% for Northfield (which forms just under a quarter of the officers patch).

- **Antisocial Behaviour.** The three remaining Community Housing Officers in Tranent spend 7%, 13% (this officers area is the closest for comparison terms, as part of the patch is the Coalgate area, yet the percentage differences are massive when considering the time spent on this issue) and 17% of their time dealing with antisocial behaviour in their areas, whereas 52% of officer time is spent dealing with antisocial behaviour in Northfield.
- **Right to Buy** - In an area adjacent to Northfield of similar stock and house types, Right to Buy take up is approximately 30% as opposed to 6% for Northfield.

### Development of Lettings Plan for Northfield

The aim of the lettings plan is to promote access to housing Northfield to those that are able to contribute towards the sustainability of the community and increase stability within the area.

Therefore the following attributes have been chosen: -

<b>To increase access to social housing for those with low housing needs</b>	
Tenure	- sub tenant - private rented tenant
<b>Make best use of housing stock - occupancy levels supported by allocations policy</b>	
<b>To reduce levels of anti-social behaviour</b>	
Anti-social behaviour	- no history of anti-social behaviour



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## Monitoring Framework

There will be a need to monitor and review the objectives of the local lettings plan on a quarterly basis. Ensuring that indicators and comparison indicators are monitored closely. There is a need to have a clear and transparent record of each allocation undertaken within the plan.

Monitoring will also take place in respect of the number of offers made to applicants and when acceptance occurs within the lettings plan area i.e. is a Northfield offer accepted at first offer, second offer or third offer before deferment of the application.

The outcomes of this plan will be made publicly available through Homefront, allocation specific newsletters and on the Council's website. Copies should also be available at local area offices.

Surveys will also be looked at to gain insight into the views of tenants and residents within the local lettings plan area to gauge satisfaction levels. Tenants housed under the lettings plan will also be surveyed to gauge their experience versus perception of the area.

## Review

The Local Lettings Plan for Northfield will be reviewed jointly by East Lothian Council staff based at the local Community Housing office, tenants & residents groups and the elected member for the area. They will determine the effectiveness of the Plan in meetings its aims and objectives.

## Future of the Lettings Plan

If the Plan, after the annual review shows that the lettings strategy for this area has been successful, then consideration will be given to extending the plan beyond its first year and into a second year. The benefits of the Plan will then be reviewed again.

The Council's Cabinet, having given approval for the implementation of the original plan, must approve continuation of the lettings strategy for a further year.