

DECISION-MAKER:	DIRECTOR, ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY
SUBJECT:	VENTNOR COURT - AGE CRITERIA FOR LETTINGS
DATE OF DECISION:	13 AUGUST 2012
REPORT OF:	SENIOR MANAGER, HOUSING SERVICES
STATEMENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY	
Not applicable.	

BRIEF SUMMARY

Ventnor Court is a Council owned Supported Housing Complex based in the North of the City, comprising 122 one bed flats in two blocks. It has an age restriction of 60 years and over. For some time properties have been 'hard to let' - mainly due to the demand for accommodation of this type in an area of the City that has limited services and connections. A review was commenced with a small group of residents in 2011 to consider the future allocation of the complex. This report recommends that to support the sustainable allocation of properties and reduce current rent loss, the age criteria for Ventnor Court should be reduced over time, with the initial step change of a restriction of 55.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- (i) That the lettings criteria for Ventnor Court be lowered to a minimum of fifty five years of age for future lettings and will be subject to a local lettings plan. Consideration will be given after 12 months by the Housing Needs manager and Supported Services Manager to lowering the age further to 50 should the scheme still prove hard to let. As with all supported housing complexes there is no upper age limit.
- (ii) That the Housing Needs Manager has delegated authority to release the occasional property for someone between the age of 50 and 54 should the need arise but that this will be the exception rather than the rule. Such allocations would be looked at on a case by case basis where the applicant's needs were assessed and it was felt that supported accommodation would be the most appropriate fit.
- (iii) That all voids within Ventnor Court are released for advertisement in Homebid and are let under the current allocations and bidding process, but that the adverts ensure an appropriate description of this accommodation as being "quieter housing" and will be primarily aimed at people over 55 years of age who wish to live in a supported environment with other people of a similar age and lifestyle.

REASONS FOR REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Over the past few years, officers have become increasingly concerned with the difficulty in letting properties at Ventnor Court and have been exploring options about how to best ensure that the scheme remains fit for purpose and meets current housing need in the City.

2. Ventnor Court was highlighted in the Asset Strategy in 2009 as not being fit for purpose and not having long term viability as a supported housing scheme for people over the age of 60. Therefore a review was undertaken.
3. Currently there are just under 1,000 people on the housing register who require one bedroom accommodation who are aged between 50 and 59 and by releasing these properties it will widen the options for the applicants on the register.
4. Southampton City Council does not currently provide any supported housing complexes for people under the age of 60 and believes that this type of accommodation could provide younger, older people with an additional option in terms of their housing.
5. Void properties at Ventnor Court have been on hold for the last 18 months due to uncertainty about the future of the housing complex and tenants have been told that a decision will be made on what was happening.
6. The primary reason for holding void properties last year was so that officers could explore alternative works under the decent homes improvement programme, such as making the galley style kitchen into a more open plan arrangement or possibly knocking two flats through into one to create more spacious two bedroom properties.
7. The high number of voids and uncertainty about the housing complex has led to increased anxiety in some tenants, especially those who are aware of other proposals in the City.
8. The lack of a definitive answer about the future of Ventnor Court has also allowed some tenants to raise concerns amongst the wider older population especially those that attend the Supported Housing Tenants Forum.

DETAIL (Including consultation carried out)

9. The Senior Manager, Housing Services along with other supported services staff attended a resident's open meeting on 20th January 2011 to discuss why flats were being held and what options were currently being discussed.
10. Officers explained that properties had been considerably harder to let at Ventnor Court, that they had been exploring various options over the past six months and that they had discussed at length the long term viability of the housing complex.
11. Officers went on to explain that they had considered a number of options, including disposal of the site but that the preferred option would be to lower the age criteria to 50 years of age rather than the current 60. Officers were clear that disposal of the housing complex was no longer on the agenda but that it had been considered.
12. The Senior Manager, Housing Services outlined his expectations for the housing complex, if the age criteria were lowered and this included a commitment to refurbishing the lifts and the communal areas – the communal area work is already under way.
13. At a subsequent meeting on May 18th 2011, again attended by the Senior Manager, Housing Services, it was agreed that a tenant and staff working group would be convened to look at any ideas or concerns that residents had in regard

to the proposed lowering of the age criteria and to look at options both around dealing with those concerns and exploring alternatives in relation to letting Ventnor Court more successfully.

14. The group was convened and the five residents that volunteered were all involved in the Tenants Association in one way or another. It first met on 12th August 2011.
15. The group met three times and were very clear that they felt lowering the age criteria would only attract people with drug and alcohol problems and that the staff would not do anything about this.
16. It was explained to the group by various officers that older people with complex needs already live across the City Council's supported housing and that age is not a discerning factor when it comes to those types of issues.
17. Furthermore, officers explained that staff already support residents with complex and varied needs on a regular basis and that there are currently a number of tenants at Ventnor Court who have high support needs, none of whom cause ongoing or specific issues for other tenants. The group were also reassured that any person moving into Ventnor Court or any other Council accommodation is still subject to all the conditions of the Tenancy Agreement and any breaches would be dealt with as they are now- by officers.
18. Residents were critical of the Council's assertion that properties were hard to let and asked how that had been gauged as no properties had been advertised for twelve months.
19. The working group also raised questions about why some of the void properties had already had their kitchens refurbished under the Decent Homes programme.
20. In order to respond to the residents' concerns and to test whether the kitchen work improved the "lettability" of the properties as the working group believed, a decision was taken by senior officers to release a small number of voids to be advertised in Homebid across two lettings cycles to gauge the general feeling for flats at Ventnor Court.
21. Six flats were advertised and although four were let, not one of them attracted more than 3 bids over the two Homebid cycles. This demonstrated that the need for this type of accommodation in this area of the City remained low.
22. However, the working group still felt that not enough was being done to let the void properties at Ventnor Court and some members were of the opinion that there was a high demand in the area for older people's supported housing.
23. To this end, members of the TA took it upon themselves to hold an open day at Ventnor Court which was widely advertised in the local area and announced at an open tenants meeting.
24. Feedback to officers is that two people attended the open day and one of those moved in after successfully bidding for a property with the help and assistance of supported services staff. This provided helpful feedback to the Council and Tenants about the lettability of Ventnor Court.

25. The Supported Services Manager and Housing Needs Manager attended another resident's open meeting on 23rd August at the request of the Tenants Association and covered most of the main issues already raised. No "new" concerns were raised at this meeting.
26. At this meeting, the Housing Needs Manager presented information highlighting the need for accommodation for people over the age of 50 and officers were able to provide answers to other questions raised.
27. In regard to car parking, officers acknowledged that parking was a premium both at this site and across the City and that although no options to increase the parking had yet been found; it may be possible that under any future decent neighbourhoods work, a solution may be found. Work is now underway of designs with Balfour Beatty for improving the public areas around the blocks.
28. Local Police representatives were also present at the meeting, as they regularly are, and actively asked if there were current concerns about anti social behaviour in the area. No concerns were raised by the residents present.
29. Some questions were raised by local members about the issue of right to buy and officers were able to explain that, although lowering the age criteria may prevent flats from being exempt under Right to Buy, it is not anticipated that many (if any) would be bought.
30. Following this meeting, officers have looked at the current Right to Buy situation and can confirm that since April 2009 when 997 flats were redesignated to Over 50's, no purchases have been made.
31. A meeting was held with staff based at Ventnor Court in October 2011 to discuss the current proposals and to receive feedback.
32. The staff team were clear in their assertion that very few residents at Ventnor Court had raised questions or concerns about the proposals and believe that the majority of current tenants would not be overly worried by the lowering of the age criteria.
33. However, the staff team did mention that the working group was made up of tenants with strong characters who may well have brought some personal issues to the debate and that they may not have been truly representative of the residents as a whole.
34. Staff felt that the concerns raised by the working group were not a reason to retain the age criteria if lowering it is the right move for the housing complex and those applicants on the register.
35. As a result of the discussions detailed above it was agreed to hold off making any immediate decisions on the complex to give time for alternative options to be revisited or new ideas to emerge. During this time the Council has continued to advertise properties at Ventnor Court in Homebid but with no further take up.
36. During this time, refurbishment work has been undertaken to the communal corridors and tenants have commented how brighter the housing complex feels. They have also raised the possibility that this work will increase the "lettability" of the scheme and have made coherent arguments as to why no decision should be taken to lower the age criteria until the impact of this work has been evaluated.

37. Due to the length of time the properties have remained empty without suitable applicants coming forward and the fact that there continues to be uncertainty as no decision has been made, officers have spoken to tenants about lowering the age criteria to 55 rather than 50 in the first instance to see if the combination of that small change and refurbishment works will make a difference to the letting of the building.
38. Tenants are broadly in agreement with this proposal especially as it has been taken forward on the back of consultation and the working group's thoughts.

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

That the housing complex be decommissioned and either let under General Needs Allocations or sold.

39. Officers felt that a 122 one bed flat housing complex split over two blocks would not be conducive to general needs housing as the housing management would likely become too difficult due to the nature of people who require or are eligible for small one bed properties.
40. It would be likely that a lot of the properties over time would attract those applicants who have complex needs and this was felt to be unwise.
41. Selling the property for redevelopment was also ruled out as that would limit the available Council Accommodation in the Basset area too much. The scheme is high density and so the number of homes that could be built on the site would make the scheme financially un-viable.

Transferring to a Housing Association.

42. Through the working group, there was found to be no support for tenants transferring to a Housing Association and officers felt that this would not be a positive move for older people in Southampton.

To utilise Ventnor Court as an extra care scheme.

43. This option was put forward by a tenant at Ventnor Court and the reasons behind not pursuing this were outlined in the Q&A sheet distributed to all residents at in September 2011.
44. Ventnor Court does not lend itself to extra care provision nor is the area of the City highlighted by either housing or Adult Social Care as one where a large extra care scheme is required. Furthermore, discussions between housing and adult social care have identified a more flexible model for the future delivery of extra care within the City and a move away from dedicated large extra care schemes is being actively pursued.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Capital/Revenue

45. Bringing back into lettings the 22 properties currently being held will increase the revenue stream through the collection of rent.
46. Currently all supported housing complexes for people over 60 have a service charge levied and a new proposed service charge (level to be determined) will be needed in response to the additional housing management that a block for 55plus is likely to bring. However, a commitment to not increasing the charge

for the current tenants for a minimum of twelve months will be made and this will ensure only a small increase in the revenue stream through new tenants moving in.

47. By making a decision to reduce the age criteria the Council is able to support refurbishment of the existing lifts in each block as opposed to replacing them with a new build lift similar to Milner and Neptune Court representing a capital saving of around £500k.

Property/Other

48. None

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Statutory Power to undertake the proposals in the report:

49. Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996, as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002, sets out the legal framework for the allocation of accommodation by local authorities. The City Council has a duty under the legislation to give “reasonable preference” to certain categories of applicants in housing need as defined in the Act. Subject to this requirement, the City Council’s lettings policy also reflects local priorities. The proposal in this report to reduce the qualifying age for accommodation at Ventnor Court could be considered a reasonable exercise of the Council’s powers under the Act, and contributes to the efficient allocation of the Council’s housing stock.

Other Legal Implications:

50. Lowering the age criteria, under current legislation, may mean that the properties cannot be exempted from Right to Buy under the Housing Act 1988. However, the Council would look to defend any appeal against a refusal of an application due to the nature of the accommodation remaining in nature of supported accommodation.
51. TV Licensing have confirmed that although the housing complex would lose its automatic right for all tenants to receive subsidised television licences, all current tenants who are aged over 60 would retain preserved rights and therefore would only be charged £7.50 per year. However, it should be noted that this is a decision by TV Licensing which Southampton City Council has no control or influence over.

POLICY FRAMEWORK IMPLICATIONS

52. None

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SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Non-confidential appendices are in the Members' Rooms and can be accessed on-line

Appendices

1.	Integrated Impact Assessment (to be signed off as part of this paper)
2.	Q&A Sheet for Ventnor Court Residents

Documents In Members' Rooms

1.	None
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Integrated Impact Assessment

Do the implications/subject/recommendations in the report require an Integrated Impact Assessment to be carried out.	Yes
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Other Background Documents

Title of Background Paper(s)

Relevant Paragraph of the Access to Information Procedure Rules / Schedule 12A allowing document to be Exempt/Confidential (if applicable)

1.	None	
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Integrated Impact Assessment and Other Background documents available for inspection at:

WARDS/COMMUNITIES AFFECTED:	Basset
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