

Southampton City Council

Tenancy Strategy 2013-2017

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1. Scope

This Tenancy Strategy complements Southampton's Housing and Homelessness Strategies. The aim of this strategy is to set out our vision for the way social housing providers in the city will let their properties. The City Council is also a provider of social housing so this strategy incorporates the principles which will underpin our own landlord tenancy strategy which will be published in 2013.

In drawing up this strategy we have consulted a wide range of stakeholders and made reference to a number of relevant documents. Those documents include the 'Plain English Guide to the Localism Bill' (DCLG), 'The practical implications of tenure reform' and 'new approaches to allocations and lettings' (Chartered Institute of Housing), 'local decisions on tenure reform' and 'Creating a tenancy strategy suitable for your area' (Shelter).

We will review this strategy in 2016 with a view to publishing a new strategy in 2017. We anticipate that the detail of the strategy will remain relevant until that time but, should the need arise to review any particular element, then that will be done through the usual decision-making process.

2. Introduction and Context

We intend that the city's social housing stock is used to its best effect so that homelessness is avoided wherever possible and we maximise the opportunity for Southampton residents to access housing suitable for their needs.

We recognise that there is far more demand for social housing than current supply can meet and that social housing providers in the city will look to a range of housing options in response to this. We will support measures to tackle tenancy fraud and to introduce innovative arrangements which make best use of scarce resources. We also encourage our housing partners, wherever possible, to provide accommodation which is both sustainable and secure and contributes to long-term community stability.

This tenancy strategy has at its heart the city plan and the city's key objectives; providing good value, high quality services, getting the city working, investing in education and training, keeping people safe, keeping the city green and clean and looking after people. We hope that all housing providers in the city will sign up to these aims.

3. Tenancies

As a social landlord we will continue to use mainly secure, lifetime tenancies. We consider that these will provide the best environment for families to thrive and become part of a balanced, sustainable community. We encourage other social housing providers also to use the most secure form of tenancy available to them wherever possible. However, we do recognise that in some special circumstances the use of fixed term (flexible) tenancies might be appropriate.

We support the use of fixed term tenancies to enable 'special' family arrangements to be tried out, to support new fostering placements, for instance. The use of a fixed term tenancy in these circumstances can help to facilitate the city's wider aims in relation to looking after children while minimising the 'risk' to the landlord of the arrangement breaking down and accommodation subsequently remaining under occupied. We would see these arrangements as being relatively infrequent and proper consideration being given to the choice of tenancy based on individual circumstances.

We also support the use of fixed term tenancies in other 'special' circumstances such as (but not exclusive to) regeneration schemes. We see that there could be a possible role for fixed term tenancies where a property is vacated to facilitate the progress of a scheme and that property might otherwise remain unoccupied. Whilst our overall preference is for tenants to be given the most secure type of tenancy available, we recognise that a compromise relating to the security of some individual tenancies might be justified by the overall benefit to the city of protecting our ability to make best use of the social housing stock.

4. Tenancy Length

Where fixed term tenancies are used we would expect these to be for a minimum of 5-10 years. The choice of tenancy term should be based on both individual needs and the characteristics of particular areas. For instance, we would expect providers to take into account needs such as consistency of schooling, employment, training, regeneration and low demand as well as the desirability of providing families with predictability and long-term stability.

We would not expect fixed term tenancies to be used for any shorter term other than in exceptional circumstances such as facilitating the movement of tenants to enable development of a housing scheme as identified above.

For older people moving into supported accommodation we support the use of lifetime, secure tenancies.

5. The criteria for 'Renewal' of Fixed Term Tenancies

We anticipate that, where fixed term tenancies are used, most providers will wish to include a criteria relating to housing need amongst those matters which they will consider when deciding whether to 'renew' a tenancy.

Similarly, we would expect them to consider using criteria intended to increase their ability to make best use of stock.

We do not currently envisage the city introducing criteria related to work, income or other similar matters. We are concerned to make sure that the way in which we allocate housing does not negatively affect the success or stability of our communities. We do, however, plan to review a number of issues around priority and eligibility for social housing.

It may be that we use these or similar criteria when formulating our revised lettings policy if we consider that this is necessary to address the significant shortfall in our ability to meet housing need.

We do not support the use of fixed term tenancies as a method of enforcement where there is a breach of tenancy conditions. Where there are cases of antisocial behaviour, rent arrears etc we will use, and expect our partner landlords to use, the existing mechanisms available to them and not to rely on fixed term tenancies as a way of 'shortcutting' the process.

We consider that introductory/starter tenancies and probationary tenancies can play an important role in testing the ability to properly manage a tenancy. We encourage the continued use of these alongside other tenancy types.

6. Alternative Rent Models

We see alternative rent models as possible tools to protect community stability and to encourage tenants to improve their situation. We support the use of affordable rents and shared ownership options and see a valuable role for these as social housing options to help create balanced communities and meet housing need.

We will expect providers to consider the level at which local housing allowances are set when deciding their rent policy for affordable rent tenancies. We will not support policies which result in any disincentive to work or to improve a family's situation or which are likely to result in households being unable to pay their rent.

7. The Housing List

We will retain a single housing list combining both transfer and housing register applicants.

8. The Private Rented Sector

We welcome the opportunity to use properties in the private rented sector to discharge homelessness duties appropriately. We will work with landlords to encourage appropriate use of this sector.

9. Future Policy Developments

We aim to produce policies which are fair and transparent and we expect partner agencies to do the same.

We plan to produce a landlord tenancy policy early in 2013 and to introduce a revised lettings policy later in the year. We will work with our partners and stakeholders to use the provisions of the Localism Act 2011 to make the very best use of the resources available to us and to continue to make our city a great place to live.