

## Report for Resolution

**Report to** Cabinet  
1 June 2011

**Report of** Head of Strategic Housing Services

**Subject** Home Options policy changes

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### Purpose

This report details three recommended Home Options policy changes and seeks Cabinet approval for their implementation.

The policy changes were developed by officers of Norwich, South Norfolk, and Broadland Councils, endorsed by front line officers of the partner Housing Associations and approved by the Home Options Partnership Board.

### Recommendations

To amend Home Options policy to address issues faced by families with children, living in flats or maisonettes above ground floor level; families with children of the same sex, sharing a bedroom where there is a large age difference, and to formalise arrangements for local lettings plans.

### Financial Consequences

The financial consequences of this report are nil.

### Risk Assessment

#### Legal

The Housing Act 1996 and Codes of Guidance allow local authorities some leeway in defining their allocations policy, as long as certain categories of person/situation are given reasonable preference. The recommended policy changes do not adversely impact on these categories of reasonable preference.

#### Equalities

The proposed changes would increase the priority of a small number of applicants on the housing register, giving them greater priority than other applicants. However, we estimate that the changes would apply to c.200 applicants in Norwich and, as this change gives them a fairer priority, the impact on other applicants whose current housing situation is better, is acceptable.

### Strategic Priority and Outcome/Service Priorities

The report helps to meet the strategic priority “Strong and prosperous city – working to improve quality of life for residents, visitors and those who work in the city now and in the future”

**Executive Member:** Councillor Macdonald - Housing

**Ward:** University

**Contact Officers**

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**Background Documents**

Nil

## Report

### Background

1. This report details three recommended Home Options policy changes and seeks Executive approval for their implementation.
2. The policy changes were developed by officers of Norwich, South Norfolk, and Broadland Councils, endorsed by front line officers of the partner Housing Associations and approved by the Home Options Partnership Board. Each proposed policy change addresses a different issue.

### Current position

#### a) Families with children, living in flats or maisonettes above ground floor level.

3. The policy currently awards priority (silver band) to applicants where there is no access to a garden on the same level as a home. A discrepancy is that the access to a garden is the sole determinant of housing need for those living in flats with children. Applicants have argued that this does not reflect the difficulties they are faced with when they have young children in flats which are accessed by a number of flights of stairs, for example problems getting a baby's pram up the stairs and health and safety issues with toddlers on external concrete steps.
4. Current policy can lead to a situation where a household with a young child or children in a 3rd floor flat, particularly with six flights of internal stairs to climb to access their property and having no garden, would be banded the same as an applicant in a first floor flat with one small flight of internal stairs and access to a garden. Equally, a family on the ground floor with no garden would be banded the same as a family on the third floor

#### b) Children of the same sex, sharing a bedroom, where there is a large age difference.

5. The current Home Options Policy states that children under 16 years old, of the same sex, are expected to share a bedroom. The Home Options teams have recognised that this can be unfair where there is a large age gap between the children, often as a result of two households becoming one. It is not reasonable to expect a teenager to share a bedroom with a toddler as this can impact on the development of both children, making it difficult for the older child to have privacy and do their homework in peace.

#### c) Local lettings arrangements.

6. Direct and sensitive lets are both explained in the policy as reasons why a property would be allocated outside the normal scheme. There is, however, no mention of local lettings policies and the impact that these can have on shortlisting and who properties are offered to. This is not an actual policy change being requested but an insertion of additional wording to cover the agreements regarding both local planning agreements and local lettings policies, bringing these into one document. Due to the nature of housing stock, this issue is more relevant to Broadland and South Norfolk councils.

**Proposal: the policy would be amended in the following as below, with the changes/additions highlighted in italics.**

a) Families with children, living in flats or maisonettes above ground floor level.

7. In order to recognise the difficulties that families with young children experience where they have numerous staircases to climb to access their property, the following would be added to the existing child in flats policy wording (section 2.4.17).

*In addition, where a household includes a child or children aged six or under and the applicant lives in a property on the second floor or above, where there is no lift access, an extra unit of priority will be added. Please note that any combination of issues related to children in flats would not normally exceed gold band.*

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b) Children of the same sex, sharing a bedroom, where there is a large age difference.

8. This proposed policy change would impact both the banding of applicants and their property size eligibility. Where a household with children of the same sex have an age difference of eight years or more, and they currently have to share a bedroom, they would be considered to have a unit of overcrowding (silver band).

The following section in the policy, under silver band, would be amended to:

2.4.15 Overcrowding/Age differential / shared facilities

Applicants lack one bedroom. This will include:

applicants with legally determined regular access to children, 4 or more nights a week who do not permanently live with them, and require an extra bedroom for their overnight stays)

and

*households where 2 children of the same sex have an age gap of eight or more years between them.*

Or

Applicants living in long term bedsit-type accommodation, sharing kitchen and

bathroom with non-family members

For property size eligibility:

In the property matrix (Appendix 2) under Property Size Qualification it will read:

Each applicant will be assessed, by the particular scheme council, to determine what size of property they qualify for. The table below gives an indication of how this will be assessed. *In addition to this, children of the same sex, where there is an age gap of eight or more years, are not expected to share a bedroom.*

c) Local lettings arrangements.

9. In order to formalise the arrangement for local lettings plans, the following would need to be inserted after 3.13 Direct Let:

*Local lettings*

*New homes built in rural areas may have extra rules that apply which affect the priority of applicants. These rules are due to planning restrictions that ensure highest priority is given to people with a strong local connection to the area (village or parish) where the homes have been built. The details may vary, depending on the council area, but most give priority to applicants who live or work (or previously lived or worked) nearby or have close relatives living in the area. If a bid is received for these properties and the applicant is not able to provide evidence to show they meet the local connection criteria their bid may be skipped.*

*Local lettings agreement can also be made for an existing property or group of properties. Local lettings agreements can be requested for new developments and, if agreed, be applied in addition to any local authority planning restrictions that have been put in place but will not override them. These types of local lettings will be approved by the partnership's local lettings panel.*