Have your say on the future of the Housing Allocations Scheme

Background

Croydon Council wishes to consult on proposed changes to the Housing Allocations Scheme. It is keen to hear the views of people potentially affected by the proposals, and organisations that represent them, existing social housing tenants and other residents, community and voluntary sector organisations, public sector agencies and other stakeholders. The period for consultation is 25 July to 5 September 2016.

This document aims to enable people to better understand the current Housing Allocations Scheme and the proposed changes. It is grouped around the two main proposals that the council is consulting on.

- **Increasing the residency criteria** – applicants applying to be placed on the housing register will have to have lived in Croydon for at least three years (currently it is one year) before they qualify to go on to the register. There will be some exceptions to support vulnerable applicants and certain other groups. You can read the consultation document to find out more.

- **Prioritising homelessness prevention** – households that work with the Gateway Service to prevent their own homelessness, either through the direct assistance of the service, or through their own efforts, will be awarded a higher level of priority on the housing register.

This document also contains some general background questions and answers on the housing register and the allocations policy.
Understanding the Housing Allocations Scheme and the housing register

1. What is the housing register?

Many people in Croydon cannot afford to buy a home, or to rent somewhere to live from a private landlord. Local authorities and housing associations provide social housing for people that cannot afford to buy or rent market housing that is suitable for their needs. The council keeps a waiting list, called the housing register, with details of all households that apply for social housing. Unfortunately there is not enough social housing in Croydon for everyone that applies. Currently, the number of applicants is more than six times the number of properties expected to become available for let. For that reason, the council has a system for deciding who will be offered social housing, and how quickly. The council is required to publish its policy explaining how it decides who will be offered new or vacant social housing, called the Housing Allocations Scheme.

The council uses a banding scheme to determine priority levels. More information about this is available at question 4.

2. What is the council’s Housing Allocations Scheme?

Every council has a document, called a Housing Allocations Scheme that sets out:

- who can apply to go on the housing register;
- who will be eligible for housing that becomes available to the council; and
- how homes that become vacant are let.

Details of the scheme are published on the council’s website at:

www.croydon.gov.uk/democracy/dande/policies/housing/strategies/housing-allocation-scheme

3. Is everyone eligible to go on the housing register?

The housing register is a list of people who have applied, and been accepted, for social housing in the borough. Some people’s applications are not accepted as they are not eligible for social housing because they are “subject to immigration control” or are “persons from abroad” (which can include British citizens who do not normally live in the UK).

Information and advice about “immigration controls” is provided by the Home Office (Immigration Directorate). Visit www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk or call 0870 606 7766.
People can apply to go on the housing register if they are aged 18 or over and are eligible for social housing, as set out above.

However, there are a number of conditions, summarised below, within the council’s Housing Allocations Scheme that govern who qualifies to go on the housing register.

- You must be living in Croydon and have lived in Croydon for at least 12 months.
- You must not be on another local authority housing register.
- If you have enough money or resources to buy or rent a suitable home you will not qualify to go on the housing register.
- If you have a history of antisocial behaviour you will not qualify to go on the housing register.
- If you have a history of rent or mortgage arrears you will not qualify to go on the housing register.
- If you have refused all the offers you are entitled to under the scheme you will not qualify to go on to the housing register.

4. What are housing need bands?

There are different types of need; for example, being homeless, overcrowded, or not being able to manage in existing accommodation because of a medical condition or disability. The housing register is divided into three bands so that people with similar levels of need – if not similar types of need – all go into the same band. In order to keep the housing register as simple as possible, once the council has assessed a household’s housing need, the application is placed in one of the three bands that make up the housing register. The banding system operates as follows:

- **Band 1** is for households that need to move urgently.
- **Band 2** is for applicants that qualify for increased priority because they work, are in training, volunteer, or are foster carers or adoptive parents.
- **Band 3** is for households with at least a moderate housing need.

Everyone who applies to go onto the housing register is asked to complete an online application form providing details about their household, their current accommodation and personal circumstances, such as a medical condition or disability. This information is used to decide which band someone will be placed in.
Increasing the residency criteria

5. What is the current residency criteria?

The current allocations policy requires housing applicants to have lived in Croydon for 12 months prior to applying for housing.

6. How will the council check whether people have genuinely lived in the borough in order to meet the residency criteria?

Everybody who applies to the housing register will be required to provide documentation to prove they have lived in the borough for three years. This will include providing copies of documents such as utility bills and bank statements. The council will also carry out independent checks such as cross-referencing with the electoral register. Unless an applicant can prove they have lived in the borough for three years, they will not be allowed to register.

7. What if I am on the housing register already but have not lived in Croydon for three years?

Applicants who are already on the housing register but who don’t have the three-year residency requirement will be able to remain on the housing register. It is proposed that the change will apply only to new applicants from the date that the new policy is to be implemented. This date will be determined and published widely if the proposed changes go ahead.
Prioritising homelessness prevention

8. Why does the council currently give this group additional priority?

Placing people in emergency or temporary accommodation costs the council hundreds of thousands of pounds each year. In addition, the quality of life for people living in temporary accommodation can be affected – they will often have to share facilities and live away from family and support networks in an area they would not choose. Sometimes this accommodation is outside of the borough. It is much better, all round, to work to try to prevent becoming homeless in the first place.

The current allocations policy does not give sufficient emphasis or priority to people that have taken steps to prevent themselves from becoming homeless, with or without the council’s assistance. This proposal gives applicants an incentive to work with Gateway Service staff to identify solutions that will avoid the need for emergency or temporary accommodation.

9. What is the Gateway Service?

The Gateway Service was initially set up to provide a comprehensive service to clients who were struggling with housing issues as a result of welfare reform and the bedroom tax. It has proved to be a hugely successful way of helping individuals to resolve their housing problems. The Gateway Service was extended to provide support to all clients who were threatened with homelessness, with the aim of enabling them to stay in their home or find a suitable alternative.

The Gateway Service is available at Access Croydon, in Bernard Weatherill House.

10. What will the council take into consideration when awarding priority?

Consultation to get as many ideas as possible is under way, but it is felt that the following should attract additional priority.

- Successfully having secured a private rented sector property.
- Obtained accommodation with family or friends.
- Remaining in existing accommodation for an agreed time, after negotiation with landlord.

Other suggestions received during the consultation period may be considered.
11. What additional priority will be awarded?

It is proposed that applicants who prevent their homelessness through the measures proposed above, which are the subject of this consultation, would receive a higher level of priority and be eligible to go into Band 2.

12. What about those people who are vulnerable and cannot help themselves?

Gateway Service staff will work with these clients, one on one, to ensure homelessness is prevented where possible. They will also work with family, friends and support services, either within the council or through other providers, to try to prevent homelessness. This will include home visits to family and friends, and discussions with landlords and letting agents. We are keen to ensure that everyone receives adequate support to prevent their homelessness, the service will be holding focus groupswith voluntary and statutory support providers to understand how best to address the needs and issues of more vulnerable people within these proposals.

Information about this consultation

13. Where can I find more information on these proposals?

A detailed consultation document can be found here: www.croydon.gov.uk/housingallocations

14. How do I give my feedback?

People are invited to give their views via an online survey. This will take about 10 minutes to complete and can be found here: www.croydon.gov.uk/housingallocations

Views can also be emailed to hsg.allocationsconsultation@croydon.gov.uk

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