Have your say on the future of the Housing Allocations Scheme
Consultation information – July 2016
Introduction

Croydon Council is committed to tackling homelessness, reducing the numbers in temporary accommodation, and providing a clear and transparent housing policy.

The provision and allocation of social housing is a key means by which councils seek to manage housing need. Social housing is provided in the form of council housing and housing association homes to assist people that cannot afford to rent or buy suitable market housing. Demand for social housing is high, and there are not enough homes for everyone who applies.

To manage this, the council has a housing waiting list for those who have applied, and qualify, for social housing. This is called the housing register. People are placed on the register only if they have an assessed housing need and a chance of being rehoused.

The council’s legal obligations around housing allocations are set out in Part VI of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended) and in statutory guidance issued by the Secretary of State in June 2012. All councils must publish a Housing Allocations Scheme which sets out how the council will make the difficult decisions about which applicants for social housing are made an offer of accommodation.

The current Housing Allocations Scheme was last revised in 2014. Croydon Council is proposing two key changes to the present scheme and wishes to consult widely on these. The changes are as follows.

1. Ensuring that people have lived in the borough for at least the past three years (currently this is one year) before they qualify to apply for council or housing association housing, with some exemptions to be applied to certain groups.

2. Giving a higher level of priority on the housing register to people that respond to help offered by the council to prevent their homelessness; for example, by accepting an offer of private rented accommodation and receiving support, and avoiding long stays in temporary accommodation. This means they will be given a higher priority than people who did not respond to the help offered by the council, or take action to help themselves, and are likely to be rehoused more quickly as a result.
The background to these proposed changes

Across London and the south-east, councils are experiencing unprecedented levels of demand for social housing. Much of this demand relates to the rising number of households seeking assistance for homelessness. In March 2016, the council was accommodating nearly 3,000 households in different forms of temporary accommodation. In 2015/16 the net cost to the council of accommodating these households was £5.4m. This is a significant cost and one that the council cannot sustain over the long term.

Croydon has a smaller stock of social housing than many London boroughs. There are currently more than 5,000 applicants on the housing register, while the number of properties expected to become available to let this year is about 800. This means there is only one property available to let for every six applicants. Market housing for sale and rent is becoming increasingly expensive, while housing benefit is being further reduced.

Together, these factors present a real challenge for the council, both to tackle the growing homelessness crisis and provide a fair housing policy for all of Croydon. In this context, it is important that the way in which the council allocates housing is transparent and easy to understand for applicants, staff, council members and other stakeholders.

The aim of the proposed changes, therefore, is to manage the demand for social housing and increasing levels of homelessness in a way that ensures:

- priority is given to local residents that have a strong connection to the borough through their length of residence;
- more emphasis is given to supporting people to resolve their housing problems by providing intensive support;
- priority continues to be given to those households in the highest housing need; and
- the number of homeless households in temporary accommodation is reduced by awarding a higher level of priority to those who actively engage with the council to prevent their homelessness.

The details of the changes we are proposing, and the reasons for these, is set out in the remainder of the document.
PROPOSAL 1

To increase the period that applicants must have been living in Croydon to at least three years before they can go on the housing register

What is being consulted on and why?

In March of this year, the council’s cabinet agreed that it would like to seek views on a number of proposed changes to the current Housing Allocations Scheme. It was agreed that consultation would be carried out with a wide range of stakeholders to find out whether people agreed with the proposals, what alternative ideas or proposals might be considered, and what people thought the impact of the proposed changes might be on them.

The council’s current policy states that applicants must have been living in Croydon for at least 12 months before they can qualify to go on the housing register. The reason for this is to make sure our housing policies benefit people that live in Croydon who would find it particularly difficult to find a home on the open market.

We want to ensure that applicants for social housing have a close association with Croydon through their length of residence in the borough. Social housing is a scarce resource, and we think it is important to make sure it is available to local people. This is in line with statutory guidance produced for local housing authorities in 2013 (‘Providing social housing for local people’), which states that all local authorities should ensure that they prioritise applicants who can ‘demonstrate a close association with their local area’ and that it is ‘appropriate, proportionate and in the public interest’ to restrict access in this way.

The reasons for extending the period that applicants must have been living in Croydon from the current requirement of 12 months is that we do not believe this is not long enough to prove a close association with Croydon. Given the current high pressures on social housing in the borough, including from homeless households, our view is that we should give greater emphasis to local households that are experiencing high levels of housing need although they are not homeless. We are keen to find out your views about this.
What is the council’s proposal?

Various options for increasing the residency requirement have been considered and the responses to the engagement survey have been studied. We have also had to have regard to the government’s view that a reasonable period of residency would be at least two years. However, it is for the local authority to come to its own decision on what is an appropriate length of time for applicants to demonstrate a close association with their local area. We believe that living in Croydon for at least three years creates this close association with the borough.

The option of increasing the residency requirement to two years has been considered but is not considered to be long enough to demonstrate a close association with the borough. The council believes that the longer an applicant has lived here, the stronger the association will be.

The outcome of the engagement survey was that very few people who wanted to see an increase in residency qualification proposed a period of two years. The responses showed there was some support for a longer period of five years. This, however, was a minority view as only 36 out of 219 responses to this question proposed a period of five years. It is also a much longer period than the government’s guidance suggests. The council’s view is that extending the residential qualification to five years is too large a jump and may have the effect of excluding too many applicants.

The council is therefore proposing a three-year period as it believes this is an appropriate period to demonstrate a close association with Croydon. In coming to this view, regard has been given to the support within the engagement responses for an increase in the residential qualification period to three years, as well as the government’s guidance.

The detail of the proposal

The current allocations scheme gives exemption from the 12 months residency requirement to a number of groups, as follows.

- A member or former member of the British Armed Forces or Reserved Forces who is applying for housing within five years of discharge, unless there are exceptional circumstances that prevented an application being made, or justify an application after five years. Applications will also be considered from serving members of the Armed or Reserve Forces who are within the final six months of service if they can provide a letter from their commanding officer confirming their last day of service.

- The bereaved spouse or civil partner of a member of the Armed Forces leaving Services Family Accommodation following the death of their spouse or partner.

- A serving or former member of the Reserve Forces who needs to move because of a serious injury, medical condition or disability sustained as a result of their service.

- An older person whose economic circumstances are unlikely to change and who is applying for older-persons, special-sheltered or extra-care housing.
• An existing social housing tenant applying to live in Croydon through Housingmoves – the social housing mobility scheme for London designed to help tenants to move to another part of London, with priority given to households who have more bedrooms in their current home than they need, or who wish to move to be closer to employment or higher education, or to provide care to family members or friends.

• An applicant who has been accepted as homeless by Croydon Council and is living in temporary accommodation outside the borough of Croydon

The feedback from the engagement survey indicated some concerns that vulnerable people, in particular, and some other groups placed outside of the borough, or with no long-term connection, could be disadvantaged as a result of an increase in the residency requirement. The council has considered this and reviewed what exceptions it is reasonable to make. In doing so, it has had regard to statutory guidance issued by the government in December 2013, in the document ‘Providing social housing for local people’. This recommends that local authorities consider the need for exceptions to their residency requirement including, for example, care leavers placed in accommodation outside of the borough and people fleeing violence. It also says that local authorities must make an exception for certain members, or widows of members, of the Armed Forces and Reserved Forces.

The council’s view is that the exceptions should be amended to include the following groups.

• Those who are homeless within the meaning of Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 and where Croydon Council has accepted a full housing duty to them.

• Existing secure or fixed-term tenants of Croydon Council.

• Young people leaving the care of Croydon Council, regardless of whether they currently live in Croydon.

• Older people applying for sheltered housing.

• Serving and former members, or widows of members, of the Armed Forces and Reserved Forces, whether or not they currently live in the borough (excluding those that have been dishonourably discharged).

• Those residing in supported housing schemes commissioned by Croydon Council.

• Verified rough sleepers, where there is proof of rough sleeping in the borough over the previous six months, prior to applying to the housing register.

• Persons in prison whose last settled address was in the borough.

• Applicants who are referred to the council through one of the following projects – the Safe and Secure project, witness protection scheme, Housing Moves, agreed reciprocals with other boroughs, and where an applicant is fleeing domestic abuse and is referred via the Family Justice service.

The council would like to invite formal feedback on these proposals as part of the consultation process. It is keen to find out whether people agree with the proposals, what alternative suggestions they might have, and what impact the proposals might have on them.
PROPOSAL 2
To give a higher level of priority on the housing register to applicants who work with the council to actively prevent their homelessness

What is being consulted on and why?
The council wants to encourage households to engage with the Gateway Service to prevent homelessness. The council’s Gateway Service aims to help people to find solutions to prevent homelessness and also to encourage households that can find their own solutions to do so. More detail about how the Gateway Service will engage with people is provided below and in the Questions and Answers section. The council believes that households that accept the council’s assistance, or assist themselves to find a solution, should receive a higher priority than households that apply to the council as homeless without taking such action.

The council considers that introducing a higher level of priority to applicants that actively work with the Gateway Service to resolve their homelessness will result in a reduction in the number of households requiring costly emergency and temporary accommodation. It will also provide a clear and easier-to-understand framework enabling applicants to take actions that can result in them being awarded a higher priority than would otherwise be the case. Typically, this will mean supporting households who are able to meet their accommodation needs in the short-term by securing a private rented property, by agreeing or negotiating to remain in their current accommodation longer, or by making arrangements to stay with family or friends, rather than in emergency accommodation provided by the council.

We are inviting feedback on this approach, the potential impact on those affected by the proposals, and the criteria that should be used to assess whether applicants should be awarded a higher level of priority.

What is our proposal?
The council proposes to give a higher level of priority on the housing register to households who engage with the council to actively prevent their homelessness. In reality, this will mean that these applicants will receive a level of priority that places them in Band 2 of the housing register. The Housing Allocations Scheme has three bands within which applicants are grouped according to their level of housing need. There is more information on how this works in the Questions and Answers document, available by going to: www.croydon.gov.uk/housingallocations

Applicants who do not respond to the support and encouragement offered, and do not take action to prevent themselves from becoming homeless, may be placed in temporary accommodation (as a result of the council accepting a full housing duty). These households will receive a lower priority and be placed in Band 3 of the housing register.
The detail of the proposal

In order for this proposal to be transparent and effective, we need to provide clear guidance to applicants about what we mean in practice by “working with the council’s Gateway Service”. The council has considered various options and is proposing the following criteria:

- The applicant has prevented homelessness by securing a private rented-sector property.
- The applicant has prevented homelessness by securing accommodation with family or friends.
- The applicant has prevented homelessness by remaining in their existing accommodation for an agreed time, after negotiation with their landlord, with or without the council’s assistance.

We believe that if an applicant has worked to achieve success in one of these areas, they should receive a higher level of priority on the housing register. This means they will receive more priority than an applicant that applied at the same time, but who did not take any action to resolve their homelessness.

The council’s Gateway Service will provide support and assistance to all applicants faced with homelessness. 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 has, therefore, been extended to provide support to all clients threatened with homelessness, with the aim of enabling them to stay in their home or find a suitable alternative. The Gateway Service operates as part of Access Croydon.

In the event that an applicant fails to prevent his or her homelessness, they will continue to be assisted by the council, as a homeless applicant. Enquiries will be conducted into whether a legal duty to assist with housing exists, and the council will, where there is a duty to do so, provide accommodation. However, these applicants will not receive the same degree of priority for permanent social housing as applicants who have taken action or accepted assistance to prevent their homelessness in the ways described above.

The council has also considered the need to ensure that sufficient support is provided to clients who are vulnerable and need extra time and practical assistance to be able to prevent their homelessness. We will ensure that the development of this service is discussed with voluntary and statutory sector services to ensure that those with support needs receive dedicated one-on-one help, and benefit from joined-up working with council or voluntary-sector support providers.

The proposals outlined reflect the council’s view on what might be considered to be appropriate actions to achieve a higher level of priority. The council is keen to consult on these proposals and to receive formal feedback and suggestions on awarding additional priority.
How can you get involved?

You can get involved and have your say by completing the online survey. Please complete the survey by going to: [www.croydon.gov.uk/housingallocations](http://www.croydon.gov.uk/housingallocations)

If you need any of the information for this consultation in a different format, or have queries, you can get in touch by writing or phoning us:

**Address**

Housing Allocations Consultation  
Floor 3, Zone B  
Bernard Weatherill House  
8 Mint Walk  
Croydon  
CR0 1EA

**Phone**

020 8726 6000  
ext 64327

**Email**

hsg.allocationsconsultation@croydon.gov.uk

Next steps

The consultation will close on 5 September 2016. A report outlining the outcomes from the consultation will be published and presented as part of the report to the council’s cabinet in the autumn. Cabinet will then decide whether to approve and adopt the proposed changes. If it approves the revised scheme, the council will put in place the changes needed to existing systems and procedures over the following months.