



Exeter City Council

Reducing Under-Occupation in the Council's Housing Stock Incentives for Downsizing

1 Introduction

Within the Council's housing stock there are a number of tenants under-occupying their home. Many will be elderly who have seen their family grow up and leave home leaving them to reside in a three or four-bedroom property.

Of course many of these tenants will want to remain in the family home. It contains many happy memories and allows space for family and friends to visit. However, there are also a number of people who find living in such a large property difficult. Some will have mobility problems and require expensive adaptations to remain, others will just be overwhelmed by the daily maintenance a large property presents. In such cases the Council should do all it can to help tenants move to more suitable accommodation, whether it be within our own stock or that of a partner housing association.

To help with the stress and worry of moving it is important that we make the process as easy as possible for these tenants. Having a named contact point to talk to and help arrange removals will ease the process and ensure elderly tenants don't suddenly decide to refuse an offer of smaller accommodation. Help with the move and financial incentives all help in this respect and may encourage more people to downsize into more suitable accommodation. Whilst such incentives will place additional burden on the Housing Revenue Account it will also reduce the need for complex and expensive disabled adaptations in future years. It will also help to increase the supply of family housing for those people on the Home Choice register.

2 Incentive packages for those wishing to downsize

Where a tenant is identified who is eligible for help and assistance under this package the Estate Officer will talk with the tenant to explain the package of incentives and housing options available and leave information for them to read at their leisure.

Where a tenant expresses a wish to explore the possibility of moving, and they require help and assistance throughout the process, they will be referred to the Council's Tenant Liaison Officer (TLO), who is part of the Tenant Participation and Special Projects Team. The TLO will provide a range of assistance, tailored to the tenants actual needs.

Home Choice Applications:

All tenants who wish to move must be registered with Home Choice. This process in itself can be daunting, therefore, where appropriate, staff, or the TLO will offer help to complete the form and bid for suitable properties.

Any tenant who is currently under-occupying their home will automatically be awarded Red band status and given 25 years waiting time. This will ensure they have a very high level of priority when bidding for properties. However, this policy will change in early 2010 when the new Devon Home Choice scheme is implemented. Under this new scheme only those under-occupying their home by two or more bedrooms will be eligible for the high

needs band. Those under-occupying by just one bedroom will be placed in the medium needs band.

To maintain a steady supply of two, three and four bedroom homes, Exeter City Council will continue to advertise suitable properties to those on the housing register who are seeking to down-size and give them the highest level of priority over other applicants.

The tenant will be given the choice of either bidding for properties of their choice in the normal manner, nominating an advocate to bid for properties on their behalf (this could be a family member, close friend, health visitor, Age Concern representative etc) or being placed on the Auto-bid system.

Throughout the process the TLO will maintain contact with the tenant to ensure they understand the process and are actively bidding.

Financial Incentives

Once a tenant has been successful for a property of their choice we will ensure that they receive intensive help, support and assistance to make the move as smooth and as stress free as possible.

However, it is also recognised that moving home can be costly and a major disincentive to tenants wishing to downsize. The Council will therefore offer cash incentives to downsizing tenants to help pay for the move. The total amount available for each move will depend on the following:

- The size of property being released as a result of the move
- The specific circumstances of the tenant
- Any rent arrears owing
- The condition of the property being released

Examples of the maximum cash incentive available are:

- Downsizing by two or more bedrooms (i.e. 4 bed property to 2 bed or 3 bed property to 1 bed) = **Maximum £1500 cash incentive**
- Downsizing by one bedroom (3 bed property to 2 bed or 2 bed property to 1 bed) = **Maximum £1000 cash incentive**

This cash incentive can be used to purchase any item the tenant requires to move into their new home. This could include new carpets, curtains, white goods, telephone connection, etc. In all cases the TLO will offer to purchase these goods for the tenant and pay for them direct from the cash incentive.

The actual cash incentive payable will be at the discretion of the Tenant Liaison Officer, depending on the circumstances outlined above. Before any move an assessment will be made by the TLO of the total cash incentive payable and the tenant made a formal offer of the appropriate amount.

The cash incentive will also include paying for removal fees. The Council will source the contractor who provides the best value for this service and pay them direct. In some cases a full packing service may also be offered, particularly if the tenant is frail or disabled.

Property Incentives

Where the tenant is moving to another Council property it is important to make the property attractive to the tenant. The Council has adopted a Lettable and Habitable

standard for all its empty properties that must be met before the new tenant moves in. This standard includes the decoration of two rooms within the property. However, in certain circumstances, where a property needs a level of decoration above this standard the TLO can offer this as part of the overall incentive package. Where appropriate, the TLO will also assess the tenant's eligibility for inclusion on the Council's assisted gardening scheme and assisted decoration scheme.

3 New build properties

Across the city the Council and its housing association and private developer partners are providing new build properties, many of which will be suitable for tenants who are looking to downsize. This is particularly true of the large number of purpose built, fully accessible 'over 55' year old schemes that will be attractive to older tenants living in large family houses. In the case of the Council's in-fill sites the properties will also be at the leading edge of thermal efficiency and provide warm and cheap to run homes. They will also contain modern facilities and appliances.

Where tenants are looking to downsize into new properties the cash incentive outlined above will not be payable. However, the Council will pay a maximum of £500 towards the tenants removal costs and continue to provide advice and assistance to the tenant where required.

4 Adaptations

In some cases a tenant will require a number of minor adaptations to be completed in their property to ensure they are able to live independently and comfortably after their move. Where the property is a Council property the TLO will liaise with the Technical Officer to see what needs to be done and the process to be followed. It is important that wherever possible such adaptations are completed within a short period of the tenant moving. In some cases the work may need to be done before occupation and every effort should be made to accommodate this.

Where the tenant is moving to a housing association property the TLO should contact Devon County Council's Care Direct service or the county-wide Home Improvement Agency to check on their eligibility for assistance. The tenant's new landlord will also have their own policy for dealing with such requests.

5 Arrears and Recharges

The Council has a number of policies around rent arrears and recharging tenants for the removal of rubbish or repairs at their previous property.

As a standard rule tenants are not allowed to transfer to another property if rent arrears exist on their account. However, if a tenant is downsizing this rule can be waived on condition that the arrears are cleared from the total cash incentive payable.

Where large amounts of rubbish or furniture are left in the tenants previous property after they have moved out, or re-chargeable repairs are identified that require attention as part of the void works, the cost of these will be calculated and deducted from the cash incentive.

Where a tenant is disabled or elderly and has difficulty in clearing their property or carrying out repairs that fall within their responsibility the TLO in consultation with the relevant Technical Officer can agree to waive these recharges as part of the incentive package.

6 Incentives for tenants requiring disabled adaptations

Disabled tenants who require an adaptation to their property in order to live independently can apply for such alterations through the Council's Disabled Adaptations scheme. In many cases where an OT's assessment identifies a need the Council will do its best to ensure the adaptation is done. However, there are limited resources for undertaking adaptations and this can lead to a backlog of work that may take up to 12 months to complete.

In many cases the tenant's needs are better met by moving to more suitable accommodation that will give them a better quality of life. However, most tenants are reluctant to move from their home despite the potential wait for work to be undertaken.

In all cases the OT, Estate Officers and Technical Officers should be trying to persuade tenants to undertake a move to more suitable accommodation so that the adaptation will not be required thereby helping us to stretch out budgets further. In these cases the above incentives for downsizing will apply.

Where someone is moving to a similar sized property that has already been adapted and is therefore suitable for their needs the Council will pay a £1000 disturbance allowance plus the removal costs.

7 Budget

It is proposed that from the 1 April 2011 the Tenants Downsizing Incentive Scheme will be allocated a total of £50,000 per annum. Should this amount be exhausted before the end of the financial year the scheme will be closed until the next years allocation is available.

8 Compensation for Improvements

Under the Compensation for Improvements regulations 1994 tenants who have undertaken certain specified improvement works to their properties (e.g. installation of kitchens, bathrooms, heating etc) may be entitled to compensation when moving from their property. The amount of compensation payable depends on the original costs of the improvements, how long ago it was installed and its notional life. Where the TLO believes the tenant maybe entitled to compensation under his scheme they will issue the tenant with the application form and help them complete it.

A separate budget exists for compensation payments under this scheme.

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