



Exeter City Council

Reducing Under-Occupation: Incentives for Downsizing

1.0 Introduction

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

It is, of course, natural for tenants to want to remain in the family home; it has many happy memories and provides 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 of a large property. In these cases the Council should do all it can to help tenants move to more suitable accommodation, whether it be within Exeter City Council stock or that of a partner registered provider.

To minimise the stress and worry of moving it is important that Housing Services make the process as easy as possible. This can be done through having a named contact point to help arrange removals and guide tenants through the process. It will also help to ensure older and more vulnerable tenants do not refuse an offer of smaller accommodation due to a lack of available support.

Assisting with the move and offering financial incentives may encourage tenants to downsize into more suitable accommodation. Whilst financial incentives place an additional burden on the Housing Revenue Account it will reduce the need for complex and expensive adaptations in future years. It will also help to increase the supply of family housing for those in need on the Devon Home Choice register.

2.0 Incentive Packages

Where a tenant is identified as being eligible for assistance under the downsizing initiative, the Neighbourhood Officer will visit the tenant to explain the process. They will outline the available options and package of incentives and leave information for them to read at their leisure.

Where a tenant expresses a wish to move, they will be referred to the Void Coordinator (VC) to guide them through the process. The VC will provide help which is tailored to the actual needs of the tenant.

2.1 Devon Home Choice Applications

All tenants who wish to move must be registered with Devon Home Choice. This process in itself can be daunting. Some tenants may have lived in their home for more than 20 years and never needed to register with the service. Where appropriate, staff or the VC will offer help to complete the Devon Home Choice form and bid for suitable properties.

Any tenant who is currently under-occupying their home by two or more bedrooms will automatically be awarded B Band status (high needs). This will ensure they have a very

high level of priority when bidding for properties. Those under-occupying by just one bedroom will be placed in the medium needs C Band. Downsizing tenants may also be given additional priority for any disabilities.

To maintain a steady supply of two, three and four bedroom homes, Exeter City Council will continue to advertise suitable properties to those on Devon Home Choice seeking to downsize and give them a higher level of priority over other applicants.

The tenant will be given the choice of either bidding for properties 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 UK representative etc.) or being placed on the auto-bid system.

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

2.2 Financial Incentives

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

Housing Services recognise 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 the 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 £2,000 cash incentive**
- Downsizing by one bedroom (3 bed property to 2 bed or 2 bed property to 1 bed) = **Maximum £1,500 cash incentive**

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

After the repayment of any rent arrears and/or recharges, the cash incentive is primarily for removal expenses. The Council will source the contractor who provides the best value for this service and pay them direct. If the tenant is vulnerable or disabled, a full packing service may also be offered.

Any excess can be used to purchase items the tenant requires to move into their new home. This could include new carpets, curtains, white goods, telephone/internet connections etc. Where the tenant is more vulnerable, the VC will offer to purchase these goods for them directly from the cash incentive.

2.3 Property Incentives

Where the tenant wishes to move to another Exeter City Council property it is important to make that property desirable. The Council has adopted a Lettable and Habitable standard for all empty properties that must be met before any new tenant moves in. This standard includes the decoration of two rooms within the property.

In circumstances where the property needs a level of decoration above this standard, the VC can offer this as part of the overall incentive package. Where appropriate, the VC will also assess the tenant's eligibility for inclusion on the Council's Garden Assistance Scheme and Decoration Assistance Scheme.

2.4 Incentives for Tenants requiring Home Adaptations

Disabled tenants who require an adaptation to their property in order to live independently can apply for such alterations through the Council's Home Adaptations scheme. Where an Occupational Therapist's assessment identifies a need for adaptations, the Council will ensure that this is addressed. There are, however, limited resources for undertaking adaptations and this can lead to a backlog of work that may take up to 12 months to complete.

In some cases the tenant's needs are better met by downsizing to more suitable accommodation that will give them a better quality of life. Tenants in this situation can, however, be reluctant to move despite the potential wait for the work to be completed.

The Occupational Therapist, Neighbourhood Officers and Technical Officers should seek to persuade the tenant to downsize to more suitable accommodation which may already have the required adaptations. This will give them a better quality of life and enable Housing Services to better manage budgets in order to help more people. The incentives for downsizing in **Sections 2.0 – 2.3** will apply here.

Where someone is moving to a similar sized property that has adaptations fitted, these incentives do not apply as the tenant is not strictly downsizing. The Council will, however, pay a **£500** Disturbance Allowance plus additional removal costs of up to **£500** in order to free up their former property.

3.0 New Build Properties

New build properties are provided across the City by Exeter City Council, partner registered providers and private developer partners, many of which are suitable for tenants who are looking to downsize. This is particularly true of the large number of purpose built, fully accessible 'over 55' schemes which are attractive to older tenants living in large family homes.

In the case of both Rowan House and Knights Place (Council new build developments), the properties have cutting edge thermal efficiency technology and provide homes that are warm and cheap to run. All new build homes also contain modern facilities and appliances.

For these reasons, where tenants are looking to downsize into new properties, the cash incentive outlined above will not be payable. The Council will, however, pay a maximum of **£500** towards the tenant's removal costs and continue to provide advice and assistance where required.

4.0 Arranging Adaptations

A tenant may require a number of minor adaptations to be completed in their new property to ensure they are able to live independently and comfortably after they move in.

Where the property is Council owned, the VC will liaise with the Technical Officers to ensure the Home Adaptation process is followed. It is important that, wherever possible, such adaptations are completed as soon as possible after the tenant moves in. Some of 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 registered provider property, the VC should contact Devon County Council's Care Direct service or the county-wide Home Improvement Agency to check their eligibility for assistance. The tenant's new landlord will also have their own policy for dealing with such requests.

5.0 Arrears and Recharges

The Council has a number of policies surrounding rent arrears, the recharging of tenants for removing rubbish from their previous property and any recharges created through outstanding repairs.

As a standard rule, Exeter City Council tenants are not allowed to transfer to another property if rent arrears exist on their account. If a tenant is downsizing, however, this rule can be waived on condition that the arrears are cleared using some (or all) of the incentive payment.

Where large amounts of rubbish or furniture are left in the tenant's previous property or rechargeable 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. If this amounts to more than the incentive payment, an invoice will be raised to recharge the tenant for the outstanding amount.

Where a tenant is disabled or more vulnerable and has difficulty clearing their property or carrying out repairs that fall within their responsibility, the VC, in consultation with the Housing Operations Manager can agree to waive these recharges as part of the incentive package.

If the tenant has other outstanding debts to the Council such as Council Tax or Housing Benefit overpayments, the VC will liaise with the relevant department and the Housing Operations Manager over whether they are eligible to move.

6.0 Compensation for Improvements

Under the Compensation for Improvements regulations 1994, tenants who have undertaken certain specified improvement works to their property (e.g. the installation of kitchens, bathrooms, heating systems 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 VC believes the tenant may be entitled to compensation under this scheme they will issue them with a Compensation for Improvements application form and help them complete it if this is required.

A separate budget exists for compensation payments.

7.0 Affordable Rent and Flexible Tenancies

When new affordable rents (registered providers) and flexible tenancies (registered providers/local authorities) come into use, the Council will offer a 'like for like' downsize. For example, a Council tenant on a secure tenancy paying social rent will keep both their security of tenure and social rent when they downsize.

8.0 Budget

From 1 April 2011, the 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 year's allocation is available.

9.0 Monitoring the Downsizing Scheme

The VC will collect the following performance information for the Tenancy Service Manager to report at the Performance Review Committee every quarter:

- Number of downsizers per quarter
- Number downsizing to Exeter City Council properties
- Number downsizing to registered provider properties
- Incentive paid during the quarter
- Total incentive paid (cumulative).