

Date: 28th June 2013

Consultation: Equality Impact Assessment: Proposed Changes to The Housing Selection Scheme

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) represents registered and non-registered housing associations in Northern Ireland. Collectively, our members provide around 38,000 good quality, affordable homes for renting or equity sharing. They also provide a wide range of community services. Housing associations are responsible for over 30 percent of all social housing stock throughout Northern Ireland. Further information is available at www.nifha.org

Specific Comments

2.3 Assessment of Impacts

(i) Minimum Bedroom Requirements for allocations - age criteria for children sharing bedrooms

NIFHA accepts that increasing the age to 10 years old within the housing selection scheme rules where two children are required to share a bedroom is required to bring the scheme into line with the criteria used for housing benefit purposes.

However, we are particularly concerned regarding the appropriateness of “older” children of different genders sharing the same bedroom and where step brothers and sisters or grandchildren from different families are required to share bedrooms.

We support the reduction in age of older children, of the same gender, being expected to share a bedroom from 18 to 16 and we welcome NIHE’s anticipated view that the Housing Selection Scheme will retain enough flexibility to take account of individual households’ requirements when determining the minimum number of bedrooms required.

However, NIFHA has concerns that people with dependants, especially men, and children themselves will be directly adversely impacted by the proposed changes.

(ii) Minimum Bedroom Requirements for allocations - Difficult-to-Let Properties

NIFHA agrees that flexibility should be retained as it is more beneficial to both housing providers and the communities the property is located in for the property to be occupied rather than void. We would however, stress the

importance of ensuring that if working age tenants are allocated a property of a size greater than their needs then they should be given appropriate advice informing them of the short fall between their housing benefit and rent payments. This advice would enable them to make an informed choice prior to accepting the property.

We recognise that these are a small proportion of the overall number of dwellings but we have concerns that this will impact more on single men especially if they have access to children.

(iii) Minimum Bedroom Requirements for allocations - Parents with access to children who do not permanently reside with them

NIFHA agrees that the allocation to applicants of a bedroom more than their minimum requirements to facilitate access to children should be maintained. We agree that prospective tenants should be informed, when offered accommodation that exceeds the size they would normally require, that their housing costs will not include an allowance for bedrooms for non resident children. Making applicants aware that they would have to pay any shortfall between their housing costs and their rent would enable them to make an informed choice prior to accepting an offer of accommodation.

We recognise and are concerned that these changes may have an adverse impact on men compared to women and that there may be an overall adverse impact on children if access to a parent was restricted as a result of the lack of availability of bedroom space.

(iv) Minimum Bedroom Requirements for allocations - Flexibility to make allocations one bedroom in Excess of Minimum Requirements

NIFHA agrees with maintaining the flexibility associated with making allocations one bedroom in excess of the minimum bedroom requirements. We agree that this flexibility may be used in circumstances to ensure the best use of the housing stock in meeting the housing needs of people on the waiting list.

We agree that under these circumstances the applicant should be informed, that their housing costs will not include an allowance for a bedroom in excess of the minimum requirements. Making applicants aware that they would have to pay any shortfall between their housing costs and their rent would enable them to make an informed choice prior to accepting an offer of accommodation.

NIFHA recognises that greater clarity is needed around any further exceptions, such as those with respect to people with disabilities who may need extra rooms, that are to be included within the Northern Ireland Welfare Reform Bill and whether or not these will have an impact on equality.

(v) Overcrowding Rules

NIFHA recognises that changes are required to bring the age criteria for sharing bedrooms in line with the proposed Housing Benefit size restriction. We would however re-iterate our concerns that people with dependants, especially men, and children themselves will be adversely impacted by the proposed changes.

(vi) Policy Succession

NIFHA agrees that tenants who are awarded a policy succession or policy assignment should be advised that they would have to pay any shortfall between their housing costs and their rent. We accept that policy successions / assignments are granted under specific circumstances and that these would not bring about a differential impact on any of the section 75 groups.

(vii) Allocations to Transfers – Applicant / Transfer ratios and Management Transfer status

NIFHA agrees that there should be additional arrangements put in place to assist tenants who are under occupying and are seeking to move to a smaller more affordable home. We also agree that the Housing Selection Scheme should relax the current transfer applicant allocations ratio although landlords may already currently use a ratio that is appropriate to the relative housing need of waiting list and transfer applicants.

Whilst we support the principle that housing allocations should always be on the basis of need we appreciate that the transfer of people who are under occupying their homes to smaller properties may be viewed as giving preference to these people over others where there is perceived greater housing need. NIFHA therefore welcomes that this rule will be reviewed 12 months following its implementation.

(viii) Allocations to Transfers – Access to the Transfer / Mutual Exchange List

NIFHA agrees with changing the housing selection scheme to allow greater flexibility in access to the transfer list and giving consent for a mutual exchange. We support the removal of barriers for tenants who experience financial hardship and rent arrears as a result of the size restriction and who want to move to a smaller property although there needs to a protocol or agreement in place regarding the repayment of arrears if the tenant moves into property belonging to a different landlord.

NIFHA appreciates that the impact of this change cannot be assessed until it becomes operational and is evaluated over a representative period of time.

(ix) Creation of Joint Tenancies

NIFHA agrees with the proposal but we suggest that it will need to have arrangements in place to prevent any abuse of the selection system. We appreciate that the impact of the change will be beneficial to single households although this is anticipated to be minor.

(x) Local Lettings Policies

NIFHA agrees that policies such as the local lettings policy should be subject to periodic review. We would suggest though that care needs to be taken if there are plans to change these policies. The policies were developed and have been used to ensure that landlords through their housing allocations deliver balanced and sustainable communities. Housing associations would seek to retain some form of a local lettings policy that will enable them to do this in the future.

NIFHA suggests that if local lettings policies are removed then this removal should be evaluated and their impact assessed over a representative time period.

2.4 Consideration of mitigation measures / alternative policies to promote equality of opportunity

NIFHA's view is that proposals within the Welfare Reform Bill will generally have a negative impact on people with children and specifically on single parents with access to children. Therefore we consider that the proposed changes to the housing selection scheme will have an adverse impact on the same groups.

NIFHA therefore welcomes that the implementation of the proposed changes will be reviewed to evaluate the degree of impact by current and future applicants to the Housing Selection Scheme.

I hope you find this consultation response useful, for further information please contact **Maire Kerr T: 028 9089 7695 E:MKerr@nifha.org**.