

Under-occupation policy

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1 Aim of the policy

1.1 This policy aims to support under-occupying tenants who wish to downsize by providing them with practical support and financial assistance.

1.2 Helping tenants to downsize appropriately will:

- release larger properties for re-letting to overcrowded families
- make best use of existing council stock at a time when opportunities for building new houses in Stevenage are declining
- relieve the financial pressures on working age under-occupying households adversely affected by welfare reform
- help reduce customer debt and council rent arrears
- help to create more sustainable communities.

2 Scope of policy

2.1 The terms of this policy will apply to all under-occupying tenants.

3 Responsibility

3.1 **The Empty Homes Manager** is responsible for the under-occupation policy.

3.2 **Lettings Advisors** are responsible for administering the under-occupation policy

3.3 **Housing management staff** assist in the implementation and promotion of the under-occupation policy.

4 Policy

4.1 In carrying out this policy we will:

- follow best practice

- treat all tenants in a fair and non-discriminatory way as set out in our Equality and Diversity policy
- treat all information provided as confidential, and release it to a third party only after discussion and with the tenant's agreement.

4.2 We will not require under-occupying tenants to downsize unless they wish it.

4.3 **Tenant profiling**

We will identify under-occupying tenants through data available from tenancy records, the housing register and the council's mutual exchange services. We will then target these tenants in carrying out the aims of this policy.

4.4 **Support and assistance**

We will:

- aim to understand and assess our tenants' needs
- provide a range of advice and assistance to under-occupying tenants moving to a new home
- discuss available options
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4.5 **Financial and other assistance**

4.6 Stevenage Borough Council will pay an incentive of £750 per each room downsized. This will be off-set against any rent arrears or recharges outstanding. For households moving to sheltered accommodation Stevenage Borough Council will pay for basic removal costs. Incentives and removal costs will only be available subject to funds.

4.7 Policy prevents a tenant from moving if they have a current housing debt owed to the council, however we will consider allowing tenants in arrears to downsize; on the basis that smaller accommodation will not only be cheaper to rent it will be cheaper to run. This will be at the discretion of Stevenage Borough Council.

4.8 We will consider offering under-occupiers other incentives to downsize. This will be considered on a case by case basis and is at the discretion of Stevenage Borough Council.

4.9 Some tenants occupy properties that have adaptations which meet their particular needs. We will apply to the Secretary of State for authority to pay the government's housing-benefit spare-room subsidy for such tenants. This funding will top up the existing Discretionary Housing Payment funding and will be administered by the Income Team. We will periodically review the expenditure and reapply to the secretary of state where necessary.

4.10 **Publicity**

We will:

- increase public knowledge and awareness of the opportunities available for downsizing
- promote the benefits of occupying smaller properties, such as the savings made from lower utility costs
- raise the profile of under-occupation through customer contact, advertising, new leaflets and promotional events, and by working closely with partners and colleagues
- provide information to our tenants on how to secure alternative accommodation in an understandable format.

4.11 **Data matching**

We will:

- support initiatives which bring together upsizing and downsizing tenants through chain lettings or local mutual exchange schemes
- actively seek downsizing opportunities for our tenants.
- Actively promote Housing Registration under the Housing Allocations policy

4.12 **Mutual exchange**

We will:

- encourage tenants actively to search for moves through the mutual exchange services
- provide ways for tenants to come together to agree mutual exchanges.

4.13 **The allocation scheme**

The Housing Allocations Scheme will award greater priority to under-occupiers wanting to downsize.

4.14 To encourage downsizing, we will ring-fence some high-demand properties such as bungalows for under-occupiers. We will do this by developing local lettings plans and quotas through the Allocation Scheme. This will make available larger properties and homes with adaptations to those who need them.

4.15 We will make sure that only in exceptional and justifiable circumstances will successions lead to under-occupation.

4.16 **Adaptations**

Mobility difficulty is a major reason for under-occupiers wanting to downsize. When we can meet these tenants' needs either by downsizing or by adapting their existing home, we will encourage downsizing.

4.17 We will identify potential downsizers through closer working with those providing adaptations.

4.18 **Older peoples services**

We will continue working closely with internal and external partners to meet the needs of our older population.

5 **REVIEW**

5.1 The policy will be reviewed by the Empty Homes Manager annually or earlier if changes in legislation or demand require this. The review will take into account any changes in statutory guidance and good practice. It will be measured on its effectiveness and the availability of the resources. Any major changes will be consulted on.

5.2 Performance will be monitored and measured through:

- tenant downsizing satisfaction surveys
- the number of tenants under-occupying their homes
- the number of those interested in the downsizing scheme
- benchmarking against the approach other organisations take to under-occupation
- consideration of ideas that will help us improve the policy.

6 **Associated documents**

6.1 **Internal**

Related strategies, policies and standards

- The Allocations Policy
- Empty Homes Policy
- Adaptations Policy
- Lettable Standard

6.2 **External**

Legislation

- Localism Act 2011
- Welfare Reform Act 2012

Guidance

- Communities and Local Government – A plain English guide to the Localism Act
- Communities and Local Government – Allocation of accommodation: guidance for local housing authorities in England

