

Housing Under Occupancy Policy

Document control

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1. Purpose

Gravesham Council has a limited supply of family sized accommodation and properties adapted to be wheelchair accessible. The purpose of this Policy is to encourage tenants who are under occupying their properties to downsize to smaller accommodation. This will have the benefit of reducing their ongoing running costs or reduce the burden of looking after a property which perhaps has become too large to manage. The benefit to the council is to free up family sized under occupied properties which can then be allocated to larger families in need of that size accommodation, to maximise occupancy. The council has therefore adopted an under-occupation policy as an incentive, to free up these properties. The Under-Occupancy Policy is for council tenants who have one or more bedrooms they no longer need and are interested in 2 downsizing or ending their tenancy. Tenants have the option of transferring to another social housing property or moving into the private sector.

The policy also applies to tenants who are either under-occupying or no longer need a wheelchair adapted property, or where the adaptations in the property are no longer needed, and if eligible, will be given the highest priority for re-housing.

Moving can be a daunting time and the council is committed to assisting tenants through the process of downsizing to a smaller property, move into the Private Sector or move to a non-adapted property (even with the same number of bedrooms).

2. Scope of Policy – Aims

Reference in this policy to 'The Council' means Gravesham Borough Council.

This policy is intended to be gender-inclusive and where a reference to an individual's gender appears within this document its use is non-discriminatory.

The Housing Under-Occupancy Policy is voluntary, it is not compulsory for any tenant to move. The Under-Occupancy Policy applies to council tenants who have one or more bedrooms they no longer need and are interested in downsizing or ending their tenancy. Tenants have the option of transferring to another social housing property or moving into the private sector. Under the policy, council tenants who are giving up these types of accommodation are eligible for cash incentives and are given priority for re-housing in accordance with the council's Allocations Policy.

Practical help to tenants will, wherever possible, be matched to each individual tenants needs.

3. Policy Statement

3.1. Eligibility

The Housing Under-Occupancy Policy applies to tenants who meet the following criteria:

- Have held a Secure Tenancy agreement with Gravesham Borough Council for a year or more

- Occupy a general needs family property* or occupy wheelchair accessible accommodation**
- Agree to transfer to smaller accommodation that meets their needs and/or a non-adapted property, and provide vacant possession of their present home, or to relinquish their Secure Tenancy completely and move to the private sector.
- Have a clear rent account or have an agreement in place to clear arrears and the Housing Income Team agrees that a move can take place. Any money owed to the council, including but not exclusive to rent arrears, council tax and any recharges may be deducted from the incentive payment in accordance with the council's Corporate Refund Procedure).

The Housing Income Team will be consulted where tenants are in rent arrears, including where they are subject to a possession order.

* Through this scheme, general needs family properties are classified as houses, bungalows, maisonettes, or flats with two bedrooms or more.

** In this instance a wheelchair accessible property would be classified as accommodation fully adapted for a wheelchair user, or a property that has level or ramped access with wheelchair access to all essential rooms within the property but may not have wheelchair access to all areas of the property.

3.2. Ineligibility

The Housing Under-Occupancy Policy will not apply to tenants:

- Who have been served with a Notice of Seeking Possession for anti-social behaviour.
- Who hold an introductory tenancy or are licensees.

4. Financial incentives

Bedrooms released	Payment for	Maximum payment towards costs of moving	Total maximum payment
1	£500	£500	£1,000
2	£1,000	£500	£1,500
3	£1,500	£500	£2,000
4	£2,000	£500	£2,500
5	£2,500	£500	£3,000

* In certain circumstances and subject to determination by the Housing Officer, a 2nd reception room may be regarded as a bedroom.

4.1. Applying

Applicants wishing to take benefit from the Under-Occupancy Policy should contact the Housing Estate Management Team who will designate a named officer, who will engage with the applicant on a one-to-one basis to discuss their requirements in detail, explaining how the system works and what we can do to help them through the process. Tenants who apply to go on the scheme will be given priority for re-housing to a home in an area of their choice which is of a size suitable to their needs in accordance with the council's Allocation Policy and will be given priority on the transfer list of either band A or B depending upon whether they are under occupying their property by one or more bedrooms. They can find and bid for a property through Kent Homechoice, the council's choice-based lettings scheme.

4.2. When is payment made

The payment is normally made within 4 weeks of the move taking place and is subject to a satisfactory inspection of their current property.

4.3. Financial Resources

The policy will be kept under review and the need for any additional funding will be dealt with as part of the annual budget setting process.

5. Holding Hands Scheme

The Holding Hands Scheme is one of the tools available to assist the council to address the under occupation of Gravesham Borough Council properties. This is achieved by making the best use of its available stock by helping tenants in larger family homes or adapted properties to move to smaller properties or properties that better suit their needs. This will then:

Make available larger family homes for those who are on the Housing Register and minimise running costs for those who are unable to meet the costs of running a larger home, potentially avoiding costly legal action, and becoming homeless.

Tenants and, but not exclusive to older tenants may require individual support to assist them through the downsizing process to a smaller property and therefore a Holding Hands service is there to help those residents with the task of moving. Tenants may require individual support to assist them through the Holding Hands Under-occupancy Scheme.

Tenants may be unclear what support is available to them, it is therefore important that a number of steps are followed throughout the process including:

- Provision of contact details of a named officer
- Help with bidding for properties
- Assistance with viewing properties
- Advice on disposal of unwanted items
- Help and / or advice in closing down utility accounts and commencing new accounts
- Help and / or advice on notifying change of address
- Help and advice following their move

The council is committed to assisting tenants wishing to move to more suitable accommodation through the Under-Occupancy Policy

6. Equality statement and equalities impact assessment

This Policy works in conjunction with the Council's Equality policy.

6.1. Gravesham Borough Council is committed to treating people with dignity and respect. This applies to colleagues, residents and members, all of whom undertake not to discriminate directly or indirectly, or victimise because of race, colour, ethnic or national origin, nationality, citizenship, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, disability, religion or political persuasion.

6.2. All information / literature will be made available in other formats or translated upon request.

6.3. The Council is committed to addressing issues of financial inclusiveness by referencing its Vulnerability Policies.

6.4 Front line staff will signpost customers to external advice agencies providing additional help and support regarding equalities, ensuring full use of available resources.

6.5. Appointments arranged to discuss issues covered by this policy will be made reflecting awareness of cultural and religious holidays and celebrations. Alternative dates/times for attendance will be offered should the suggested date/time conflict with a cultural or religious celebration.

6.6. This policy has satisfied an Equalities Impact Assessment, which has been carried out in line with the 2010 Equalities Act (Protected Characteristics).

7. Policy Review

Policy reviews will be carried out periodically to ensure that the policy is effective, and the Housing and Regeneration Directorate is providing services which meet resident's needs. These may take the form of peer reviews or a sample check of cases where a tailored service has been provided.

8. Complaints

Any complaints will be dealt with in accordance with the council's Corporate Complaints Procedure.

Related GBC Policies 6.1 GBC Equalities and Diversity Policy 6.2 GBC Housing Allocation Policy 6.3 GBC Corporate Debt Policy 10. Legal Framework Housing and Planning Act 2016 Housing Act 1985 Housing Act 1996 (as amended 2017) Children Act 1989 Landlord & Tenant Acts 1985, 1987 6 Housing Act 1988 Local Government & Housing Act 1989 Human Rights Act 1998 Housing Act 2004 Localism Act 2011 11. Key Performance Indicators There are no corporate performance indicators relevant to this policy