

Appendix A



Watford Borough Council

Temporary Accommodation Placement Policy

1 Introduction

1.1 This document sets out Watford Council's policy for the placement of households in temporary accommodation, both inside and outside the Borough. It covers both interim placements made under Section 188 Housing Act 1996 ("HA96"), while homelessness enquiries are undertaken, and longer term temporary accommodation placements for households accepted as homeless under Section 193 HA96.

1.2 The policy takes into account the statutory requirements on local authorities in respect of suitability of accommodation, including Suitability Orders, and the Homelessness Code of Guidance 2006.

1.3 As per section 208 HA96, and paragraph 16.7 of the Homelessness Code of Guidance, so far as reasonably practicable, the Council seeks to accommodate homeless households in Watford and always considers the suitability of the accommodation offered, taking into account the circumstances of the individual household. However, due to an acute shortage of affordable housing locally, and rising rental costs, an increasing number of households are likely to be placed outside the borough, as it will not be reasonably practicable to provide accommodation within Watford. The application of housing benefit caps, and introduction of the overall benefit cap from April 2013, has further restricted the number of properties that will be affordable to homeless households in Watford, and particularly larger families.

1.4 When determining whether it is reasonably practicable to secure accommodation in Watford, as opposed to simply what is reasonable, the cost of the accommodation is a relevant and proper consideration.

1.5 The Local Housing Allowance (LHA) is used to work out how much Housing Benefit a tenant will receive to pay their rent. LHA rates depend on who lives in the household, and the area they are making their claim in. These areas are called Broad Rental Market Areas (BRMA) and Watford is part of the South West Herts. BRMA.

1.6 The Welfare Reform (low levels of Local Housing Allowance against increasing local market rent) continues to impact negatively on our supply of 2 bedroom accommodation, the main accommodation size required for households in TA. We have seen a decrease in the overall number of social lettings by 20% in the previous 24 months to date. TA occupation has more than doubled since March 2013 with over 200 families now occupying TA and 32% of TA residents are currently placed out of borough.

1.7 According to the Office of National Statistics (ONS) records, Watford is the most densely populated district area in England and Wales with an area of 21 sq km (8 sq mi) and a population density of approximately 4,300 people per square km. The growing population has contributed to the increasing short

supply of suitable accommodation. Due to this, it is likely that increasing proportions of households will be placed out of borough in future.

1.8 The Council endeavours to place most affected applicants in the neighbouring boroughs, with access to services and reasonable travelling distance, 90 minutes, by public transport to Watford. However there may be cases where applicants may have to be placed further away due to lack of suitable properties. This policy therefore details how applicants will be prioritised for housing in Watford, and outside of Watford.

2 Temporary Accommodation Offers and Refusals

2.1 Due to the shortage of suitable accommodation in Watford, homeless applicants who are housed under the Council's interim duty to accommodate pursuant to Section 188 HA96 may initially be placed in emergency accommodation, including bed and breakfast and short-term self-contained accommodation, such as annexes, while enquiries are carried out. This accommodation may be outside of the borough. If the Council decides it has a duty to house the household, they will be moved to longer-term accommodation as soon as a suitable property becomes available.

2.2 Wherever possible, the Council will avoid placing: families with dependent children; pregnant women; and, young people aged 16/17 in bed and breakfast accommodation. Where no other suitable accommodation exists and such placements are necessary, the Council will endeavour to move these households to more suitable self-contained accommodation within six weeks.

2.3 Where the Council decides that applicants housed under Section 188 HA96 are not owed the main homelessness duty, they will be asked to leave, usually within 14 days for single households and 28 days for families, of receiving a homelessness decision letter.

2.4 Applicants will be given one offer of suitable interim or longer term temporary accommodation and they will be asked to accept it straight away. There is no obligation upon the Council to enable applicants to view the accommodation prior to acceptance. In making the offer, the household's individual circumstances will be considered, taking into account the factors set out in section 3 of this policy and Council's criteria on out of borough placements.

2.5 If an applicant rejects an offer, they will be asked to provide their reasons for refusal. This applies to new applicants to whom the Council has an interim duty to accommodate under Section 188 HA96, as well as those seeking a transfer from existing Temporary Accommodation (TA) or those in TA who are required to move by the Council whom the Council has accepted a rehousing duty towards under Section 193 HA96. The Council will consider the reasons given and undertake further enquiries as necessary. If the Council accepts the

reasons for refusal and agree the offer is unsuitable, the offer will be withdrawn and a further offer will be made.

2.6 Where applicants refuse suitable interim accommodation (which may include out of borough placements) and the Council does not accept their reasons for refusal, and considers that the offer is suitable, applicants will not be offered further accommodation and will be required to make their own arrangements. There is no right of appeal against the suitability of accommodation offered to applicants under Section 188 HA96 (although they can apply for judicial review through the courts). For applicants where the Council has accepted a rehousing duty under Section 193 HA96, (s193 duty) there is a right to request a review of the suitability decision, pursuant to Section 202 HA96.

2.7 In cases where the applicant is entitled to and exercises their right to a review of the Council's decision, they will only continue to be accommodated during the review period in exceptional circumstances. Each case will be considered on an individual basis, taking into account the overall merits of the review request, any new information or evidence that may affect the original decision, and the personal circumstances of the applicant and the potential impact of the loss of accommodation. Should the outcome of the review determine that the original offer was suitable and the applicant still refuses that suitable offer of accommodation, the homelessness duty will be discharged. If the applicant is resident in emergency accommodation, they will usually be asked to vacate the property. This will be within 14 days for single households and 28 days for families, of receiving the decision letter and advised that no further assistance will be provided. If they are already in longer-term temporary accommodation, the current housing provider should be advised that the duty has been discharged.

2.8 In cases where the applicant has no right to a review, the homelessness duty will be discharged. If the applicant is resident in emergency accommodation, they will usually be asked to vacate the property. This will be within 14 days for single households and 28 days for families, of receiving the decision letter and advised that no further assistance will be provided. If they are already in longer-term temporary accommodation, the current housing provider should be advised that the duty has been discharged.

3. Suitability of accommodation – factors to consider

3.1 In offering temporary accommodation, the Council will consider the suitability of the offer, taking into account the following factors:

3.1.1 **The temporary accommodation available in the borough-** if suitable accommodation is available in the borough, applicants will be housed in Watford, allowing them to maintain any established links with services and social/support networks. However, when there is a lack of suitable accommodation or there are higher priority households awaiting accommodation in the borough, out of borough placements will be used to

meet the Council's housing duty. Given the shortage of accommodation locally, bed and breakfast in/outside of the borough may be considered suitable for short-term interim placements.

3.1.2 Size and location of the property and the availability of support networks in the area – accommodation must provide adequate space and room standards for the household and be fit to inhabit. In deciding on the fitness of the property, consideration will be given to the length of time needed to complete any necessary repairs and whether it is reasonable to complete these while the property is occupied. The quality of the decoration/furniture, the layout/type of accommodation, provision of parking and lack of access to a garden are not in themselves acceptable reasons for a refusal.

3.1.3 Health factors – the Council will consider health factors, such as ability to get up the stairs, care and support provided by other statutory agencies or the need to access any specialist medical services that are only available in Watford. If the applicant or a member of the resident household is citing medical grounds that were not identified during the initial assessment, the applicant must submit a medical form with 24 hours. The key test in determining the impact of medical issues is whether the condition itself makes the housing offered unsuitable. Problems such as depression, asthma, diabetes or back pain would not normally make a property unsuitable, as the problems would persist in any sort of accommodation.

3.1.4 Education - attendance at local schools will not be considered a reason to refuse accommodation, though some priority will be given to special educational needs and students who are close to taking public examinations in determining priority for in-borough placements.

3.1.5 Employment – the Council will consider the need of applicants who are in paid employment to reach their normal workplace from the accommodation that is secured.

3.1.6 Proximity to schools and Services - The council will consider the proximity to schools, public transport, primary care services, and local services in the area in which the accommodation is located.

3.1.7 Any special circumstance - The Council will consider any other reasons for refusal put forward by the applicant and come to an overall view about whether the offer is suitable.

4. Criteria for prioritising placements inside/outside of Watford

4.1 As the borough faces pressure to house applicants outside the area, it will increasingly be necessary to make decisions about the suitability of out of Watford/ in Watford placements for individual households and balance these against the type and location of temporary accommodation that can be offered. In many cases housing outside of the borough will be more sustainable for the household in the long-term, with lower rents allowing them to better meet their subsistence and household costs and avoid rent arrears.

4.2 In placing households in temporary accommodation, there will be a general presumption that placements outside of Watford will be used to discharge housing duties where suitable, affordable accommodation is not available locally. However, priority for in-borough accommodation will be given to certain households whose circumstances indicate that they would best be housed locally. These include:

4.2.1 Applicants with a severe and enduring health condition requiring intensive and specialist medical treatment that is only available in Watford.

4.2.2 Applicants who are in receipt of a significant package and range of health care options that cannot be easily transferred.

4.2.3 Applicants with a severe and enduring mental health problem who are receiving psychiatric treatment and aftercare provided by community mental health services and have an established support network where a transfer of care would severely impact on their well being.

4.2.4 Households with children registered on the Child Protection register in Hertfordshire, or families who have high social needs who are linked into local health services and where it is confirmed that a transfer to another area would impact on their welfare.

4.2.5 Households containing a child with special educational needs who is receiving education or educational support in Watford, where change would be detrimental to their well-being.

4.2.6 Applicants who have a longstanding arrangement to provide care and support to another family member in Watford who is not part of the resident household and would be likely to require statutory health and social support if the care ceased.

4.2.7 Any other special circumstance will also be taken into account

4.3 Priority for placements in Watford will be given to:

4.3.1 Applicants who have as part of their household, a child or children over the age of 14 who are enrolled in public examination courses in Watford, with exams to be taken within a year, wherever practicable we will seek to place such households within reasonable travelling distance of their school or college.

4.3.2 Wherever practicable, any applicant who works in paid and settled employment, minimum of 16 hrs /week for a single person or lone parent and 20 hrs/ week for a couple. Maternity leave will be taken into account, where the requisite hours were routinely worked prior to maternity leave and there is an intention to return to work. The applicant/s would have been employed continuously for more than six months and the Council will

endeavour to place such household within reasonable travelling distance, 90 minutes, by public transport from their place of employment.

4.3.3 Applicants who meet none of the above criteria will be offered properties out of Watford when no suitable property in Watford is available.

5.0 Reviewing the Policy

5.1.0 The Policy will be monitored and reviewed formally in line with the development of a new Homelessness Strategy to ensure effectiveness. If changes are required, these will be made as and when necessary. The Policy may also be reviewed at any time, in line with any relevant changes in legislation or Guidance issued by relevant Government Departments.