Property Conversion Policy

The Property Conversion Policy sets out Dartford Borough Council's approach to achieving its aim of increasing the supply of larger sized accommodation through property conversions.

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DARTFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

housing@dartford.gov.uk

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. This policy outlines Dartford Borough Council's ('the Council') approach to achieving its aim of increasing the supply of larger sized accommodation through property conversions. Where two Council owned properties located next to one another become empty (void), consideration will be given to the suitability for converting the two properties into one larger property. This policy applies to general needs properties that are owned and managed by the Council and is aspirational in as much as the Council has no control over when suitable properties might become available, and suitable for conversion, within its own stock.

1.2. To ensure consistency and transparency, this policy sets out the criteria for assessing the housing need for property conversion; the types of property the Council will consider converting and the decision-making process for approving property conversions.

1.3. Enabling flexibility in reconfiguring the housing stock portfolio through this policy compliments the Council's new build housing programme and the Policy on the Acquisition of Private Properties for Council Housing, which aim to help meet the Council's current housing demand for affordable housing in the borough.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. The Council operates a housing register for allocating social housing in the borough, including Council and housing association properties and there is a shortage of properties with four or more bedrooms. This is evidenced by the fact that as at the 1 May 2021, there were 57 families waiting for four bedroom accommodation with 48 families being in priority bands A and B. However, there were only 10 lettings to homes with four or more bedrooms made over the last five years (2016-2021) compared to overall lettings of approximately 1,500 in the same period. At the time of developing this policy, there are no five-bedroom properties in the Council's housing stock portfolio.

2.2. While households are waiting for a larger property to become available to let, they are often living in overcrowded conditions, which can have a detrimental impact on mental and physical health and wellbeing. The impact of this will be further exacerbated by the length of time waiting for a suitable property, which in some cases can be over ten years.

2.3. This policy therefore aims to try and address the need for larger properties, now and in the future, by making the best use of existing housing stock wherever possible. It is recognised that a carefully balanced approach must be taken; as, whilst this policy objective is to meet identified housing need for larger properties, it will reduce the number of smaller units in the housing stock. This is, however, mainly offset by the majority of new council homes already developed, and being built, consisting of one, two and some three bedroom properties. The Council also actively acquires private properties to increase the supply of its housing stock.

3. POLICY OBJECTIVES

3.1. The objectives of this policy are to:

- increase the supply of four plus bedroom properties in accordance to the supply and demand for larger properties;
- assist in meeting the housing needs for larger sized households;
- create movement in the Council's housing stock;
- reduce the time households wait for a suitable property thus reducing the time households spend living in overcrowded conditions;
- have greater flexibility in reconfiguring existing properties to make the best use of the stock;
- ensure all property conversions are appropriate and in accordance with planning permission requirements;
- ensure property conversions are completed to a high quality standard.

4. CRITERIA FOR PROPERTY CONVERSION

4.1. When the Housing Maintenance Team become aware of two properties located next to one another that are due to become void, they will notify the Housing Allocations Team of the opportunity for property conversion. The Housing Allocations Team will consult the housing register in order to assess the current levels of housing need for larger sized properties.

4.2. It should be noted that void turnaround performance will be longer for converted properties which will impact on performance indicators but it is felt that the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. Turnaround times will also be impacted by the need to obtain planning permission. All properties proposed to be converted must be suitable for conversion to four or more bedrooms.

4.3. Housing need

4.3.1. To consider a property conversion, there should be a demonstrable housing need. A number of factors will be taken into account to assist the Council in determining whether to carry out a property conversion based on the level of demand for larger properties against their supply, including:

- Number of applicants on the housing register requiring a four plus bedroom property;
- Housing need priority of the applicants;
- Length of time the applicants have been on the housing register;
- Current development and future planned development for four plus bedroom affordable housing;

4.4. Types of properties the Council will consider

4.4.1. The Council will consider various property types for conversion, including terraced houses, semi-detached houses, flats and maisonettes.

4.4.2. Properties where extension is possible will be considered, including end houses.

4.4.3. Other considerations for determining the types of properties that would be suitable will include the property amenity space, parking, and whether the conversion would detract from the residential character of the area. These factors will also be determined through the planning application process.

5. FUNDING PROPERTY CONVERSIONS

5.1. All property conversions will be subject to budget availability.

6. APPROVAL PROCESS

6.1. Assessments as to the suitability of a property for conversion will be made by the Housing Maintenance Team, the Housing Allocations Team and the Assistant Director of Housing.

6.2. All decisions to proceed on property conversions will be made on a case-by-case basis taking into account the assessments carried out to determine if the criteria for conversion have been met.

6.3. All proposals for property conversions will be approved by the Deputy Chief Executive (Housing and Public Protection).

6.4. The Council will apply for planning permission for all proposed property conversions where necessary.

7. ALLOCATION TO THE CONVERTED PROPERTY

7.1. All properties converted under this policy will be let to existing Borough Council tenants on the Council's housing register to ensure that the objective of this policy to create movement in the housing stock is met. In these cases, offers will be made to tenants in the highest housing need taking account of the suitability and location of the property for a family. All other criteria will be made in accordance with the Council's current Housing Allocations' Policy and Tenancy Policy.

7.2. In accordance with all Council property lettings, each property conversion will meet void letting standards, Decent Home standards, the regulatory Home Standard, and design standards and space standards.

8. RENT LEVELS

8.1. Rents will be charged in line with the Council's current policy on rent setting.

9. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

9.1. The Council is committed to welcoming and valuing diversity, promoting equality of opportunity and tackling unlawful discrimination in accordance with the Equality Act 2010. The Council, in delivering this policy, will have regard to

the Public Sector Equality Duty and ensure that no individual is discriminated against based on their sex, sexual orientation, marital status, pregnancy and maternity, gender reassignment, race, religion, belief, disability or age.

9.2. The Public Sector Equality Duty is a duty on the Council and that responsibility cannot be delegated to a contractor/service provider and is a continuing duty.

9.3. A Customer Access Review has been undertaken to assess the impact this policy will have on affected persons with protected characteristics. The review concluded there were no known circumstances of a negative equality impact.

10. RIGHT TO BUY

10.1. In line with current legislation, converted properties are not exempt from Right to Buy.

11. REVIEW

11.1. This policy will be reviewed every three years, or sooner, in the event of major legislative or operational changes.

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