



Shaping
a better future



Shaping
better development



Shaping
the urban future



Shaping
the rural future

Lancaster District Tenancy Strategy 2012

FINAL

LANCASTER
CITY COUNCIL

Promoting City, Coast & Countryside

Contents

1. Introduction
2. The statutory requirements of the Lancaster District Tenancy Strategy
3. The Lancaster district housing market
4. Tenure and affordability
5. Enhanced housing options

Introduction

- 1.1 The Lancaster District Tenancy Strategy has been formulated through collaborative working with the 14 local authorities across Lancashire and a number of partner Registered Providers to establish a broad framework which social housing providers will operate within. However, each individual district has developed their own individual tenancy strategies having regard to their own housing markets, housing provision and approaches that exist within those districts.
- 1.2 Lancaster City Council is committed to improving the health and wellbeing of its residents and ensuring access to decent, safe and affordable homes.
- 1.3 This Strategy relates principally to the management of social rented homes within the Lancaster district. It looks at how we might best use this important but limited resource to meet the needs of households that cannot exercise the same amount of choice as those who can readily access market housing.
- 1.4 The Strategy represents the council's considered response to the new freedoms provided within the Localism Act 2011 and sets out the extent to which we think these freedoms should be used to address the challenges we know exist.
- 1.5 It provides the basis for changes we may make in the management of own stock and gives guidance to other providers of social housing that are active within the Lancaster district.
- 1.6 The Tenancy Strategy will outline how the council and other social housing providers will address the issues of:-
 - Rent and tenure reform
 - Homelessness duty and the private sector
 - Changes to the housing register and priority for social housing
 - Nomination arrangements

Section 2 – the statutory requirements

- 2.1 The Government's National Housing Strategy 2011 seeks to "ensure everyone has an opportunity of living in a decent home, which they can afford, in a community where they want to live", and identified a number of barriers to achieving this. The Government has put a number of social housing reforms in place through the Localism Act, which received Royal Assent on the 15th November 2011.
- 2.2 The five main changes brought about through these reforms can be summarised as:-
- A wider range of tenancies within the social housing sector
 - The introduction of affordable rents
 - Greater discretion for local authorities to decide who can apply for inclusion on the Housing Register
 - The ability for local authorities to discharge their homelessness duty in the private rented sector
 - Allowing greater mobility within the social housing sector
- 2.3 To date, most social housing tenants have been offered a secure tenancy, which grants them a home for life. The Localism Act gives landlords more flexibility to decide what length of tenancy they offer, based on levels of housing stock and the needs of individual tenants.
- 2.4 The new flexible tenancies can be granted periodically or on a fixed term, normally on a minimum period of 5 years. It allows tenancies to be granted at affordable rents, which means social housing providers can charge up to 80% of market rents.
- 2.5 The Act also places a legal requirement upon local authorities to publish a tenancy strategy, which should set out their expectations for social housing landlords in relation to:
- The kinds of tenancies they will grant
 - Where they grant tenancies for a fixed term, the length of those terms
 - The circumstances under which they will grant tenancies of a particular type
 - The circumstances under which a tenancy may or may not be reissued at the end of the fixed term, in the same property or in a different property.
- 2.6 In developing their tenancy strategy, the local authority is required to send a copy of the draft to all private registered providers in the area, and the Secretary of State may also make directions as to who must be consulted before the strategy is adopted

- 2.7 Whilst all local authorities are required to produce a tenancy strategy, Registered Providers and Lancaster City Council as a stock retaining council will need a tenancy policy on the type of tenancies they grant. In developing a tenancy policy there must be due regard to tenure strategies. The requirements for the tenancy strategy are set out in the Localism Act, but the requirements of a tenancy policy are explained in the draft Directions to the Regulator of Social Housing. Lancaster City Council, therefore, requires both a tenancy strategy and a tenancy policy.

Tenancy Policy

- 2.8 All tenancy policies that are developed must set out if fixed tenancies are to be offered and must have regard to each District's Tenancy Strategy. When using fixed term tenancies the following themes would need to be considered:-

- The relationship between fixed term tenancies and affordable rent
- Use of starter tenancies, introductory and demoted tenancies
- The Right to Buy/Right to Acquire and fixed term tenancies
- Succession and fixed term tenancies
- Transfers, mutual exchanges and fixed term tenancies
- Ending a fixed term tenancy
- Possibility of challenge.

- 2.9 Registered Providers are expected to conform to published guidance from the social housing regulator in respect of developing and publishing tenancy policies setting out the type of tenancies they will use and the circumstances therein. They will also be expected to follow any good practice and ensure they are taking account of the local housing market and issues when developing their tenancy policies.

- 2.10 Most partner Registered Providers have already got a tenancy policy or interim policy in place in order to comply with the current Affordable Homes Programme and funding requirements. Registered Providers, therefore, need to review their own tenancy policies after the publication of the Tenancy Strategy to ensure that their policies do not conflict with any aspects of this document.

Aim of the Strategy

- 2.11 This Tenancy Strategy seeks to ensure that the changes in the Localism Act do not undermine and, wherever possible, enhance progress in meeting the housing priorities in the district which are:-

- To build and maintain sustainable communities

- To ensure the most efficient use of the district's housing stock to meet local need.
- To target resources effectively to households in greatest need.
- To prevent homelessness and fulfil our statutory duties when homelessness occurs

- 2.12 The Strategy seeks to complement the Lancashire wide and sub-regional initiatives such as the Lancashire Homelessness Strategy prevention agenda, and the local policies that exist in relation to the Ideal Choice Homes Choice Based Lettings Scheme, and the current/future allocation policies of partner Registered Providers with housing stock in this district.
- 2.13 The Strategy also takes account of the private rented sector and to maximise the potential that exists to provide a wide range of housing offers locally.

Section 3 - The Lancaster district housing market

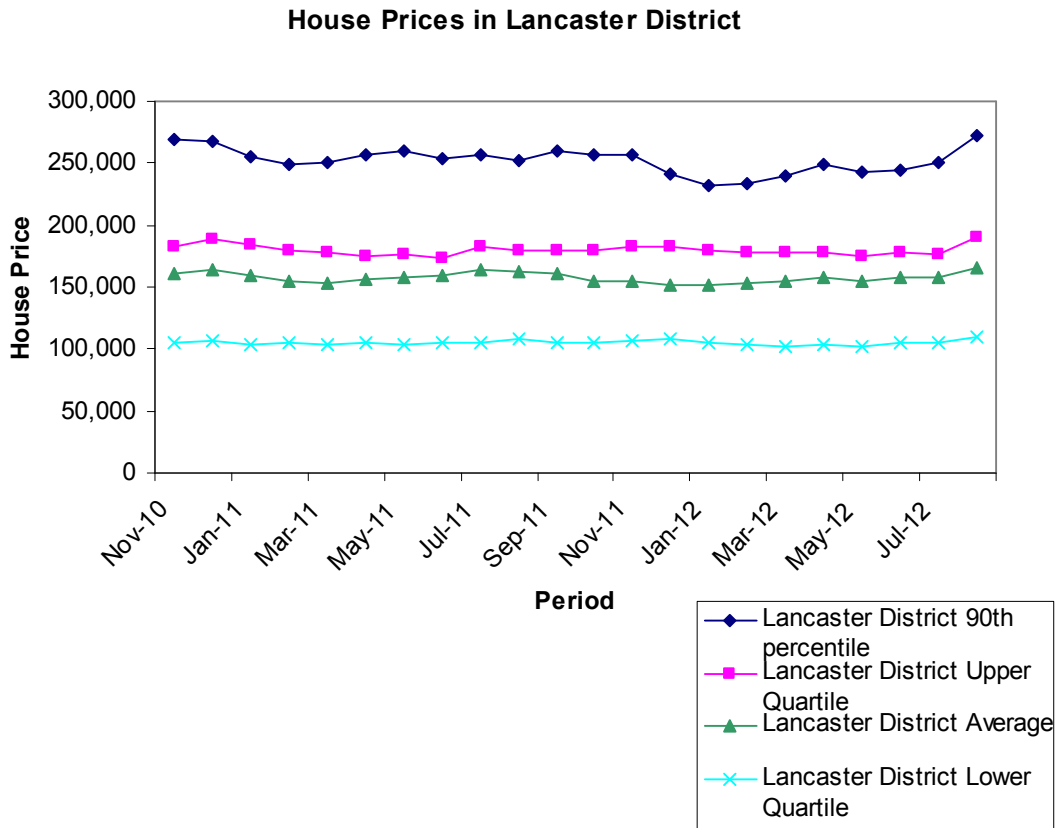
- 3.1 Social housing providers should, when determining their own tenancy policies, be informed by an understanding of the role of affordable housing within the Lancaster district, and the potential impact of their policies.
- 3.2 The Lancaster district contains a population of 138,400 residents, with a total housing stock of 61,570 dwellings (HSSA 2011). 60.5% of dwellings are either detached or semi detached, 23.5% are terraced houses, 13.8% are flats and the remainder are houseboats, caravans and mobile home properties (Housing Needs Survey 2011).
- 3.3 The last Housing Stock Condition Survey was undertaken in 2004, which reported that 78% of the stock is owner-occupied, 4% is owned and managed by Registered Providers, 6% is owned by the Local Authority and 12% is private rented. These statistics demonstrate that the District of Lancaster has higher levels of owner-occupation than the national average which peaked at 72.5% in 2001, and lower levels of social housing in comparison to the national average of 17% (English Housing Survey: Housing Stock Report 2009). These figures clearly demonstrate that affordable housing provision in the Lancaster district is lower than normal, and a fundamental aim of this Tenancy Strategy is to maximise the use and potential of what is already a scarce resource.
- 3.4 The Lancaster district has been recognised through previous regional strategic housing market assessments and in the Housing Needs Survey 2011 as having a relatively self contained housing market. Some of the historic and current factors can be summarised in broad terms as:-
- An isolated housing market
 - High demand areas in Lancaster and rural areas out of reach for first time buyers and young families, which is becoming more widespread.
 - A large take up of private sector housing in Lancaster by the student population.
 - A lower than national average social housing provision at 10%.
 - Over supply of poor quality private rented stock in Morecambe; a legacy from the town's heyday as a popular coastal resort.
 - Low income, benefit dependant households are driven into the deprived areas of Morecambe and significantly inflate the value of HMO (House in Multiple Occupation) stock.
- 3.5 Significant progress has been made with the regeneration of Morecambe's West End to reduce the number of HMO's, to create a more balanced housing market and improve the housing conditions in

the area. There has been increased provision of student housing in the City Centre (circa 250 bedspaces) supported through planning approvals, which is hoped will create more availability and better access to private rented housing in the Lancaster south area. There are very well aligned housing and planning policies in place to meet the housing needs of the district. However, affordability is a fundamental barrier to many households being able to exercise choice in securing suitable housing.

Market Housing Sector

- 3.6 Historically, accessing market housing in the District was an achievable aspiration of many working households, but with the increase in house prices locally, the economic downturn and impact upon the labour market, as well as difficulties accessing mortgage products, the need for affordable housing products has never been greater. The Housing Needs Survey 2011 findings reveal that for those wishing to purchase market housing, income requirements ranged from £13,800 - £33,900 depending upon the type and size of property and lowest entry prices. However, 45% of concealed households within the district earn less than £15K per year and are unable to access market housing.

Table 1: Range of Average House Prices in the Lancaster District – October 2012

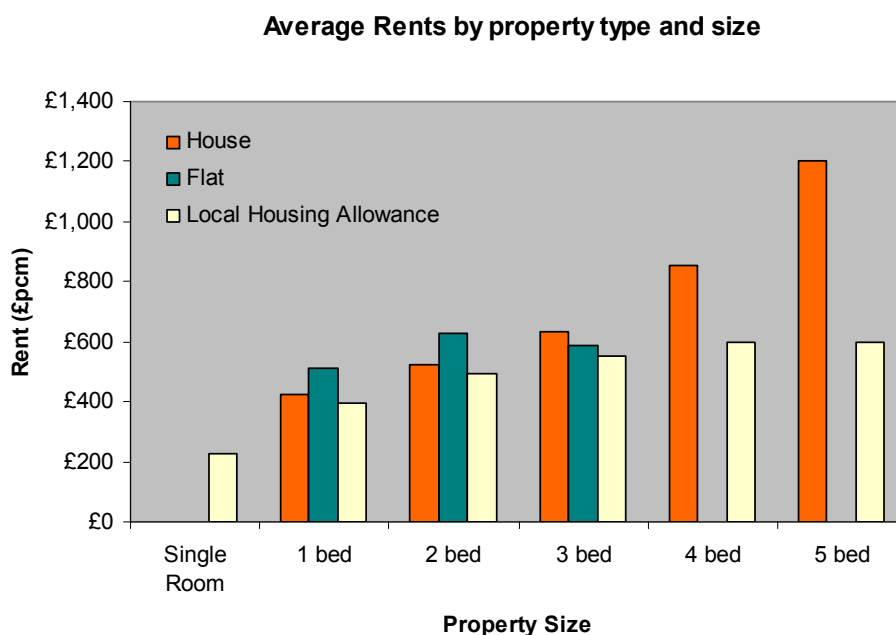


Source Hometrack data

Private Rented Sector

- 3.7 Around 90% of the private rented sector stock is situated in urban areas and 10% in rural areas. 45% of private rented accommodation is situated in Morecambe and Heysham, and 32% in Lancaster south, much of which will include student lets. In Lancaster district, around 10,000 households receive housing benefit.
- 3.8 A detailed analysis of entry levels and average rents was undertaken in 2011 as part of the Housing Needs Survey, but the graph below contains the latest information from Zoopla in October 2012, and provides a more accurate picture of the current private sector rent levels. The graph also includes the current local housing allowance rates set at April 2012 which highlights that those relying on housing benefit are likely to experience financial hardship if securing accommodation in this sector, which is the most acute for single people under 35.

Table 2 - Average Private Sector Rents – October 2012

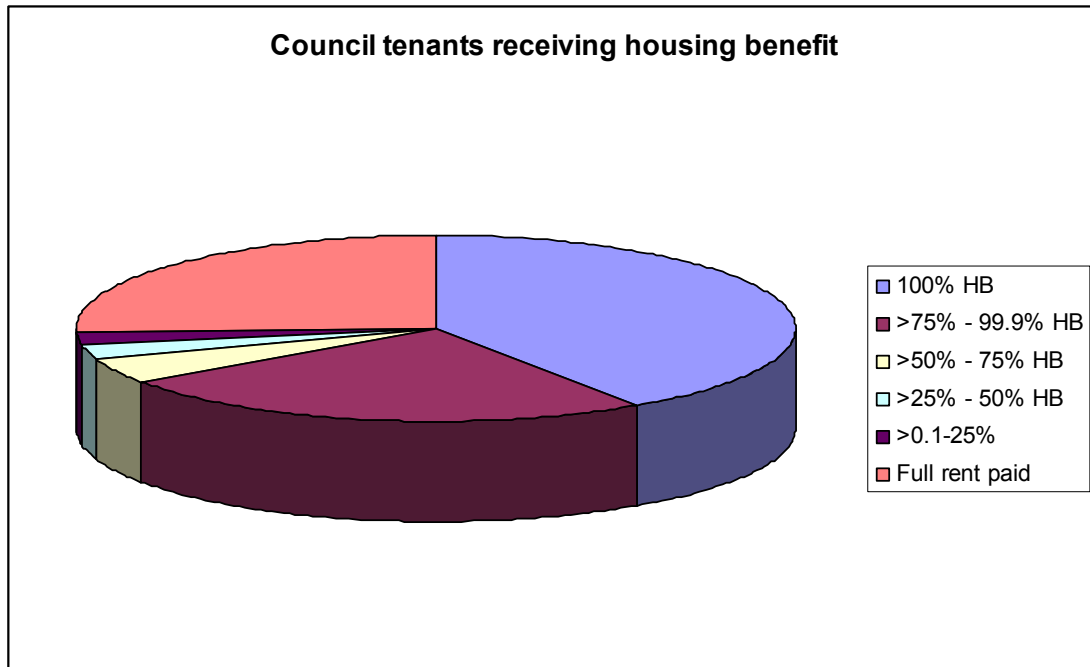


Source – Zoopla

Social Housing Sector

- 3.9 The current level of affordable housing stock (excluding discounted outright sale properties) within the District is 5,938, with the local authority’s housing stock being 3,807 dwellings and a total of 2,131 Registered Provider stock. The vast majority of affordable housing stock is social rented accommodation, although in recent years, some Registered Providers have moved towards providing shared ownership, in order to balance the housing market and improve access to housing for those households who would traditionally not qualify for social rented accommodation. Annual turnover of social housing per year is around 550 relets.
- 3.10 A recent analysis of council tenants in January 2012 revealed that a high percentage of tenants rely on housing benefit to pay their rent, as detailed below.

Table 3: Council Tenants in receipt of housing benefit – Jan. 2012



- 3.11 The Housing Needs Survey 2011 estimates that 500 units of social housing are under-occupied by 2 bedrooms or more. Under occupation of social rented homes is clearly an issue that social landlords can influence and the use of incentive schemes and providing assistance for tenants to downsize needs to be widely encouraged and prioritised. It is already normal practice for social landlords to give a high priority to those tenants who are under-occupying large family housing. The local authority is also providing better access to social housing through its Choice Based Lettings Scheme "Ideal Choice Homes". A further driver is likely to be the welfare reforms which, from March 2013, will result of tenants under pensionable age who under-occupy social housing will have their housing benefit reduced depending on how many bedrooms they under-occupy.
- 3.12 There is a need to ensure that social landlords make the best use of adapted properties to meet the needs of the vulnerable and physically disabled. The council will be establishing a register of adapted properties which is an identified action in the Housing Action Plan 2012-2017 to enable a greater match between properties that are adapted and those who need them.

Section 4 – Tenure and affordability

The main types of tenancy currently used by providers are as follows:

- **Introductory Tenancy** - An introductory tenancy is a one-year 'trial' council tenancy. As long as the terms of the tenancy agreement are met, it will be automatically followed up with a secure tenancy.
- **Secure Tenancy** – Normally granted by local authorities and Registered Providers before 1989, where the tenant can stay in the property for an unspecified period of time, and where the tenancy can only be brought to an end in certain circumstances (known as grounds for possession). Fair rents have applied prior to the Localism Act 2011, and tenants have other rights such as the right to exchange, the right of succession and the right to buy.
- **Demoted Tenancies** – Where a court has granted an order to demote a secure tenancy or brings to an end an assured tenancy to be replaced by a demoted assured shorthold tenancy on the grounds of nuisance, annoyance or unlawful use of the property. A demoted tenant loses the previous rights they enjoyed as secure or assured tenants and the demoted tenancy normally lasts for one year unless the court extends this.
- **Assured Short hold Tenancies (ASTs)** – These are in common use in the private sector and by some Registered Providers with their market rented Stock, where they do not own the freehold of the property, act as managing agents or where some other restriction applies. The key feature is that the tenancy lasts for a fixed term following which the landlord is entitled to possession of the property.
- **Assured Tenancies** - These provide similar legal rights to ASTs, but the tenant can stay in the property for an unspecified period of time. There is no automatic right for the landlord to repossess the property at the end of the tenancy.
- **Probationary Tenancy (or starter tenancy)** is similar to an introductory tenancy but used by Registered Providers. It will generally last for up to 12 months before converting to an assured tenancy, and can be in the form of an AST. Some Registered Providers use starter tenancies routinely on all new lettings, or in certain circumstances, such as where a local lettings policy applies.
- **Licences** – These are normally used by social housing providers for supported housing schemes, such as the Foyer, where there are shared

facilities and where the accommodation is intended to be short term. There is limited security of tenure where a licence has been granted.

New range of tenure types and rents that can be offered

	Permanent Tenancy	Fixed-term tenancy
Social Rent	Local authority - Secure Tenancy let at social rent	Local authority - Flexible Tenancy let at social rent
	Registered Provider - Periodic Assured Tenancy let at social rent	Registered Provider - Fixed-term Assured Shorthold Tenancy let at social rent
Affordable Rent	Local authority - Secure Tenancy let at an affordable rent	Local authority - Flexible Tenancy let at an affordable rent
	Registered Provider - Periodic Assured Tenancy let at an affordable rent	Registered Provider - Fixed-term Assured Shorthold Tenancy let at an affordable rent

Affordable Housing and Affordability

- 4.1 The term 'affordable housing' is used to describe housing provided below market cost, either through renting or by a mixture of renting and buying part of the property, commonly known as shared ownership or shared equity.
- 4.2 The National Planning Policy framework includes 3 types of affordable housing:
- a) Social rented housing which is owned by local authorities and private registered providers for which guideline target rents are determined through the national rent regimes.
 - b) Affordable rented housing which are subject to rent controls of no more than 80% of the local market rent (including service charges).
 - c) Intermediate housing, which includes shared ownership, and can include shared equity and equity loans, and intermediate rent.

Affordable housing should:

- Meet the needs of eligible households including availability at a cost low enough for them to afford, determined with regard to local incomes and local house prices.
- Include provision for the home to remain at an affordable price for future eligible households or, if these restrictions are lifted, for the subsidy to be recycled for alternative affordable housing provision.

Affordable Rents

- 4.3 The Homes and Communities Agency (the main funding provider of affordable housing on behalf of Central Government), have developed a new framework to deliver the Affordable Homes Programme 2011-2015. The new arrangements mean that Registered Providers have to develop new affordable housing with lower rates of grant funding, and as a result of this, have to charge higher rents to achieve new affordable housing. Affordable rents are set at up to 80% of market rents (the 80% has to include any service charge that applies). When setting affordable rents, the Registered Provider should check the market rents in a particular area, and will also take account of the Local Housing Allowance that applies in the district, so that the proposed rent does not exceed the LHA rate.
- 4.4 The new framework means that Registered Providers are operating within a much more financially challenging environment, and in order to deliver the requirement number of new units in the current programme, Registered Providers can, when properties become vacant, convert the tenancy to affordable rent, and in certain circumstances, may wish to dispose of some of their existing stock which is uneconomical to keep and maintain.
- 4.5 Lancaster City Council recognises that Registered Providers have already signed contracts with the HCA for the development of new affordable homes in the current programme period, and are now obliged to set affordable rents. As this is now the only vehicle for bringing forward affordable housing where HCA grant is required, the council must adopt the new model to achieve the required number of affordable housing completions annually, providing that:-
- a) Affordable rents should not exceed the Local Housing Allowance
 - b) Affordable rented tenancies are let in the same way as social rented tenancies, and are let as widely as possible through the Council's Ideal Choice Homes Choice Based Lettings Scheme.
 - c) The number of tenancies being converted to affordable rent at the point of relet does not exceed the contracted number reported to the HCA.

- d) That mechanisms exist to provide new tenants with clear information about affordable rent at the commencement of the tenancy, and the impact of future changes such as the proposed welfare reforms, changes in entitlement and the introduction of Universal Credit.
- e) Registered Providers do not attempt to convert tenancies to affordable rent on schemes where a section 106 agreement stipulates that social rents will apply.
- f) Affordable rents should not be applied for supported housing as the overall cost of accommodation including service charges is unlikely to be feasible or viable. Any proposed use of affordable rents in supported housing should be discussed and agreed with the council before implementing.
- g) Registered Providers, will notify Lancaster City Council in writing about any units they wish to dispose of, whether in respect of individual units, or as part of an overall disposal strategy, setting out the reasons for this. Lancaster City Council will not unreasonably withhold consent but may suggest an alternative means of retaining units as affordable housing where possible, and may require evidence of this before consent to dispose is provided. The council would expect that, given the low level of social housing within this district, that disposals will only be necessary in exceptional circumstances.

Affordable housing secured through Section 106 agreements.

- 4.6 As part of the planning process, Lancaster City Council requires a percentage of on-site affordable housing on new market housing schemes that exceed the threshold set out in our affordable housing policy. Where affordable housing is required, the Council will generally negotiate for a mix of rented and intermediate housing, and in normal circumstances, the preferred tenure for rented units will be social rented homes subject to viability.

The use of Flexible Tenancies

- 4.7 The Government's rationale for introducing flexible tenancies is to ensure that social housing is provided to those who need it the most, and allows social housing providers to review a household's circumstances at the end of the fixed term, and either grant another fixed term tenancy or bring the tenancy to an end. Flexible tenancies can be used as a mechanism for tackling under-occupation of the social housing sector, to increase the turnover of units that are in scarce supply, such as purpose built special needs or adapted housing where the occupant no longer needs that type of housing, to signpost and support households whose financial circumstances improve so that they can move into intermediate or market housing, and as a means of

managing households who have a history of serious anti-social behaviour or poor tenancy conduct.

- 4.8 As part of developing this Tenancy Strategy, Lancaster City Council has considered the potential benefits of adopting flexible tenancies and our measured response is that we advocate a cautious approach to the use of flexible tenancies.
- 4.9 The majority of social housing tenants receive some element of welfare benefits, and therefore, social housing is not currently taken up by a large percentage of tenants who would otherwise be able to access other means of housing.
- 4.10 Whilst, we do acknowledge that under-occupation of the social housing sector is something that all social housing providers need to tackle in this district, the changes being brought about through the welfare reforms are likely to incentivise some tenants to move into smaller accommodation, and there are other ways in which tenants can be supported into moving to alternative accommodation without the need to routinely administer flexible tenancies.
- 4.11 Although there is significant demand for social housing, and lower than average social housing provision in this district, in instances where fixed term tenancies are brought to an end, the needs of that household may still need to be met through social housing, so the use of flexible tenancies will not routinely remove that need and provide more capacity within social housing. The benefits of providing security of tenure for many vulnerable households should support the creation of sustainable communities within the district and limited further polarisation within the social housing sector.
- 4.12 Lancaster City Council recognises that it is important to tackle anti-social behaviour in social housing. For this reason, the Council already grants introductory tenancies, and can grant Family Intervention tenancies. Registered Providers can already offer starter tenancies for some or all of their new lettings should they chose to for the better management of their housing stock. There is also the potential administrative and financial burden that could be created by social housing providers creating fixed-term tenancies through necessary monitoring, issuing of notices, undertaking reviews, appeals and possible legal challenges as well as costs associated with re-lets and voids.
- 4.13 Therefore, Lancaster City Council does not currently see the need for the systematic use of flexible tenancies in this district. However, where social housing providers do wish to use flexible tenancies, the following should apply:-

- Social housing providers must provide details of where flexible tenancies will be granted within their tenancy policy, and that they will only be applied following consultation with Lancaster City Council and should be able to demonstrate the need for flexible tenancies both in relation to the management of the stock as well as asset management consideration.
- Where social housing providers are considering the use of flexible/fixed term tenancies, that they have considered the following factors:-
 - a) The fundamental need to build and maintain sustainable communities
 - b) To ensure the most efficient use of Lancaster district's social housing stock to meet local housing need
 - c) To target resources effectively to households in greatest need
 - d) The minimum term should be 5 years unless the social housing provider has published an appropriate housing management business case for a shorter tenancy period which should be no less than 2 years.
 - e) The needs of vulnerable groups such as older people, people with learning disabilities, mental ill health or physical disabilities where a periodic tenancy is far more conducive to their health and wellbeing, and the accommodation is longer term supported housing. The use of fixed-term tenancies or licences is only considered appropriate for short term supported housing.

- 4.14 Where social housing providers intend to use flexible tenancies on a fixed- term, their tenancy policy should detail the circumstances in which they may or may not grant another tenancy on the expiry of the fixed term including their approach on taking into account the needs of households who are vulnerable by reason of age, disability or illness and households with children.
- 4.15 Where another tenancy is not being offered reasonable advice and assistance should be provided to the tenant by the social housing provider to help them find alternative housing at least 6 months prior to the end of the tenancy. Tenants should be assisted in finding accommodation that is suitable to the household needs and in doing this social housing providers should have regard to the test of suitability contained within the statutory code of guidance on homelessness.
- 4.16 In deciding whether to grant a further tenancy at the end of a fixed term, social housing providers should comply with the requirement to grant tenancies which are compatible with the purpose of the

accommodation, the needs of individual households, the sustainability of the community and the efficient use of their housing stock.

- 4.17 Social housing providers should signpost and work with the council's Housing Options Service as appropriate, and so far as possible, should work in partnership with other landlords who may be able to meet the needs of any tenant whose fixed term tenancy is being brought to an end.

Reviews

- 4.18 All social housing providers should include details in their tenancy policy of the mechanisms for reviews of decisions and that the review process following any directions issues by the regulator and to achieve consistency amongst social housing providers.
- 4.19 There will be a presumption of the renewal of the tenancy for another fixed-term equivalent to the current or previous fixed-term.
- 4.20 All review processes should be clear and transparent and afford a full opportunity to understand any decisions made by the social housing provider, and provides a realistic timescale for the request for a review.
- 4.21 That policies will have due regard to Human Rights Article 6 and Article 8 and that the ending of a tenancy is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim.
- 4.22 Each Registered Provider will structure its own review process in line with relevant guidance. It is anticipated however that the process will;-

- a) Include the right to request a review of proposed length of flexible tenancy if the proposed length does not accord with the landlords policy within 21 days of the offer of a flexible tenancy
- b) Include the right to a review where a landlord proposes to seek recovery and not grant another tenancy
- c) Ensure that any review request is carried out and decisions notified before the expiry of any notices served
- d) Provide notification in writing of the outcome and reasons for decisions which are clear and provide a full explanation
- e) Set out the statutory provisions for reviewing possession proceedings

Mutual Exchanges

- 4.23 Social housing providers are encouraged to make best use of the council's Ideal Choice Homes CBL as a way of maximising opportunities for social housing tenants to find suitable mutual exchanges to increase social mobility, provide opportunities for tenants to take up

employment and to allow tenants to improve their housing circumstances and move into more suitable accommodation. Where mutual exchange requests are received, the social housing provider must make it clear to incoming tenants from the outset, the type of tenancy they will be granted once they exchange properties, and the rent charged applicable to the property they are moving to.

Successions

- 4.24 Social housing providers should ensure their tenancy agreements and their published tenancy policy set out the circumstances in which succession rights apply, depending upon the type of tenancy granted, the date it was granted, and whether the landlord is a Registered Provider or the council, as different succession rights apply.

Section 5 - Enhanced Housing Options

- 5.1 Given the shortage of social housing in the Lancaster district, it is imperative that all social housing providers work together to meet housing need and respond to changes in housing markets. Lancaster City Council has strengthened its Housing Options Service by improving access to the social rented stock through its Choice Based Lettings Scheme - Ideal Choice Homes, which provides a more simplified means of assessing housing need in a clear and transparent way. The council widely encourages all social housing providers to advertise all of their vacancies in this way, to maximise the impact of CBL and make the best use of social housing vacancies. Lancaster City Council is currently reviewing the Allocation Policy to take into account changes to the size limit rule being introduced by housing benefit and in line with new guidance: Allocation of accommodation: guidance for local housing authorities in England issued by the Department of Communities and Local Government. The council will also be consulting on the qualification criteria to access social housing. This will hopefully help us to move forward with creating a single allocation policy for this district.
- 5.2 The comprehensive use of CBL by all social housing providers should provide better opportunities to deal with under-occupation of social housing stock, over-crowding, properties with adaptations and purpose built special needs accommodation which is in extremely short supply. The council has to be realistic about the number of applicants who will qualify for a social housing offer. There are currently over 2000 applicants included on the Housing Register with every likelihood of sharp increases in the future and it is only through partnership working with all social housing providers that we can best meet housing need within the district.
- 5.3 The council has broadened its homeless prevention role and has employed two dedicated homeless prevention officers to provide detailed assessments, linking in with specialist services, provide timely interventions to prevent homelessness occurring and assist households where no statutory rehousing duty applies. The council also provides assistance to homeowners who are in mortgage arrears, and funds some specialist debt advice delivered by North Lancs. Citizens Advice Bureau. Whilst the council has successfully reduced the number of statutory homeless acceptances year on year since the period 2005/2006, we are not being complacent about the challenges ahead posed by welfare reforms and the impact of the financial downturn and loss of jobs, all of which could impact on future homelessness presentations.

- 5.4 Given the limited availability of social housing vacancies, Lancaster City Council may decide to discharge its homelessness duties in the private rented sector, and that opportunity could exist as the council has entered into a partnership with Methodist Action NW to deliver a social lettings agency in this district. Methodist Action will enter into a leasing arrangement with private sector landlords; will take over the management of the property for a small fee, and all resultant properties which will be required to meet appropriate standards.

Local lettings Policies

- 5.5 Some local lettings policies already apply within the Lancaster District, which apply to certain types of properties or in certain areas. Lancaster City Council generally supports the appropriate use of local lettings policies as a means of creating sustainable communities providing the policies do not severely limit or restrict opportunities to rehouse those in the greatest need or the most vulnerable. Social housing providers need to ensure that they provide clear information and guidance on how and when local lettings policies will apply, what processes are in place to determine the suitability of applicants and undertaking reviews.

- 5.6 Armed Forces Personnel

Social housing providers are requested to have regard to the needs of armed forces personnel when framing their allocation policies and refer to the appropriate guidance to ensure that this group are not disadvantaged. The Homes and Communities Agency have already determined that armed forces personnel should be awarded the highest priority for schemes like Firstbuy. In Lancaster district, there is designated accommodation at Westfield Memorial Village, with a strict requirement that applicants must either be serving or previously serving members of HM forces.

Exclusions

- 5.7 All social housing providers can determine their own allocation policies which are framed around housing need and contained in the reasonable preference categories, defined in the new Code of Guidance published in June 2012. Social housing providers can also determine in what circumstances they can exclude or reject applicants from the Housing Register. Where these apply, social housing providers must publish details of the circumstances they will exclude or reject housing applicants; they should issue written decisions outlining the reasons for it, and should give applicants the right to request a review of the decision.

5.8 Lancaster City Council developed a nomination agreement with all partner Registered Providers who are active in this district, which was reviewed when the Ideal Choice Homes – Choice Based Lettings Scheme was implemented in October 2011. The council widely encourages full participation of CBL from all social housing providers. Some partner Registered Providers have completely embraced this and are providing 100% nomination rights through CBL, other partners are considering increasing their nomination percentages, and other partners do not wish to commit beyond 50% nomination rights. We do understand that some Registered Providers have legitimate concerns about fully committing 100% nominations through CBL as they believe it could restrict their ability to properly manage their own stock and impact on voids and relet performance. However, we believe that the arrangements can be flexible enough to overcome any issues identified. Furthermore, there is more likelihood of the council being able to support and facilitate reciprocal arrangements between social housing providers to make the best use of the social housing vacancies that become available, which will be more acute when the welfare reforms around under-occupancy apply. There are also many benefits to customers having one single point of access for all social housing vacancies operated in a clear and transparent way.

Section 6 - Monitoring and reviewing the Tenancy Strategy

- 6.1 Lancaster City Council provides a Strategic Partnership Registered Provider Forum which meets quarterly and focuses on the development of housing and planning policies and strategies, the provision of affordable housing and tenancy management issues within the district. This group will support the council in its role of monitoring and reviewing the effectiveness of this Strategy, particularly in the following areas:-
- The effectiveness and extent to which the new measures proposed by the Localism Act 2011 are implemented, including the number of flexible tenancies granted, changes to allocation policies and processes and the role of social housing providers and the private rented sector in tackling homelessness and assisting the council in meeting its statutory duties.
 - The changing market conditions and their likely impact upon the demand for affordable housing now and in the future. It will therefore also monitor housing need, affordability, homelessness, affordable housing completions, rent levels and welfare reforms.
- 6.2 A wider group of local authorities in mid-Lancashire and partner Registered Providers is also well-established, and a working group which was set up for the purpose of developing the broad framework being applied to Tenancy Strategies across Lancashire. There will be further collaborating working within Lancashire to review the agreed framework.
- 6.3 It is intended that the Lancaster District Tenancy Strategy and the agreed framework for Lancashire shall be reviewed and updated in April 2015, in line with the Homes and Communities Agency's Affordable Homes Programme, unless for any reason, there is a legitimate need to set an earlier review date.