

<b>Committee:</b>	<b>Date:</b>
Housing Management & Almshouses Sub Committee	12 January 2015
<b>Subject:</b> Review of City of London Almshouses Eligibility Criteria	<b>Public</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Director of Community & Children's Services	<b>For Decision</b>

### **Summary**

The current eligibility criteria for applicants to the waiting list for City of London Almshouses was set at a time when the almshouses were in low demand.

This has now changed, and there are increasing numbers of people applying to the list. Many of these come from outside London, with no connection to the area, and are of working age. This paper sets out proposals for changes to the eligibility criteria, in order to focus the provision of almshouse accommodation on those in greatest need.

Officers propose that:

- the age threshold for applicants be raised from 55 to 66, in line with the state retirement age (this might be in two stages);
- applicants be required to either:
  - be living in Greater London;
  - have been working in the City for at least the 12 months prior to the application;
  - have a child or sibling living in the City or the London Borough of Lambeth;

### **Recommendations**

Members are asked to:

- agree, in principle, the proposed changes in eligibility criteria for applications to the City of London Almshouses waiting list and to instruct officers to implement these, subject to there being no questions raised by the Charity Commission.

## **Main Report**

### **Background**

1. At its meeting on 25 September 2014, Members of the Housing Management & Almshouses Sub-Committee received a report entitled 'Reduction in external funding to Almshouses residents'. This report outlined changes in the way the London Borough of Lambeth provides financial support to

vulnerable residents and explained the impact on working residents at the City of London Almshouses.

2. Members approved recommendations regarding funding to these individuals, and asked officers to review the eligibility criteria for the City of London Almshouses, with a view to preventing the situation where residents require top-up funding occurring in the future.
3. A review has now been carried out. As well as looking at the issue of financial arrangements for residents who are employed, officers have looked at the current waiting list, the demand for places at the almshouses, and trends in housing applications generally. It has also taken into account the strategy agreed by the Community & Children's Services Committee in November 2014, that the City will, in the future, provide housing suitable for older people on all estates, rather than focusing provision on specific sheltered housing schemes.
4. This paper sets out the findings of the review and proposals for changing the criteria for admission to the City of London Almshouses waiting list. It does not propose amendments to the criteria for the Gresham Almshouses waiting list, as this is the responsibility of the Gresham Trustees, and the terms of letting for those almshouses are different.

### **Current Position**

5. Currently, the criteria for applicants to the waiting list for the City of London Almshouses is that they must be:
  - Aged 55 or over;
  - On an income which is below average or receiving welfare benefits;
  - In proven need of housing;
  - Wishing to live in sheltered accommodation.
6. There is no geographical restriction – applicants can come from anywhere in the country.
7. The age threshold of 55 is very low, especially for current times. It was lowered, and geographical criteria abandoned, some years ago, at a time when there was a low number of applicants to the Almshouses waiting list. Almshouses were not seen as particularly desirable properties at that time, as private rented accommodation was more affordable than it is now.
8. However, since then, things have changed. In recent years, we have had a significant increase in people applying to go on the waiting list. Figures from the last three years are below:

	Approved applicants	Applications awaiting interview
2012	4	16
2013	6	21
2014	8	29

9. Applicants are interviewed and then their applications put forward to the Chairman and Deputy Chairman of Housing Management & Almshouses Sub-Committee for approval. As we already have eight people on the approved waiting list, we have not undertaken any further interviews to put prospective residents forward for approval to the Trustees in recent months. We do not wish to raise expectations too high, as, even when someone is on the approved waiting list, it may still be years before a property becomes available for them.
10. With no geographical restriction and a very low age limit, we are receiving an increasing number of applications from people of working age, who wish to move to London for employment, but cannot afford private rents.
11. Most of these applicants are not considered to be elderly and are not in need of sheltered or supported housing. They are unable to claim state retirement benefits until age 66 and many are still working. Currently more than a third of the residents at the Almshouses do not require any support from staff as they are either at work or have no requirement for staff support.
12. The impact of the changes in funding for housing support from the London Borough of Lambeth is that residents who work and cannot claim benefits are having this portion of their service charges funded by the City of London Almshouses Trust, even though they may not be in need of the actual support. The more people of working age we have living at the almshouses, the more this top-up funding will be needed.
13. As a result of these changes, there is an increasingly noticeable difference within the demographics of the community at the Almshouses, and a distinct separation between younger residents who are working (in the main) and able-bodied with interests outside the community, and the older, mainly retired, community who are not always so fortunate health-wise. Whilst we wish to encourage a mix of residents, this is creating a two-tiered community.
14. Members may also feel that the current criteria, whilst reasonable when demand for the almshouses was low, are no longer in keeping with the intent of the original benefactors, which was to provide accommodation for “poore and impotent” people.

15. Priority is currently given to applicants who are Freemen of the City of London and their families and to existing tenants of the City of London. It is not proposed that this should change.

## Options

16. There are a number of options open to Members.
17. Regarding age:
- a. To leave the threshold at 55, as at present.
  - b. To increase the age threshold to the state retirement age of 66.
18. Regarding geographical spread:
- a. To leave the criteria as at present, accepting applicants from anywhere.
  - b. To only accept applicants from the Greater London area, and giving priority to City residents and tenants of City of London homes in other London boroughs.
  - c. To restrict eligibility to applicants from Greater London, applicants who have worked in the City for the previous 12 months and applicants from elsewhere who have close family (child or sibling) living in the City or Lambeth).
19. Regarding income:
- a. To accept any applicant on a low income, whether working or retired.
  - b. To only accept applicants who are in receipt of the state pension.
20. It is the view of officers that a combination of options 17b, 18c and 19b would provide the most appropriate set of criteria. The criteria for applicants would then be that they:
- Are at the state retirement age;
  - Currently live in Greater London; or have worked in the City for at least the 12 months prior to the application; or have immediate family (child or sibling) living in the City or the London Borough of Lambeth for the last 12 months;
  - Are in receipt of the state pension;
  - Are in proven need of housing;
  - Wish to live in sheltered accommodation.
21. Members may wish to phase in the new age threshold rather than moving straight to the state retirement age. The risk of this is that people who are below 66 are still subject to welfare benefits reform changes, and this may impact upon their ability to pay rents and service charges. However, should Members feel that the change from 55 to 66 is too rapid an increase, then officers will manage the impacts.
22. Officers would review the current applicants who are awaiting approval interviews to consider a reduction in the list. The applicants who have already

been approved would remain on the waiting list; it would be unfair to remove them after approval had been granted.

23. These changes fall within the charitable objects of the City of London Almshouses Trust, as set out in the Charity Commission Scheme of 1991 (amended 2011), and so it is not anticipated that any questions would be raised by the Charity Commission. However, should there be any questions raised, we will bring the proposals back to Members to review.

### **Recommendations:**

Members are asked to:

24. agree, in principle, the proposed changes in eligibility criteria for applications to the City of London Almshouses waiting list and to instruct officers to implement these, subject to there being no questions raised by the Charity Commission;

### **Implications**

25. There are no financial implications of making this change. Officers from the Chamberlain's dept have highlighted that people who are at or above the state retirement age are exempt from welfare benefit reforms, so will not be in need of any funding from trustees to bridge any shortfall between their income and charges. However, should Members wish to phase in the change in age threshold, then officers will work with individuals to minimise any impact.
26. There are no legal implications, as the proposals fall within the existing Charity Commission Scheme for the City of London Almshouses and the new criteria would only apply to applicants who have not already been accepted onto the waiting list.

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