

## **Improving access to social housing for members of the Armed Forces, Veterans, and their families**

### **About the District Councils' Network**

The District Councils' Network (DCN) is a cross-party member led network of 200 district councils. We are a Special Interest Group of the Local Government Association (LGA), and provide a single voice for district councils within the Local Government Association.

District councils in England deliver 86 out of 137 essential local government services to over 22 million people - 40% of the population - and cover 68% of the country by area.

District councils have a proven track record of building better lives and stronger economies in the areas that they serve. Districts protect and enhance quality of life by safeguarding our environment, promoting public health and leisure, whilst creating attractive places to live, raise families and build a stronger economy. By tackling homelessness and promoting wellbeing, district councils ensure no one gets left behind by addressing the complex needs of today whilst attempting to prevent the social problems of tomorrow.

The District Councils' Network welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on "Improving access to social housing for members of the Armed Forces, Veterans, and their families". In their role as Local Housing Authorities, District Councils are directly responsible for drawing up and administering their local allocations policies for social housing. As part of this responsibility, District Councils recognise the importance of the Armed Forces Covenant and the need to ensure that social housing is accessible to service personnel and their families.

### **Response to the Consultation**

**Question 1:** Do you agree with the proposal to use statutory guidance to strongly encourage the exemption from local connection requirements of divorced or separated spouses or civil partners of Service personnel who are required to move out of accommodation that has been provided by the Ministry of Defence?

**We support the proposal that guidance should encourage the exemption from local connection requirements of divorced or separated spouses or civil partners of service personnel who are required to move out of accommodation provided by the Ministry of Defence. This will help to ensure a consistency of approach across all authorities and will mean that ex-partners of service personnel are not penalised as a result of frequently re-locating which has prevented the household from building up sufficient time in one location to meet local connection requirements.**

**Question 2:** Do you agree with the proposal to use statutory guidance to make clear the circumstances in which we would expect local authorities to apply the 'medical and welfare' reasonable preference category and the additional preference requirements to ensure members of the Armed Forces and Veterans suffering from mental ill health are given appropriate priority for social housing? Views are sought on the advantages and disadvantages of this proposal.

**We recognise the importance of ensuring that serving and ex-members of the Armed Forces suffering from mental ill health are given appropriate priority for social housing. Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996 and associated guidance already makes provisions that allocations schemes should give reasonable preference to people who need to move on medical or welfare grounds including grounds relating to disability. District Councils already give full consideration to mental ill health when assessing applications for social housing and the question of qualification and priority. The consultation paper proposes issuing further statutory guidance on how apply the 'medical and welfare' reasonable preference category and the additional preference requirements in respect of members of the Armed Forces and Veterans suffering from mental ill health. We recognise the intention to try to secure a consistent approach across all local housing authorities. However, it is important to ensure that any guidance is not too prescriptive and restrictive on how such applications are dealt with.**

**District Council housing officers are skilled and experienced in assessing applications for social housing, particularly in recognising issues around mental health, therefore understanding the needs of a vulnerable client and ensuring prioritised re-housing. Officers need to be able to have some flexibility in using their professional judgement in investigating and assessing these applications. The guidance can help to set parameters but should not be too restrictive in setting down what officers can and cannot do in managing these applications.**

**Question 3:** Local authorities are invited to provide details of how their current allocation policies ensure that members of the Regular and Reserve Armed Forces, and Veterans, who are suffering from mental ill health are given appropriate priority.

**This will be responded to by individual authorities.**

**Question 4:** Local authorities are invited to provide details of how they are using their existing powers under the allocation legislation to support serving and former members of the Armed Forces and their families.

**District Councils already ensure that their housing allocations policies do not apply local connection restrictions to service personnel and their families. This is in accordance with the requirements of the Allocation of Accommodation (Qualification Criteria for Armed Forces) England Regulations 2012 (SI 2012/1869).**

**Question 5:** Do you agree with the proposal to bring together in one standalone document guidance on the allocation of social housing to the Armed Forces community?

**We agree with the proposal to consolidate all existing guidance on the allocation of social housing to the Armed Forces community.**

**Question 6:** Do you currently include a question on your application form that asks whether the applicant is a current member of the Armed Forces, a Veteran or another member of the Armed Forces community?

**This will be responded to by individual authorities.**

**Question 7:** Would you support the proposal to use statutory guidance to encourage local authorities to include such a question?

**We support the proposal for statutory guidance to encourage local authorities to include specific questions around service personnel in their application process.**

**Question 8:** Local authorities are invited to provide details of how they are training their housing staff to deal with applications from serving or former members of the Armed Forces or other members of the Armed Forces community.

**This will be responded to by individual authorities.**

**Question 9:** Would you support the proposal to use statutory guidance to encourage local authorities to provide appropriate training for staff and managers to deal with applications from serving or former members of the Armed Forces or other members of the Armed Forces community?

**We support the principle of using the statutory guidance to encourage local authorities to provide appropriate training for staff and managers on dealing with service personnel and other members of the armed forces community. As highlighted above, it should be recognised that District Council officers are already highly skilled and experienced in managing and assessing housing applications. Any training in this area needs to be proportionate (as different District Councils will have different levels of housing demand from the Armed Forces community) and build on the existing skills base within District Councils. If the Government proceeds with amending statutory guidance to encourage full training for all authorities in this area, then this seems to us to constitute a new burden for which MHCLG would have to provide funding and the DCN would welcome discussion with MHCLG about that**