

Home Choice Plus Allocations Policy Review

Relevant Portfolio Holder	Cllr Del Booth
Portfolio Holder Consulted	Yes
Relevant Head of Service	Sue Hanley
Wards Affected	All
Ward Councillor Consulted	N/A
Key Decision	

1. SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS

- 1.1 Housing authorities are required by s.166A of the Housing Act 1996 to have an allocation scheme for determining priorities and for defining the procedures to be followed in allocating social housing accommodation and they must allocate in accordance with that scheme.
- 1.2 The allocations law provisions of the Localism Act 2011 came into force in England on 18th June 2012 amending Part 6 s169 of the Housing Act 1996. The objectives behind these amendments are to:
- Enable housing authorities to better manage their housing waiting list by giving them the power to determine which applicants qualify for an allocation of social housing. Authorities are now able to operate a more focused list which better reflects local circumstances. These changes can help to manage unrealistic expectations by excluding people who have little or no prospect of being allocated accommodation.
 - Make it easier for existing social tenants to move
 - Maintain the protection provided by the Statutory Reasonable Preference Criteria – ensuring that priority for social housing is given to those in greatest need.
- 1.3 Housing Authorities may only allocate accommodation to people who are defined as ‘qualifying persons’ (s.160ZA (6)(a)) with the exception for members of the Armed and Reserve Forces.
- 1.3 A summary of the proposed changes to the allocations policy are:

Qualification Criteria: Applicants must have a 2 year local connection to the Home Choice Plus Partnership area or have been in permanent paid employment in the Partnership area for six months. Those applicants who have a local connection to Bromsgrove, under the 1996 Housing Act, will have a higher banding than those without a connection to the district. This will ensure those applicants with a connection to Bromsgrove will have preference over those without.

No Housing Need: Where an applicant is not an existing tenant requiring a transfer, eligible for sheltered housing or a household interested in low cost home ownership, and is deemed to have no housing need they will not be eligible to join the housing register.

Reduced Banding: Households with an income, of more than £35,000 (currently the threshold is £60K) will be placed into the reduced banding unless they are in receipt of means tested benefits. This will ensure those applicants who do not have the means to access housing in the private sector will have preference.

Bedroom Standard: It is proposed that the bedroom standard be changed to fall in line with the way that housing benefit assessments of a household's bedroom requirements are made.

Additional Preference for Community Contribution

- Applicants in Employment
- Applicants Volunteering
- Applicants in Education and Training
- Disabled applicants whose disability prevents them from seeking work, volunteering or attending education or training.
- Applicants who are full time carers
- Members of the Armed Forces

1.4 Accordingly, Members are asked to approve the draft Policy for consultation which is attached as Appendix 1.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

That Cabinet is asked to resolve that

- 1) The Home Choice Plus Allocations Policy is approved to be sent out for consultation, and;**
- 2) Officers report back to Cabinet on the outcome of discussions with the Home Choice Plus Partnership regarding local connection**

3. KEY ISSUES

Financial Implications

3.1 Current costs to run the service

Total Cost to BDC	£53,846
-------------------	---------

Anticipated one off additional cost of Implementing Home Choice Plus Policy for 2014/15	£30,000
--	---------

Officers are discussing with bdht any additional costs relating to the changes

Legal Implications

3.2 Housing authorities are required by s.166A of the Housing Act 1996 to have an allocation scheme for determining priorities and for defining the procedures to be followed in allocating social housing accommodation and they must allocate in accordance with that scheme.

3.3 The allocations law provisions of the Localism Act 2011 came into force in England on 18th June 2012 amending Part 6 s169 of the Housing Act 1996. The objectives behind these amendments are to:

- Enable housing authorities to better manage their housing waiting list by giving them the power to determine which applicants qualify for an allocation of social housing. Authorities are now able to operate a more focused list which better reflects local circumstances. These changes can help to manage unrealistic expectations by excluding people who have little or no prospect of being allocated accommodation.
- Make it easier for existing social tenants to move
- Maintain the protection provided by the Statutory Reasonable Preference Criteria – ensuring that priority for social housing is given to those in greatest need.

3.4 Housing Authorities may only allocate accommodation to people who are defined as 'qualifying persons' (s.160ZA (6) (a)) with the exception for members of the Armed and Reserve Forces. In addition, housing authorities are encouraged to adopt a housing options approach as part of a move to a managed waiting list.

3.5 Housing Act 1996 Part VI specified five categories of applicant who must be awarded 'reasonable preference' and this remains unchanged by the Localism Act 2011 and these are:

- people who are homeless
- those owed homelessness duties
- people occupying insanitary or overcrowded housing or other unsatisfactory housing conditions
- People who need to move on medical or welfare grounds
- People who need to move to a particular locality within the local authority district, where failure to meet that need would cause hardship to themselves or others.

3.6 The Allocation of Housing (Qualification Criteria for armed forces)(England) Regulations 2012 and the Housing Act 1996 (Additional Preference for Armed Forces) (England) Regulations 2012 sets out how local authorities should respond to the housing needs of ex servicemen. The proposed changes to the allocations policy addresses the expectations contained within these regulations.

3.7 A new code of guidance has been written replacing all previous guidance on social housing allocations: 'Allocation of accommodation: guidance for local housing authorities in England.

Service / Operational Implications

3.8 Bromsgrove District Council is currently part of the Home Choice Plus Partnership, which was established in 2008. The partnership is made up of six local housing authorities, who all operate within a common housing allocations policy. Customers seeking affordable housing across the areas covered by the partnership register with Home Choice Plus and are placed in a band according to their housing need. Applicants subsequently bid for properties as they become available under a Choice Based Lettings approach.

3.9 Since the introduction of the Localism Act 2011, many housing authorities have reviewed their housing allocations policy, to introduce some of the new freedoms and flexibilities available under that legislation. This is to better manage customer expectations and reduce the number of households on housing waiting lists, given the relatively small number of homes becoming available every year. There are also moves to increase housing opportunities for certain customers who have traditionally struggled to secure housing through the list.

3.10 The authorities who make up the Home Choice Plus Partnership have considered these matters and the Partnership has collated the key messages back from Councils and drafted a new common allocations policy as a result of these discussions – see appendix 1. The new draft policy goes considerably further than its predecessor, incorporating the changes available under the Localism Act, and the Partnership will be

putting the new draft policy out for consultation in January 2014. Assuming the draft policy is subsequently implemented, system changes will be introduced in June 2014 to enable the new housing allocations approach to go live in September 2014.

- 3.11 Bromsgrove District Council has actively considered the same themes and has explored thinking behind the existing Choice Based Lettings approach. Alongside this, a review of the existing housing waiting list, undertaken by Bromsgrove District Housing Trust (BDHT) in July 2013, has seen the number of households registered in the District reduce from 3700 to 1500
- 3.12 Many areas of the new draft allocations policy produced by the Home Choice Plus Partnership meet the expectations of the Council, but concerns remain about local connection, and how to prioritise the housing needs of Bromsgrove residents when it comes to allocating properties in the District.
- 3.13 The draft policy currently proposes applicants satisfy a two year local connection to the partnership area in order to register, but feedback from discussions with Bromsgrove Members indicates that applicants should need to satisfy a two year local connection with the District, as opposed to the partnership area, in order to secure properties in Bromsgrove.
- 3.14 Officers will discuss with the Partnership the ability for Bromsgrove District Council to require a two year local connection to the District for the allocation of affordable housing in Bromsgrove.
- 3.15 The Home Choice Plus Timeline for implementation of the new policy is as follows:

Consultation	Mid Jan – April 2014
Final policy sign of	May 2014
System changes	June 2014
Review of all applicants	July/Aug 2014
Go Live	Sept 2014

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET

8th January 2014

3.16 A summary of the proposed changes to the allocations policy are:

Section	Current Policy	Proposed Change
Qualification Criteria	Home Choice Plus is an 'open' waiting list. Anyone can apply and be accepted.	Applicants are not eligible to join the Home Choice Plus housing register unless they meet qualification criteria: The household must have lived in the Partnership area, by choice, for a minimum period of 2 years. Exceptions to this are households accepted for the full homeless duty, where the applicant has been in permanent paid employment for a minimum of six months, where the household has a close family member who has lived in the relevant local authority for a period of five years, where the applicant is a member of the armed forces or there are other special circumstances...
No Housing Need	Home Choice Plus is an 'open' waiting list. Anyone can apply and be accepted regardless of whether they are in any housing need.	Where an applicant is deemed to have no housing need they will not be eligible to join the housing register. Exceptions to this will be existing tenants requesting a transfer or applicants who are would like to apply for shared ownership properties.
Reduced Banding	Households with an income of more than £60k will be placed into the Reduced Banding	Applicants with an income of more than £35k will be placed into the reduced banding, unless they are in receipt of means tested benefits.
Bedroom Standard	The current bedroom standard conflicts with the bedroom eligibility used to calculate housing benefit entitlement.	The bedroom standard will be amended to fall in line with the bedroom eligibility used to calculate the housing benefit entitlement.

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET

8th January 2014

Additional Preference – Community Contribution	No additional preference is currently awarded beyond the reasonable preference bandings and local connection.	Six months waiting time additional preference will be awarded within the band for: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Employment (where applicants meet the required hours in employment for working tax credits thresholds and have been in employment for six out of the last 9 months.2. Volunteering – for 20 hours per month for a continuous period of at least six months at the point of application and offer.3. Education and Training – for a continuous period of 6 months at application and offer.4. Full time carers who have done so for a period of 6 months at application and offer.5. Severely disabled applicants who are not able to participate in any of the above.6. Members of the Armed Forces with urgent housing needs
--	---	--

3.17 Local Connection – Housing Act 1996

- normally resident in the area (this must be residence of choice, and for at least six months of the previous 12, or three years of the previous five, and the relevant period will be up to the date of the decision, including any time spent in interim accommodation)
- employed in the area (this will not include casual work or study, but can include part-time or voluntary work)
- have family associations in the area (family associations will usually be with parents or adult brothers or sisters, but can be with other relatives where a particularly close relationship exists.
- have other special circumstances that mean that they need to be in the area

3.18 The table above shows there are opportunities and risks around any decision the Council takes in terms of remaining within the partnership, or withdrawing from it, now or in the future. However, it is feasible to remain in the partnership, introduce various elements of the Localism agenda, and ensure housing is prioritised for Bromsgrove residents in the short to medium term.

3.19 Taking this approach does not prevent the Council from withdrawing from the Partnership at a later date, which it may wish to do once the future of the housing contract becomes clearer with BDHT.

Customer / Equalities and Diversity Implications

3.20 In framing the qualification criteria, the council has had regard to its duties under the equalities legislation.

3.21 A strong and proactive housing options approach will ensure that households are offered support to access the housing solution which best meets their needs (this might be private rented housing, low cost home ownership or help to stay put), in addition expectations about accessing social housing will be properly managed, and social housing will be focussed on those who need it most.

3.22 An Equalities Assessment Record has been completed which identifies areas of potential adverse impact and the measures that will be put in place in order to mitigate this.

3.23 Consultation will take place with applicants, residents and relevant stakeholders and responses will be considered prior to the final policy being approved.

4. RISK MANAGEMENT

Risk	Consequence	Controls
Qualification Criteria	May result in increased review requests	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Information will be provided to explain the policy and the housing options team will provide advice and assistance for applicants to find accommodation.
More restrictive local connection criteria could mean less people in housing need are able to access the list.	May lead to more people approaching as homeless. May result in an increase in the use of temporary accommodation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Developing greater access to the private rented sector and other housing options will help to mitigate this.
Increase in Housing Options Interviews	.Greater strain on current resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Applicants will be signposted to the enhanced housing options on line advice tool – Bromsgrove Home Options to mitigate the impact on housing options.
Registered Providers setting up their own waiting lists	A reduction in revenue funding to the Council. Applicants will have to apply to multiply organisations making the allocation of affordable housing confusing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work with Registered Providers in any changes to the pollicy

5. APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Draft Home Choice Plus Allocations Policy

6. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Localism Act 2011
Housing Act 1996

7. AUTHOR OF REPORT

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET

8th January 2014

Name: Derek Allen

E Mail: Derek.allen@bromsgroveandredditch.gov.uk