

CABINET

THURSDAY, 3 APRIL 2014

REPORT OF THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR PUBLIC HOUSING AND VULNERABLE PEOPLE

ALLOCATIONS POLICY REVIEW

EXEMPT INFORMATION

PURPOSE

To agree the Council's Housing Allocations Policy and to agree arrangements for future reviews and changes to this policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

**That the Council's Allocations Policy shown at Appendix One is agreed
That the Portfolio Holder for Public Housing and Vulnerable People be authorised to make non material changes to the policy**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Council's Housing Allocations Policy was last reviewed in March 2010 at which time the Council introduced a Choice Based Lettings scheme and moved from a points based system to Choice Based Lettings based on Bands and on line bidding by applicants. This change has been successful with 88% of applicants expressing satisfaction with the new scheme.

Since the Policy was last reviewed the National and Local Policy position has developed and the local position in relation to housing need is also changing. Welfare Benefit Reform has had an impact on the relative need for properties as has the need to relocate households from areas subject to redevelopment as part of the regeneration of Tinkers Green and Kerria areas.

The demand for Social Housing continues to be greater than the supply and the purpose of the Housing Allocations Policy is to seek to ensure that those in greatest housing need are allocated properties which meet their need. The policy has to balance a number of competing factors and cannot make every circumstance or applicant a priority. Given the pressure of housing need within Tamworth it is important to note that for the majority of residents with an ambition or desire to move but without a housing need social housing will not be accessible. In parallel with the implementation of the new policy the Council will continue to work to develop its resources to advise and support residents to meet their own housing needs.

The revised allocations policy is shown at Appendix One and a summary of the proposed changes are shown at Appendix Two. An implementation timetable is shown in the main body of the report below.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

The implementation of the revised allocations policy can be delivered within existing budgets. These include budgets for training, printing and IT development.

LEGAL/RISK IMPLICATIONS BACKGROUND

The revised Allocations Policy has been subject to a legal assessment which has confirmed that the policy complies with current legislation. A full impact assessment has also been undertaken and is shown at Appendix Three to this report. This has identified no material issues relating to the revised policy.

The implementation plan for the revised policy will be subject to a full risk assessment

SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

Social rented housing is an important factor in ensuring access to safe, warm and properly managed housing for those who are not able to meet their own housing needs. How the available stock is allocated has a significant impact in supporting a range of positive outcomes and in the delivery of the Council's corporate objectives. In addition the policy has an impact on the sustainability of the housing stock and the need for the Council to ensure that it makes best use of its own and partners' housing assets.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In March 2013, Cabinet approved the commencement of a review of its allocations policy. This review has included comprehensive consultation with stakeholders, including those currently registered. In addition a legal review of the proposals has been undertaken along with an impact assessment. The new policy is shown at Appendix One to this report. The Allocations policy aims to:

- Ensure greater choice and maximise options for prospective and existing tenants', preventing homelessness.
- Create more mixed and sustainable communities within Tamworth, supporting greater community cohesion
- Promote greater mobility by removing barriers to housing
- Make best use of stock through 'incentive to move schemes' for releasing under-occupied properties or adapted properties
- Provide an open, transparent and equitable service to all customers that is tailored to individual needs and vulnerability
- Ensure value for money by improving customer satisfaction and sustaining tenancies longer-term

National Policy Position and Local Housing Need

The Government expects social housing to be allocated to people who can't access housing on the open market – either rented or owned – and that local people will be prioritised over those with no connection to the area. In recognition that waiting lists were growing, they included substantial numbers of applicants with no defined housing need, and many applicants stood no realistic chance of being allocated social housing, the Localism Act 2011 opened up the potential for Allocations policies to be more tailored to local needs and circumstances. Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996 was subsequently amended to reflect its provisions. These amendments give local authorities the power to define who qualifies to join their housing register. However, amongst those that qualify, reasonable preference must still be accorded to those that fall into one of the groups defined by statute. Statutory guidance

issued in June 2012 and December 2013 encourages Councils to reflect local housing circumstances and priorities, and to limit entry to the housing register to those in housing need and who have a local connection.

Public spending has been, and continues to be cut, as a key element of the Government's response to the recession and efforts to reduce national debt. Welfare reform has introduced changes to social tenants' Housing Benefit entitlement with reductions where their household size indicates that they have more bedrooms than they require. This has increased the demand for smaller homes and decreased demand for 3 bed or larger family homes. In Tamworth this means that households with little or no housing need are more likely to bid successfully for a family home, whereas in the past these would have been let to higher banded applicants. There is a risk that some family homes will be left void if Tamworth restricts access to the register to those with housing needs: as is happening elsewhere in the country.

The Council wants to continue to encourage economic prosperity including through enabling mobility for work. However, because of the increased demand for some types of home, the Policy reflects the need to prioritise Tamworth citizens by reducing the relative priority of applicants with no local connection.

Tamworth has a considerable stock of properties designated for mature/older people, and sheltered housing. It is not in the Council's interests to restrict access to the register for older homeowners or those with no apparent housing need. The Policy reflects these differential demands on properties.

Outcome of the Impact Assessment

The impact assessment showed that while some people were adversely impacted by the changes, only one group was unreasonably adversely impacted: gypsies and travellers. The potential for adverse impact on some other applicants is outweighed by other adverse impacts from:

- Allocating an unsustainable tenancy (because of restrictions to housing benefit)
- The potential for adverse impacts to neighbours or the local community because of applicants' anti-social behaviour or failure to comply with their tenancy conditions.

Gypsies/travellers are detrimentally impacted because the Policy states that only applicants with a local connection to Tamworth will be placed into bands above Band 4. Gypsies and travellers find it considerably more difficult to establish a local connection because there is no designated site in the Borough. To mitigate this, the allocations procedures are being changed to recognise that applicants who have no local connection with any area should qualify as locally connected under the 'any other special reason' clause.

Future Reviews of the Policy

It is recognised that given the pace of change at both a National and Local level the Council needs to ensure that its allocation policy is responsive and that the process of making changes to the policy is flexible. It is important that fundamental reviews of the policy are undertaken frequently as has been the practice to date. However, it is proposed that specific authority is delegated to the Portfolio Holder for Public Housing and Vulnerable People with the support of the Director of Housing and Health to make non material changes to the policy as this is required within the context of the overall aims.

Such changes could include the reprioritisation of specific needs groups, changes to the bidding system and changes to excluded groups categories.

The role of Members in the Allocations Process

Councils with housing responsibilities are required to adopt an Allocations Policy that complies with Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended) and must make allocations of

social housing in accordance with that policy. Elected Members' role is to determine and approve the Policy.

Members do however have a role in advocating for constituents that are unhappy with officers' decisions. The Policy sets out a comprehensive and stringent review procedure that ensures that applicants (whether or not supported by Members) can challenge officers' decisions and have these reviewed by a more senior officer who has had no prior involvement in the case.

Implementation of the Revised Policy

The implementation of the revised policy will be a significant undertaking for the Council. This will include the need for the Council to:

- Clearly communicate the changes to all applicants
- Revise and publish new guidance and application forms for applicants
- Review and revise procedures and ensure training for TBC staff and partners
- Re-assess all existing applicants under the new policy
- Make changes to IT systems including the 'Finding a Home' bidding system

The implementation of the new policy will also be supported by improvements in the use of Information Technology including the development of on-line applications, improved feedback for applicants relating to the assessment of housing need and the outcome of bids. In addition the development of improved advice and guidance resources for applicants will support applicants to meet their own housing needs wherever possible. This will include better signposting to alternatives including access to private sector renting and low cost home ownership.

Budgetary resources exist to enable the delivery of the new policy however this will be a considerable undertaking for staffing resources and is a significant corporate project requiring the involvement not only of housing teams but also Customer Services and ICT. A full project plan including both financial and staffing resource assessment and risk assessment will be prepared to support the delivery of the project.

An outline plan for implementation is shown below.

Milestone	Date
Cabinet Approval of Policy	April 2014
Finalisation of Policy Documents and Procedures	July 2014
Introduction of Local Lettings Policy	August 2014
Reassessment of Applications	September 2014
Implementation of new policy	September 2014

REPORT AUTHOR

Robert Barnes: Director Housing and Health

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

APPENDICES

Appendix One: Allocations Policy

Appendix Two: Summary of Proposed Changes

Appendix Three: Impact Assessment