

Cherwell District Council

Executive

5 November 2018

Revised Housing Allocations Scheme

Report of Executive Director Wellbeing

This report is public

Purpose of report

To agree a revised Housing Allocations Scheme for the allocation of affordable rented housing in Cherwell District

1.0 Recommendations

The meeting is recommended:

- 1.1 To agree revisions to the Housing Allocations Scheme as set out in section 3.9.
- 1.2 To delegate authority to the Assistant Director Housing, in consultation with the Lead Member for Housing, to make any future amendments to the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme that are deemed to be necessary and do not constitute a major policy change.

2.0 Introduction

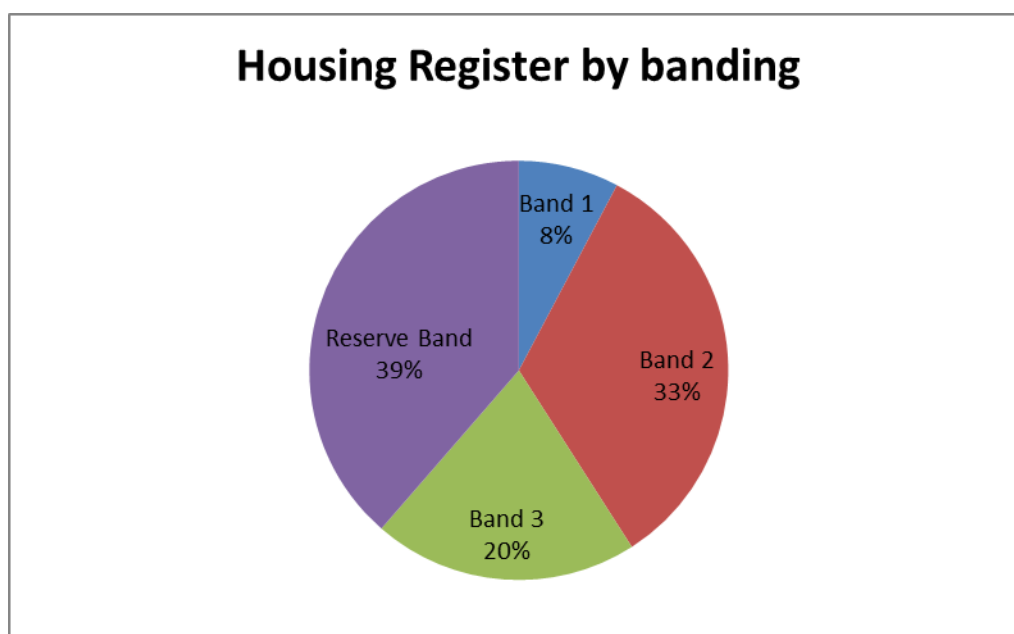
- 2.1 The Housing Allocations Scheme sets out how the Council prioritises applicants for affordable rented housing in the district, taking into account the council's housing objectives and making best use of the limited affordable rented housing available. The Executive approved the council's current Allocations Scheme in March 2015.
- 2.2 Minor revisions to the Scheme were made in April 2018 to ensure that the Scheme reflected the changes introduced by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. However it was recognised that a fuller review of the Scheme should be undertaken given that it was adopted in 2015.

3.0 Report Details

- 3.1 Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002 and the Localism Act 2011) is the key legislation that governs allocations and nominations. The Act places a duty on all local housing authorities to have a published housing allocations scheme. This must contain the authority's policy on

how social housing is allocated in its district and how housing applications are assessed.

- 3.2 The Localism Act 2011 enabled local authorities to shape an allocations scheme to give greater priority to locally identified needs.
- 3.3 The numbers on the housing register have fluctuated around 1,000 since 2015, with a current total of 1,044. There are 4 bands within the banding scheme with applicants in the greatest housing need being placed in band 1. Band 1 is intended to help those in very urgent need and as a result the numbers should be low to enable this classification to be effective in moving households urgently.
- 3.4 A snapshot of the number of households in each band is shown below (September 2018). This shows the largest number (407 which is 39% of all households) being in the 'reserve' band (lowest priority), followed by 33% (344 households) in band 2. There are relatively low numbers in band 1 (84 households i.e. 8%), which is the most urgent of cases, and the remaining households are in band 3 (209 households which is 20% of the total).



- 3.5 The largest group on the Housing Register are those who require 1 and 2 bedroom accommodation. However there is also a significant need for 3 bedroom accommodation. The majority of households (74%) require 'general needs' housing. 26% require sheltered and extra care housing.

Household Type	Current Bedroom Need				Grand Total
	1	2	3	4	
Couple	36	3	0	0	39
Disabled	22	5	6	2	35
Family	6	332	142	37	517
Older Persons	243	12	4	0	259
Single	188	6	0	0	194
Grand Total	495	358	152	39	1044

- 3.6 In 2017/18 the council housed 689 households via the housing register. 70% (483) of these were in band 2 and 16% (112) were in band 1. The remaining allocations were split between band 3 (56 households or 8%) and the reserve band (38 households or 6%). This reflects the most urgent cases being prioritised and housed first and also the large proportion of households that are in band 2.
- 3.7 Waiting times for housing are shorter in band 1 than band 2 as would be expected. The mean¹ waiting time in band 1 is 41 weeks and the median is 23 weeks. In band 2 the mean is 52 weeks with a median of 42 weeks. Band 3 households experience a longer waiting time but there were only 56 households housed from band 3 so the sample size is small. In the reserve band we see shorter waiting times because most of the households rehoused from this band are allocated extra care or sheltered housing where the supply to demand ratio is higher.
- 3.8 A key element of the Scheme review has been to ensure that the criteria for banding and the wording of the Scheme are clear for our customers, partner agencies and staff. This will give greater transparency and help customers understand how applications to the housing register are assessed.
- 3.9 In reviewing the Scheme the following changes have been identified :

(i) Bedroom entitlement

When we receive an application from a household we calculate the bedroom entitlement based on the number and ages of people in the household. Under the current scheme children and young people of like gender are expected to share a bedroom up to the age of 20 years. This could mean an older teenager sharing a bedroom with a much younger child.

It is therefore proposed that the definition is amended to allow a separate bedroom for each of the following:

- Adult couple
- Any other single adult aged 16 years or more
- Pair of children aged 0-15 years of like gender
- Pair of children aged under 10 years, different gender
- Carer

This change would also bring the bedroom requirement in line with Housing Benefit legislation making it easier to understand. We have identified 27 households that would be affected by this change and whose bedroom entitlement would increase (e.g. from 2 to 3 bedroom). We will contact these applicants to discuss this change and offer the choice of being able to bid or be matched to both sizes of property (as the waiting time for a larger property is likely to be longer).

(ii) Move on from supported Accommodation

It is proposed that these applicants are moved from band 1 to band 2 and these applicants receive one nomination only.

¹ The mean is the average waiting time and is calculated by adding all the waiting times and then dividing by the number of households. The median is the exact middle waiting time if all the waiting times are laid out in a line. It is useful to look at both when forming a picture of how long households have to wait for housing via the housing register.

Although this may seem a negative step it is important that band 1 is restricted to those who need to move for urgent medical or safety reasons or because of extremely poor living conditions. Band 2 is still a high priority band and for those in supported accommodation we work with the support provider to ensure timely access to the register as the person becomes tenancy ready. Band 2 priority also ensure parity with homeless households.

Whilst these applicants will be entitled to one nomination only the Housing Options Team will work with the applicant and any support provider to ensure that the nomination is suitable and that there is advance planning for move-on from supported accommodation.

This banding change will require close scrutiny to ensure there are no unintended consequences which might result in unnecessary delays to these applicants being allocated suitable alternative accommodation.

(iii) Health and disability matrix

It is proposed that the matrix be refreshed to make it clear that a medical assessment is primarily concerned with how an applicant's medical condition is either made worse by their current accommodation or how a move to more suitable accommodation would alleviate the impact of their condition. Categories of medical need have also been introduced, such as mental health and mobility, to enable officers to better carry out the assessment of medical needs.

The revised matrix will give greater clarity to applicants and officers regarding how medical conditions are assessed and banded i.e. the relevance of the medical condition to the actual housing need is what needs to be evidenced and assessed. It is envisaged that this will result in applicants being clearer about the information they need to submit as part of their application. This revised format is also expected to reduce the number of medical appeals received.

(iv) Auto-bidding

Currently any applicant can request to be placed on auto-bidding. This means that the system itself (Abritas) places up to 3 bids automatically in each bidding cycle. The bids are based on bedroom entitlement alone and do not take into account property type, the location or whether the applicant requires an accessible property. This has resulted in an administrative burden, as often the accommodation is not suitable for the applicant and has to be retracted. It is also unpopular with social landlords because there can be a delay in nominating a suitable household.

It is proposed that auto-bidding is restricted to those the council has a legal duty to accommodate (i.e. homeless households that our Housing Options team is actively working with, particularly those in temporary accommodation) and vulnerable applicants who do not have an advocate to bid on their behalf. This will reduce the number of households that are matched to a property that they will not accept or that could be unsuitable.

(v) Intentionally homeless

Currently any applicant assessed as intentionally homeless is placed into band 3 indefinitely. It is proposed that applicants who have been assessed as intentionally homeless are reviewed after 12 months if they have not been rehoused during this time.

This gives clarity to the applicant about the timescale they will be penalised for and ensure that a timely re-assessment takes place. Household circumstances may change and a re-assessment would give the opportunity to increase the priority level (e.g. if the reasons for the original decision had been addressed such as failure to pay rent that is affordable or failure to address anti-social behaviour).

(vi) Rename the 'reserve' band

It is proposed that the 'reserve' band be renamed 'band 4'.

This is a more meaningful term which gives greater clarity to applicants that they are on the housing register and eligible to bid for suitable properties. 'Reserve' sometimes leads to the misconception that the household is not live on the register and cannot bid.

4.0 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

4.1 The changes set out at 3.9 would give greater clarity to applicants, greater coherence to the Scheme and make the processing of applications more efficient. The changes are relatively modest with the key principles of the Scheme remaining unchanged.

5.0 Consultation

5.1 A formal four week consultation took place with Registered Providers and stakeholders in the district and the responses are attached at Appendix A.

5.2 Section 168(3) of the Housing Act 1996 states that when the authority make an alteration to their scheme reflecting a major change of policy, they shall within a reasonable period of time take such steps as they consider reasonable to bring the effect of the alteration to the attention of those likely to be affected by it. We do not consider any of the steps to be major, however where any applicant may be adversely affected we will notify them individually.

6.0 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection

6.1 The following alternative options have been identified and rejected for the reasons as set out below.

Option 1: Make no changes to the Scheme. This is rejected on the basis that over the last 3 years changes have been identified that would make the Scheme work better.

Option 2: Make selective changes to the Scheme but reject those changes that some consultees objected to. Specifically the banding for people in supported accommodation. However we believe band 2 is the appropriate banding in terms of consistency of approach with other homeless households while preserving band 1 for the most urgent cases. We will avoid disadvantaging people who are ready to move on through joint working with the supported accommodation providers and proper exit planning.

7.0 Implications

Financial and Resource Implications

7.1 This report provides for a policy change. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

Comments checked by:

Denise Taylor, Group Accountant 01295 221982
denise.taylor@cherwellandsouthnorthants.gov.uk

Legal Implications

7.2 Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002 and the Localism Act 2011) is the key legislation that governs allocations and nominations. The Act places a duty on all local housing authorities to have a published housing allocations scheme. This must contain the authority's policy on how social housing is allocated in its district and how applications for an allocation are assessed. The proposed changes to the Allocations Scheme are allowable within the legal framework and have been consulted on appropriately. The impact of some of the proposed changes will be kept under review.

Comments checked by:

Amy Jones, Solicitor, 01295 221987
amy.jones@cherwellandsouthnorthants.gov.uk

8.0 Decision Information

Key Decision

Financial Threshold Met: No

Community Impact Threshold Met: Yes

Wards Affected

All

Links to Corporate Plan and Policy Framework

Business Plan themes : Prevent Homelessness, Deliver Affordable Housing and Safeguard the Vulnerable

Lead Councillor

Councillor John Donaldson – Lead Member for Housing

Document Information

Appendix No	Title
1	Consultation Responses
2	Equalities Impact Assessment
Background Papers	
None	
Reference Papers	
Housing Allocations Scheme 2015	
Report Author	Gillian Douglas, Assistant Director Housing
Contact Information	01295 221605 gillian.douglas@cherwellandsthnorthants.gov.uk