

Cherwell District Council

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

7 September 2021

Changes to Cherwell District Council's Housing Allocation Scheme

Report of Interim Assistant Director, Housing and Social Care Commissioning

This report is public

Purpose of report

To brief the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on proposed changes to the Housing Allocation Scheme prior to approval being sought from Executive Committee.

1.0 Recommendations

The meeting is recommended:

- 1.1 to review and comment on the proposed changes to the Housing Allocation Scheme following public consultation.

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 The Housing Allocation Scheme sets out how the council processes and prioritises applications for social housing. It sets out the criteria for determining whether a household is eligible for social housing and what level of priority the household will be given based on housing need.
- 2.2 The allocation of social rented housing is the responsibility of the District Council as the housing authority. Applications for other affordable housing options (e.g. shared ownership) go through the help to buy agent, not the local authority.
- 2.3 CDC's Housing Allocation Scheme was last amended in November 2018 with the changes being approved by the Executive. It is important to review the Scheme regularly in order to make sure that it aligns with current housing needs in the District and that the council can respond to changing patterns of need. We must also take account of updated statutory guidance and regulatory changes.

3.0 Background

- 3.1 There are currently around 1,800 households on the housing register that are eligible for and seeking social housing. This is a significant increase since early 2020 (when active applications were at 1,150) and the number continues to rise. This is due to both an increase in the number of applicants applying to join the

housing register and a decrease in the number of properties becoming available to let.

- 3.2 Eligible households are placed in one of four bands with band 1 being the highest priority and band 4 the lowest. Processing times have been reduced from an average of 20 working days to assess new applications in 2019 to 4 working days in August 2021.
- 3.3 50-60 new applications to the housing register are currently received each week and the reduction in assessment times are the result of renewed focus and continual review of the assessment process. Efficiencies in working practices have been introduced in stages over the last 18 months, with a LEAN review of the process also being carried out at the start of 2021.
- 3.4 Households bid for properties on a weekly cycle through the 'Homechoice' system (choice-based lettings). The software is supplied under contract by Civica Abritas. For the minority of households that cannot bid themselves the Allocations Team can set up auto-bidding on the system or place manual bids on behalf of the applicant.

4.0 Drivers for Change

- 4.1 Appendix 1 summarises the key changes that are proposed. Appendix 2 is the revised Allocation Scheme that incorporates these changes.
- 4.2 A feasibility study conducted by Crisis in Oxfordshire and published in November 2020 recommended that Oxfordshire councils review their allocation schemes in order to improve access to social housing for single homeless people including rough sleepers. Data reviewed by Crisis showed that on average only 13% of people in the Adult Homeless Pathway move on from their supported accommodation in any given year. People in the pathway with a connection to Cherwell should be able to join the housing register and receive a band 2 priority as per other homeless households. However, people can be excluded from the register as a result of past rent arrears or anti-social behaviour. We therefore intend to relax these barriers and will need to work with registered providers to avoid nominations being rejected. This will involve putting in place tenancy sustainment support so that individuals are 'tenancy supported' rather than having to be 'tenancy ready' before being offered a home. This is essential to moving towards a housing-led approach to preventing and resolving homelessness.
- 4.3 Homeless households that are in priority need are placed in band 2. Households with dependent children are automatically in priority need. Single people and couples who are homeless but not deemed to be in priority need receive band 3 status. We propose raising their priority to band 2 in order to help resolve the homelessness more quickly and treat all homeless households as high priority for social housing.
- 4.4. Some of the proposed changes are for clarification purposes i.e. to assist applicants and Housing staff to understand how criteria are applied and why a given band has been awarded.

- 4.5 Changes need to be made to give additional priority to members of the armed forces and their families, in line with statutory guidance. The new Scheme addresses this.
- 4.6 Foster carers and adopters will be given band 1 status. This will apply to 'kinship' carers who are already caring for children and those at the latter stages of the registration process with confirmation being provided by Children's Social Care. Band 1 status will enable carers to secure a suitable property as quickly as possible in order to sustain or take up their caring role for the benefit of the child(ren) concerned.
- 4.7 A new section has been added that acknowledges that some social housing in the district will be built to meet Oxford's unmet housing needs and will not be allocated through Cherwell District Council's housing register but by transfer of the allocations function to Oxford City Council (this is work in progress).
- 4.8 Currently, we consider any key worker in Oxfordshire for a Band 2 if they need to move to take up or continue with their key worker employment. However, for key workers in Oxfordshire that are not already based in Cherwell they currently need another connection to Cherwell to qualify (e.g. through residence, family members or other work). We propose changing this to allow Oxfordshire key workers in health, care and other public service roles where there is a demonstrable shortage of labour (i.e. a significant recruitment challenge) to join the register. The rationale is that their role benefits the whole county, including residents in Cherwell, whether they are employed or have another connection to Cherwell or not.

5.0 Consultation

- 5.1 A 4-week public consultation was carried out during June/July 2021 on the revised Housing Allocation Scheme, supported by the corporate Consultation Team. The results of the survey are summarised in Appendices 3 and 4.
- 5.2 In order to help ensure the consultation was appropriately worded and relevant to respondents, two separate surveys were undertaken; one completed by members of the general public and another for housing organisations including registered providers of social housing.
- 5.3 16 responses were received from housing organisations and housing providers with the vast majority of feedback on the proposed changes being positive.
- 5.4 46 responses were received from members of the general public. Responses were also mostly in support of the proposed changes although some responses were more neutral.

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: Do nothing. Rejected on the basis that the current scheme does need to change in response to customer and staff feedback, developments in statutory guidance and to support the shift to a housing led approach.

7.0 Implications

Financial and Resource Implications

- 7.1** There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. There is an ongoing annual maintenance contract for Civica Abris software which has been included in the 21/22 budget.

Comments checked by: Kelly Wheeler, Finance Business Partner, 01295 221570, kelly.wheeler@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

Legal Implications

- 7.2** There are several legal implications arising from the content of this report, each has therefore been addressed separately below:

The Allocation Scheme

The Council's Housing Allocation Scheme is governed by Part VI of the Housing Act 1996 and must comply with the statutory requirements in the Act, as well as subsequent codes of guidance issued by MHCLG. Officers are satisfied that the revised Housing Allocation Scheme complies with the Act and the associated codes of guidance.

The New IT System – Abris

The new Abris system has been through a procurement process, assisted by the Council's legal service and the shared procurement service. The contract is therefore compliant with the Public Contract Regulations and has been procured in accordance with the Council's Contract Procedure Rules.

Consultation

As the report makes clear, there was a need, given the scale of changes to the Housing Allocations Scheme, to undertake a full public consultation on those changes. The consultation was assisted by the shared consultation service in order to ensure best practice was achieved.

Comments checked by: Richard Hawtin, Solicitor, Team Leader, Legal Services 01295 221695, Richard.Hawtin@Cherwell-DC.gov.uk.

7.3 Risk Implications

Changes required to IT software in order to allow for the proposed changes are already in place should the proposed changes be agreed and so this does not present a risk.

Implementation of the changes, including changes to any applicant's housing register application (including priority band) can be made swiftly following approval of the changes.

These risks will be managed as part of the operational risk register and escalated to the leadership risk register as and when necessary.

Comments checked by: Louise Tustian, Head of Insight and Corporate Programmes, 01295 221786, louise.tustian@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

7.4 Equality and Inclusion Implications

An equalities and climate impact assessment has been produced and is attached as Appendix 5. The allocation of social housing must be carried out in line with the Equality Act 2010 and plays a key role in addressing inequalities in housing.

Comments checked by: Emily Schofield, Acting Head of Strategy, 07881 311707, Emily.schofield@oxfordshire.gov.uk

8.0 Decision Information

Key Decision: N/A

Financial Threshold Met: N/A

Community Impact Threshold Met: N/A

Wards Affected: All

Links to Corporate Plan and Policy Framework

[Housing Strategy 2019-2024](#) and Action Plan

[Homelessness Strategy 2021-2026](#) and Action Plan

Lead Councillor

Executive reports only; Councillor Lucinda Wing, Lead Member for Housing

Document Information

Appendix 1 - Summary of Changes to Allocation Scheme

Appendix 2 – Revised Allocation Scheme

Appendix 3 – Results of public consultation (housing organisations/providers)

Appendix 4 – Results of public consultation (general public)

Appendix 5 – Equalities and Climate Impact Assessment

Background papers

N/A

Report Author and contact details

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