



AGENDA ITEM: SUMMARY

Report for:	<u>Housing and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee</u>
Date of meeting:	5 September 2017
PART:	1
If Part II, reason:	

Title of report:	Housing Allocations Policy Review
Contact:	Cllr Margaret Griffiths – Portfolio Holder for Housing Natasha Brathwaite – Strategic Housing Group Manager
Purpose of report:	The purpose of this report is to consult with the committee and offer the opportunity to comment on the proposed changes to the Housing Allocations Policy.
Recommendation(s)	1 For members to consider and comment on the proposed changes to the Housing Allocations Policy.
Corporate objectives:	Allocating homes to those most in need contributes to the following corporate objectives; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A clean, safe and enjoyable environment • Building strong and vibrant communities • Providing good quality affordable homes, in particular for those most in need • Delivering an efficient and modern council
Implications:	<p><u>Financial implication</u> Updates to Civica (F.N.A Abritas) will be required to ensure it can be effectively used to administrate the housing register and allocations process.</p> <p><u>Value for money</u> It is important that we deliver good services and value for money for local people accessing the housing register as well as our existing tenants. The proposed changes to the allocations policy will offer increased value for money by encouraging more effective use of council stock, streamlining staff workload and allowing more efficient use of internal resources.</p>
Risk Implications	The Housing Service Operational Risk Register is presented to the committee on a quarterly basis.

Equalities Implications	This policy has been written in line with the Equality Act 2010, as well as the Councils corporate commitments to ensuring fairness and equal opportunity across all services.
Health And Safety Implications	There are no direct Health and Safety implications through the update of this policy.
Consultees:	<p>Cllr Margaret Griffiths – Portfolio Holder for Housing</p> <p>Elliott Brooks – Assistant Director Housing</p> <p>Natasha Brathwaite – Strategic Housing Group Manager</p> <p>Emily-Rae Maxwell – Strategy, Improvement and Engagement Team Leader</p> <p>Jodi Cooper – Policy, Improvement and Support Lead Officer (Interim)</p> <p>Tracy Vause – Allocations and Lettings Team Leader</p> <p>Staff from across the Housing Service</p> <p>Tenant and Leaseholder Committee Members</p> <p>Housing register applicants and new tenants</p>
Background papers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing Allocations Policy [Draft] • Consultation Results – Allocations Policy Review
Glossary of acronyms and any other abbreviations used in this report:	DBC – Dacorum Borough Council

1 Introduction

- 1.1 In January 2017 the Housing Allocations Policy was due for review and initial discussions took place with Strategic Housing management to identify suggested areas for alteration in order to improve the allocations process. A number of proposed changes were noted.
- 1.2 Consultations were carried out with new tenants, applicants currently on the housing register, the Assistant Director and Portfolio Holder for Housing, the Tenant & Leaseholder Committee, as well as a number of staff from key teams across the Housing Service.
- 1.3 The results from consultations were collated (see Appendix 2) and were considered when making amendments to the drafted Housing Allocations Policy (see Appendix 1).
- 1.4 The purpose of this report is to summarise the key proposed changes to the Housing Allocations Policy and provide members with the opportunity to comment and give feedback on them.

2 Removal of a deferred register

- 2.1 From April 2018, it is proposed that DBC no longer maintains a deferred housing register.
- 2.2 Administration and management of the deferred register significantly impacts on staff time and workloads as the deferred register currently holds approx. 6750 deferred applicants and application renewals and updates are required for each applicant on an annual basis.
- 2.3 It will be important that effective communication takes place with those currently on the deferred register to ensure that they have an appropriate timeframe to make any amendments to their application if their circumstances have changed.

3 Ensuring that the local connection requirement avoids discrimination

- 3.1 As a local authority, we are required to ensure all our policies are compliant with the Equality Act 2010.
- 3.2 A recent legal challenge to DBC highlighted our Allocations Policy currently discriminates specific community groups such as travellers due to our local connection criteria.
- 3.3 To offset this, the new policy proposes that these cases will be referred Housing Panel for a full review of the applicants housing need and intention to stay within Dacorum.

4 Addressing applicants with rent arrears

- 4.1 As a housing service, we want to encourage positive behaviours towards clearing rent arrears. It is proposed applicants with rent arrears will be required to evidence at least 6 months of regular payments and a *reduction* in their arrears in order to qualify.
- 4.2 Exceptions may be made in circumstances where tenants want to move in order to make rent payments more manageable i.e. downsizing. The tenant will still be required to pay the outstanding arrears.

5 Clarifying our approach to changes in child custody arrangements

- 5.1 In the current Allocations Policy, there is no clear stance around when DBC will consider a child to be part of a household following custody changes. A change in custody may have a direct impact on the number of bedrooms an applicant qualifies for.
- 5.2 To clarify this, the drafted policy now includes the following stance; if child custody has changed due to a court decision then the child will immediately become a member of the household. If custody arrangements are agreed through choice of the parents then proof of the child living in the property for a minimum of 6 months will be required (mirroring documentation required by Housing Benefit also).

6 Reducing the number of offer refusals

- 6.1 Currently housing applicants that are active on the housing register have an unlimited number of bids. This often leads to a number of applicants bidding on properties they then go on to refuse. This has a wider impact on the teams within housing overseeing the housing register and allocations process.
- 6.2 To encourage applicants to take a more informed approach to bidding, it is proposed that the housing service removes the right to refuse a property unless an applicant can provide a valid reason outlining why the property is no longer suitable to their housing need.
- 6.3 It would then be the Housing Panel's responsibility to approve any refusal and allow the applicant to be active on the housing register.
- 6.4 Any applicant that refuses a property and there is no valid reason will not be allowed to bid for six months.

7 Providing direct offers to applicants in Mother & Baby Units

- 7.1 Under the current policy, applications for those leaving Mother & Baby Units are required to go to Housing Panel for approval. Due to the vulnerability of these applicants, these applicants are always approved.
- 7.2 It is proposed that moving forward applicants leaving Mother & Baby Units should instead receive a direct offer of a suitable property. This will speed up the process and reduce pressure on the Housing Panel.

8 Review of the downsizing incentives offered

- 8.1 Currently applicants wishing to downsize are offered 45 points for each additional bedroom they have. These applicants are also able to bid for properties with one bedroom more than required in line with their housing need. This means that a sole tenant in a 3-bedroom house receives 90 points but may only reduce their property size by one bedroom meaning they can bid for a 2-bedroom property.
- 8.2 It is important to note the impact of this on the services ability to meet housing need. Currently two bedroom properties are highest in demand.

- 8.3 It is proposed that moving forward, applicants wishing to downsize will receive points based on the number of bedrooms they would actually like to downsize by. As a result, a downsizing sole applicant wishing to move to a 2-bedroom property will be less likely to finish higher in the shortlist than a household requiring two bedrooms due to only having 45 points as opposed to 90. This approach will ensure that council stock is being used effectively.

9 Pre-tenancy training for transferring tenants

- 9.1 Currently any applicant on the housing register who attends the pre-tenancy training will receive five additional points.
- 9.2 It is proposed that transferring tenants should not receive additional points for attending the course, however transferring tenants with a history of tenancy breaches *will* be expected to attend the course as part of the approval process for the transfer to go ahead.

10 Clarifying our approach to step-siblings sharing bedrooms

- 10.1 The current policy does not state whether stepsiblings should be required to share a bedroom. This has left the service open to challenges on the bedroom criteria when two families become one household.
- 10.2 It is proposed that as stepsiblings are considered 'a household' they should be expected to share a room in line with the general allocations policy. It is however recognised that there may be circumstances where it is not appropriate for stepsiblings to share. It is proposed that the Housing Panel reviews these cases.

11 Our approach to letting village properties

- 11.1 The current policy approach to village connection has been found to limit the flexible use of council stock as often those bidding on village properties do not have the required village connection and therefore the allocation of the property can be difficult.
- 11.2 It is proposed that where a village property receives no bids from applicants with a village connection the property will be direct offered to a suitable household in the first instance.
- 11.3 If there is no suitable household for direct offer, the offer will extend to applicants living or working in the neighbouring parishes before being opened up to the wider applicant population.

12 Allocating two bedroom Supported Housing properties

- 12.1 Although the majority of our Supported Housing properties are 1-bedroom, on occasion a 2-bedroom property may become available. The current policy does not consider applicants for supported housing with an additional household member that is not their partner.
- 12.2 It is proposed that on the rare occasion that a 2-bedroom Supported Housing property becomes available to let, the allocation requires the approval of the Housing Panel and any impact to the wider scheme is considered.

13 Recommendations

- For members to consider all proposals outlined in this report and consider whether they meets the needs of housing applicants and the demands on the housing service
- For members to note the approach taken by the housing service to develop the drafted policy including the involvement of tenants and housing applicants