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Housing Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Report for:	Housing Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Title of report:	Housing Allocations Policy overview
Date:	July 2023
Report on behalf of:	Councillor Simy Dhyani - Portfolio Holder Housing & Property Services
Part:	I
If Part II, reason:	N/A
Appendices:	Appendix A - Allocations Policy Appendix B – Bedroom standards Appendix C - Housing Allocations Policy - Information and FAQs - Your Questions Answered Appendix D MWD FAQs Information - General - Your questions answered Appendix E – Households by size requirement
Background papers:	None
Glossary of acronyms and any other abbreviations used in this report:	

Report Author / Responsible Officer

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Corporate Priorities	A clean, safe and enjoyable environment Providing good quality affordable homes, in particular for those most in need Ensuring efficient, effective and modern service delivery
Wards affected	ALL
Purpose of the report:	1. Provide an overview of the statutory framework and policy - Allocations of social housing
Recommendation (s) to the decision maker (s):	1. Provide feedback regarding the policy framework

1 Introduction/Background:

1.1 The council's current Housing Allocations policy was adopted in October 2021 by Cabinet following extensive consultation and subsequent Cabinet approval. In reviewing the former policy approach, the service engaged with key stakeholders (including Members) and customers, regarding key service issues and trends identified during the life of the policy. Engagement included focussed sessions with the Tenant & Leaseholder Committee in November 2020, following by a dedicated Member Briefing session in December 2020 – which gave the service an opportunity to provide an overview of the policy framework and discussion of key issues. Additionally internal consultation was undertaken in addition to a six-week public consultation via the council's website. This was an extensive process with several opportunities for feedback to be provided. A copy of the current (October 2021) Housing Allocations Policy is at Appendix A.

2.1 Local authorities are required by law to have a defined housing allocations scheme in line with the Housing Act 1996, Part 6 (Allocations). A housing authority allocates accommodation when it:

- selects a person to be a secure or introductory tenant of accommodation held by that authority;
- nominates a person to be a secure or introductory tenant of accommodation held by another housing authority;
- nominates a person to be an assured tenant of accommodation held by a Private Registered Provider.

The Act provides detailed explanation of the rules and exceptions governing the allocation of social housing. Local authorities must ensure that their allocations scheme is compliant with the framework, associated legislation and case law.

3.1 In accordance with the Localism Act 2011, each local authority has the right to determine their own Housing Allocations Policy. This allows local authorities to give "reasonable preference" to certain categories of applicants, ensure that properties are allocated in a fair and reasonable manner as well as enabling better manage our stock. The defined policy sets out the rules that the council must follow when letting properties. This also allows the council to manage unrealistic expectations of those applicants who have little or no prospect of being allocated a property. It is a legal requirement that the policy is reviewed in the event of legislative and or case law change, in absence of such change the policy should be revised every 4 years.

4.1 Local authorities are experiencing unprecedented challenges in relation to housing, with multiple factors impacting the demand for accommodation and availability of properties for re-letting, these include but are not limited to:

- Pipeline of affordable housing
- Rising cost of living
- Affordability and access to the private rented sector
- Migration
- Right to Buy

5.1 Whilst the council stock retains in the region of 10,200 homes (including 1906 sheltered homes) – it is important to note that the length of time that households may wait for access to accommodation is driven by turnover of property. Annually the Housing Needs Team receive approximately 600 of our retained homes for re-letting to new tenants, in addition the team will allocate new build properties in advance of completion (including Registered Provider homes), in line with s106 and nomination agreements the team also receive 75% of re-lets for Registered Provider homes for allocation, this can vary – but in total will see the service allocate approximately 800 homes. Each month the service receives approximately 200 new applications to the housing register, which are assessed in line with the policy – it is therefore crucial that the a robust assessment process is in place, this helps to make sure that best use of stock available is made, by ensuring homes are allocated to those households most in need and where

a household is able to realise their own housing options, with advice and guidance – that they are supported to do so.

2 Key Issues/proposals/main body of the report:

The following information, highlights some of the key aspects of the policy that Officers, Members and customers often require clarity – which were strengthened in the development of the current policy:

2.1 Supported Housing

The council retains 1906 supported housing properties, which consists of 691 dispersed properties in the community such as bungalows and 1215 scheme based properties. Due to pressures the rising cost of living, rising property prices and interest rates, it has been identified that increased households are unable to resolve their own housing need. In addition the service have experienced some challenges in allocating to supported housing properties for a number of reasons, which is primarily due to the stock not lending itself to modern living requirements of the applicants. As a result of a combination of these factors, a decision was taken to increase the previous capital threshold to £400,000, which means that applicants with financial means above this level are unlikely to qualify unless exceptions apply.

2.2 Local connection

Applicants are required to demonstrate a 10 years residence in Dacorum at any point in their lifetime or 10 years residence of an immediate family member. Applicants with 16 hours or more permanent employment in the borough boundary for 2 years or more would qualify for local connection. Applicants who wish to live in a village within Dacorum, would need to in addition identify a local connection to the specific village for 5 years or more. This is so as to ensure compliance with historic village convents and to retain the close community or family connections that have developed over time.

It is also important to note that local connection is an area that can be determined by the council in line with the Localism Act, in respect of Homeless legislation (Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996), local connection is defined as 6 out of the last 12 months and 3 out of the last 5 years.

2.3 Applicant's income

Applicants applying to the housing register, must evidence that they have capital (including savings or financial interest) below £16,000 and household income as per the thresholds outlined below. As demand for social housing is high, it is crucial to ensure that those households who are of no more than £60,000. The service is experiencing unprecedented demand for social housing, in many cases from households who are able to resolve their housing difficulty through their own means and do not require access to social housing.

1 Bedroom/studio Property	£44,000
2 Bedroom Property	£55,000
3 Bedroom Property	£66,000
4 Bedroom Property	£66,000

2.4 Dacorum Bedroom standards

Appendix B provides oversight of the bedroom standard, which states that a pair of different sex children will not be eligible for their own bedroom until the age of 10 years, unless medical or social need determines that own bedroom is essential requirement – each such case is assessed on an individual basis and on its own merits. As per the policy, children sharing a bedroom will be considered to mean siblings or step-siblings, not other relations or non-relations. In addition, the following areas often require extensive enquiry, engagement and multi service or agency liaison to enable a full assessment to establish a household's essential future housing needs.

2.5 Medical and welfare

There are many occasions where households inform the Housing Needs Team of medical diagnosis and enquire as to their eligibility for medical points. Medical points are not awarded in every case where an

applicant has an identified medical need. Medical points are awarded where it is evidence from information provided that an applicant or household's medical need is directly impacted by their accommodation and where it is clear that a move to alternative housing will improve or alleviate their condition e.g. applicant lives in a high rise property, without access to a lift, applicant has diagnosis of respiratory condition and cannot climb or descend stairs without exacerbation. In this instance a move to accommodation with lifted access or on the ground floor is beneficial to the applicant. Points are awarded across five thresholds, dependent on the severity of the case being assessed.

Welfare priority is assessed on the same basis and is defined as care and support or other social needs that do not require medical care or support.

2.6 Overcrowding

Overcrowding points are awarded for each permanent household member who lacks a bed space. This can also include circumstances where medical information is provided to confirm that two household members cannot share a bedroom, where otherwise in line with the policy they would usually be expected to share a bedroom.

2.7 Assessments

Applications are assessed using a mix of desk top information, which includes a form completed by or on behalf of the applicant, alongside supporting documentation from the applicant, supporting agencies and professionals. In addition assessments incorporate multi-disciplinary team reports from case conferences, specialist reports – such as occupational therapist reports and information gained from home visits or face to face meetings with the household.

2.8 Points

The council operates a points system only. Points are awarded based on the household's specific circumstances and following assessment by the Housing Needs Team. The higher a household's points, the higher the housing need. Points can be increased or reduced following assessment if a household's circumstances change, it is therefore crucial that where changes to a household take place that the applicant updates their application.

2.9 Bidding

When an application is assessed and made active, applicants will be informed of their points and informed that they are able to start bidding for properties. Applicants will only be able to bid for properties that are eligible for their household size. In order to maximise their opportunity of being successful in securing housing, applicants are encouraged to bid for as many properties as possible for the property size they are eligible for. Where applicants are more selective and bid for specific area locations, where there may be fewer vacancies this is more likely to increase the wait time for accessing housing.

It is important to note that the availability of property is driven by current tenancies ending through natural means or by creating of new vacancy due to transferring tenants, such vacancies tend to arise in areas where the council has higher density of stock.

Applicants should as they would when seeking accommodation in the private sector explore and investigate areas that they wish to live in before bidding for accommodation. Where an applicant places a bid for accommodation that is suitable for their needs and then refuses an offer of accommodation, this is likely to result in the application being suspended.

3 Direct offers

Direct offers mean that applicants are exempt from bidding for properties. Direct offers are made directly by the Housing Needs Team and are made outside of the choice based letting system. Direct offers are in place for homeless households who have been awarded a main duty and are also used for other specific circumstances such as matching households with complex adaptation requirements to specific properties or managing high risk situations where a sensitive letting is needed.

Appendix C & D provide further detail on other key aspects of the policy and frequently asked questions.

3 Options and alternatives considered

Alternative options have not been considered. It is necessary for the Council to update and refresh regularly upon material or legislative change its policies to ensure that they remain compliant with the statutory framework and adequately inform all stakeholders of the Council's approach.

4 Consultation

As outlined in the report, the current policy has been subject to extensive consultation.

5 Financial and value for money implications:

Effective operation of the Allocations Policy in line with the statutory requirements ensures that the council makes best use of HRA resources and through robust processes re-lets council homes, minimising void loss to the HRA.

6 Legal Implications

Any amendments to the policy are undertaken in collaboration with Legal and Democratic Services to ensure statutory compliance.

7 Risk implications:

A robust policy approach, provides reassurance that the Council has appropriate governance and processes in place to allocate social housing, in addition to supporting applicants, safeguarding victims and those at risk from by ensuring suitable allocation of housing.

8 Equalities, Community Impact and Human Rights:

Community Impact Assessment has been undertaken and approved by the Council's Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Leader officer.

Human Rights –there are no Human Rights Implications arising from this report.

9 Sustainability implications (including climate change, health and wellbeing, community safety)

There are no sustainability issues arising from this policy. The policy provides guidance as to the approach to allocation of social housing and consideration of the policy is taken when developing key supporting strategy such as Housing Strategy and Local Plan. Regular engagement is undertaken with key stakeholders to ensure awareness of new and emerging issues, which may require an alternative policy approach.

10 Council infrastructure (including Health and Safety, HR/OD, assets and other resources)

This policy underpins the approach taken to allocations of the councils retained.

11 Conclusions:

This report provides an overview of the Housing Allocations policy framework and key processes, informing members of the approach taken by the Housing Needs Team, Housing Operations Service to fulfil the statutory requirements of Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996.