

Bath & North East Somerset Council

MEETING:	Housing & Major Projects Policy Development & Scrutiny Panel
MEETING DATE:	19 th November 2013
TITLE:	Housing Allocations Update
WARD:	ALL
AN OPEN PUBLIC ITEM	
List of attachments to this report:	
None	

1 THE ISSUE

1.1 The way social housing is allocated is key to creating communities where people choose to live and are able to prosper. The Localism Act 2011 gave new freedoms that allowed Council's to make significant changes to how social housing is allocated locally. Following extensive consultation, including with this panel, Cabinet decided to implement a range of changes to the local social housing allocation scheme, known as Homesearch. This report is provided to update panel on the implementation of these changes and to draw to the attention of panel a further recent Government consultation document on social housing allocations.

2 RECOMMENDATION

The Housing & Major Projects Policy Development & Scrutiny Panel is asked to:

2.1 Note the issues detailed in this briefing report, and comment in relation to the panel's view on the Government consultation detailed in paragraph 4.9.

3 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

3.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

4 THE REPORT

4.1 In November 2002 Bath & North East Somerset launched the Homeseekers Register. This was one of a number of Government funded pilots into the adoption of a "Choice Based Lettings" approach to the letting of social housing tenancies. This is an approach that balances customer choice and time on list with assessed housing needs as opposed to the traditional "needs only" based system. This provides a number of benefits including: transparency; improved customer satisfaction; reduced void times, particularly with low demand properties; and greater community stability and thus sustainability. Such was the success of the pilots that the Government of the day expressed a desire for all Councils to adopt such an approach. The current Government has reaffirmed their support for this approach.

4.2 In 2005 Housing Services commissioned an independent review of the Homeseekers Register. This review recommended a number of improvements, including a significant simplification of the scheme, marketing of all available properties and a significant investment in new IT systems, which achieved on-going efficiencies and associated savings in the administration of the register. These recommendations were adopted and resulted in the introduction of the current Homesearch Policy in 2006.

4.3 The scheme operates in partnership with 16 local Registered Providers, also known as social landlords, who between them manage 95% of all the social housing stock in the district. Depending upon the landlord between 75% and 100% of their vacant properties are allocated through the Homesearch scheme. In the last 12 months 385 general needs and 132 sheltered properties were allocated through the scheme.

4.4 The Localism Act 2011 and updated allocations guidance provided the Councils with greater freedoms in the drafting of their allocation policies to tackle local needs. The key changes were:

- (1) The Council has the power to determine what classes of people are or are not qualified to be allocated housing;
- (2) New requirement for a right of review of a decision on qualification and to be informed of grounds of decision.

4.5 Following extensive consultation Cabinet decided to implement the following changes:

- (1) Restricting access to the scheme to applicants who are resident within Bath & North East Somerset or have a need to reside here, for example, due to employment, social or medical reasons. This was a significant change and was expected to remove around 17% of applicants.
- (2) The Government are proposing to issue allocation regulations in regard to members of the Armed and Reserve Forces. The aim is to prevent local authorities from disqualifying a person on the grounds that they do not have a connection with a housing authority. Homesearch will comply with any

regulation in this regards as it becomes available, however, in the meantime the policy will continue to provide a relaxed local connection policy for current and ex-service personnel.

- (3) In accordance with Government guidance the new policy gave current and ex-service personnel some additional priority on the scheme. This was achieved by “backdating” eligible applications by 6 months.
 - (4) Applicants with sufficient financial resources available to meet their housing needs no longer qualify to join Homeseach. A combined income, savings, investments or capital of £60,000 or more is considered sufficient to buy a home or pay market rent in the district. A number of exceptions do apply including for applicants requiring supported housing (including sheltered accommodation).
 - (5) People who own a property also no longer qualify to join Homeseach. Exceptions apply for people in financial difficulty, such as their home is being repossessed or they are in significant and long standing mortgage arrears and those who need supported housing, (including sheltered housing) because of their age, disability or medical condition.
 - (6) Giving priority to applicants who are social housing tenants within Bath and North East Somerset and would like to move because their home is too large for their needs.
 - (7) Allowing the under-occupation of properties in rural villages where there is a shortage of properties of a particular size.
 - (8) There were also a range of smaller technical changes including: allowing eligible vulnerable residents to apply together as a single household; changing the age that children require their own rooms; reducing the number of Groups from 4 to 3; and incorporating Curo’s transfer list into Homeseach.
- 4.6 In addition to the above changes Housing Services also sought to undertake a cleanse of the database to coincide with the changes in policy. In addition an IT upgrade now allows for periodic application renewal so in future an on-going data cleanse will take place.
- 4.7 Backroom implementation of the changes was initiated during the latter part of 2012 and the policy fully implemented on the 15th May 2013, six weeks ahead of schedule. The following comprised of the key implementation milestones:
- (1) Backroom design & testing of new system questions and logic/algorithms began late November following Cabinet decision.
 - (2) New questions became mandatory for new applicants from 9th January 2013
 - (3) Letters sent to all existing applicants advising of new policy, implications, and if still eligible, requesting that they update their application either electronically or by contacting office. In addition information about the change was also advertised in local papers, on the website and through partners including the One-Stop Shop, housing providers and other agencies.
 - (4) In February a second letter was sent to those applicants who had yet to update their housing application. Further publicity through website & partners.

- (5) In March all applicants who had yet to update their applications had their accounts locked preventing them for bidding until they updated their account.
- (6) In April the scheme was closed for 1 week to allow for full IT and systems testing pending “going-live” date.
- (7) Change over completed in May and new system live from 15th May.

4.8 On 3rd January 2013, prior to the implementation of the policy changes and data cleanse, there were a total of 12,746 households on the register. On the 1st October 2013 this number now stands at 4,122 households, a reduction of around 67%. Detailed analysis of the data shows that the reduction in applicants was broadly similar between those requiring general needs accommodation and sheltered accommodation (67% and 70% respectively); and between those requiring 1,2,3,4+ bedroom accommodation (69%, 64%, 62% and 70% respectively). However, as anticipated there was significant difference between the reduction of those in higher housing need than those in lower need (30% and 70% respectively). It is also interesting to note that the current proportion of people on the register not describing themselves as white-British has increased from 11% to 13.6%. This data would imply that our extensive publicity and assistance prevented any group from being unfairly disadvantaged by the implementation of the changes.

4.9 On the 14th October the government issued a further consultation document on social housing allocations titled “Providing Social Housing for Local People: Strengthening Statutory Guidance on Social Housing Allocations”. The document can be viewed at <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/providing-social-housing-for-local-people>. Deadline for comments is 22nd November. If the guidance is adopted it would “strongly encourage” that our existing policy should be amended in the following two areas:

(1) Eligibility: Local connection

- a) Introduce a 2 year residency test – At present we require residency of 3 out of the last 5 years or 6 out of the last 12 months, or
- b) Employed in the district for “a number of years” – At present we simply require permanent employment with no specified term, or
- c) Close family living in the district for a “number of years” - At present we require a person who needs to move to the area to receive or provide support to/from a close relative to support with no specified term

(2) Publishing information about the waiting list and letting outcomes

We currently publish a range of useful information about the Homesearch scheme including: numbers on scheme (according to group & required property type); numbers housed (according to group & property types); minimum, average & longest time to be housed (according to group & property types); the group & time on list of successful applicant for individual properties. However, the guidance would also require us to publish accurate, up-to-date and anonymised information on household characteristics, including the age, sex, ethnicity and nationality of applicants and new tenants.

5 RISK MANAGEMENT

5.1 A risk assessment related to the issue and recommendations has not been undertaken given the nature of this report.

6 EQUALITIES

6.1 The equalities impacts of the agreed changes were considered during the original policy development, however, the core objective of this scheme is to ensure that households who are unable to compete on the open market are provided with suitable and appropriate housing. An equalities impact assessment was completed on the original proposal which did not find any adverse impacts on protected groups.

7 CONSULTATION

7.1 Cabinet Member; Overview & Scrutiny Panel; Other B&NES Services; Service Users; Local Residents; Stakeholders/Partners.

7.2 This is report is merely providing an administrative update for panel and so no wider consultation has been undertaken.

8 ISSUES TO CONSIDER IN REACHING THE DECISION

8.1 Social Inclusion; Customer Focus; Sustainability; Young People; Human Rights; Other Legal Considerations

9 ADVICE SOUGHT

9.1 The Council's Monitoring Officer (Divisional Director – Legal and Democratic Services) and Section 151 Officer (Divisional Director - Finance) have had the opportunity to input to this report and have cleared it for publication.

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Background papers	None
Please contact the report author if you need to access this report in an alternative format	