

FULL COUNCIL REPORT

Date Written	23 rd January 2015
Report Author	Beverly Owen / Jonathan Davies
Service Area	Housing
Exempt/Non Exempt	Non-exempt
Committee Date	25 th February 2015

To: Mayor, Ladies and Gentlemen

Changes to 'Housing Choice' – Housing Allocations Policy

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT:

To seek Council's approval for the updated Housing Choice Allocations Policy.

1.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Section 167 of the Housing Act 1996, as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002 requires all Local Authorities to publish a scheme which determines the priority and procedure for the allocation of housing accommodation. The Act also states that the scheme must include a statement of the housing authority's policy on offering choice of accommodation, as well as giving reasonable preference to those individuals or households of a higher level of housing need.
- 1.2 The current housing allocations policy was approved by Council in 2012. Since this time the policy has generally worked well, but following a recent review of how the policy works in practice, a number of minor amendments have been identified to improve the policy and its implementation processes. All local Housing Association partners have been fully engaged in this process of review and update.

2.0 HOUSING CHOICE POLICY – PROPOSED AMENDMENTS

2.1 It is proposed that some aspects of the current policy and its associated implementation processes be amended to address legislative changes, provide greater clarity on the allocation system, and improve systems to support its implementation.

2.2 In summary, the proposed changes are as follows:

2.2.1 Introduction of new 'bands' into the Choice Based Lettings System

- A 'Diamond band' (piloted since December 2013) will be formally introduced. This band is specifically aimed at tenants who need to downsize as a result of financial difficulty, arising from welfare reform. The increased priority given to them by the new band ensures that those at risk of losing their home as a result of rental arrears are given the opportunity to move to a smaller, more affordable house.
- A new homeless band will be used for people who present to the Council as homeless, until a decision is reached regarding intentionality and priority need. They will not be able to bid whilst in this category but a record of information provided to the applicant will be stored electronically. This is in preparation for the implications of the Housing (Wales) Act in April 2015, when all housing applicants, homeless or otherwise, will need to be supported holistically and recorded seamlessly.
- A 'No Preference' band is now used for applicants who have been temporarily 'suspended' from the Common Housing Register by the Local Housing Panel (LHP). Applicants will be unable to bid whilst in this category. Temporary suspension into the 'no preference band' may be an outcome from the LHP, where an applicant has previous rental arrears, former tenant charges or have been guilty of unacceptable behaviour as set out in the allocations policy (see Appendix 1 for a summary). The length of suspension and re-entry into a band, where an applicant is eligible to bid, e.g. diamond, gold, silver, silver plus or bronze, is agreed by the Local Housing Panel in accordance with the allocations policy.

2.2.2 Annual Application Reviews

Under the previous policy, applications would be annually reviewed on the anniversary of the application date, which has proved difficult to monitor and maintain. To improve consistency and efficiency, an annual review of all applications on the Common Housing Register are now undertaken August – October each year, which allows sufficient time for stage 1 and 2 reminders and cancellation notices to be issued.

2.2.3 Online Advertising

All Home-seekers now bid for properties via the 'Housing Choice' website or via telephone. This has created efficiencies, some of which have been re-invested in our in-house Common Housing Register system.

2.2.4 Advertising & Allocation of Adapted Properties

Under the previous allocations policy, purpose built homes or properties with significant adaptations have been allocated outside of the Housing Choice 'bidding system'; properties were not advertised in the same way that general needs properties were advertised. When a specialist property became available, each participating Registered Social Landlord (RSL) would request a nomination from the Council's Community Occupational Therapy (COT) team. The COT team would review their list of applicants in need of specialist accommodation (who would also be registered with Housing Choice) and provide a nomination to the Registered Social Landlord.

Whilst this has been in line with Council policy and has ensured that available, accessible properties have been allocated to those in most need, officers from the Housing and COT teams agree that the process could be more transparent and better aligned to the Housing Choice bidding system. There is also agreement with our partner RSL's that more effective 'matching of applicants' will ensure that there is better use of existing, accessible housing stock.

As a result, the allocations policy has been amended to deliver the above outcomes; a summary of the key policy revisions relating to accessible housing is provided at Appendix 2.

- 2.3 The full copy of the Allocations Policy which will come into effect following Council approval has been sent electronically to all Members.

3.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

- 3.1 There are no direct financial implications for the local authority associated with this report.

4.0 SINGLE INTEGRATED PLAN AND SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT SUMMARY

- 4.1 A Single Integrated Plan Sustainability Assessment has been completed. There are no negative outcomes and several positive impacts. This assessment is available on request. The Housing Wales Act impacts the following priorities positively:

- People, who live and work in Merthyr Tydfil are supported to enjoy a healthier and better quality of life.
- People enjoy a vibrant, attractive, safe and sustainable place in which to live, work, play and visit.

- Financial Sustainability of Public Services
- Poverty - preventing poverty, helping people out of poverty and mitigating the impact of poverty.
- Working with Communities - The role of communities working in partnership to help to deliver the Vision and Priority Outcomes for Merthyr Tydfil.
- Equal Opportunities – ending discrimination, ensuring equality of opportunity and that all parts of our population can live together, where every person has an equal chance to participate and has equal access to services.
- Social Inclusion - ensuring that no-one is disadvantaged because of poverty, geography or access to services
- The Welsh Language - promoting the Welsh language across the County Borough and ensuring that the Welsh and English language are treated equally.

5.0 EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

5.1 An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) screening form has been prepared for the purpose of this report. It has been found that a full report is not required at this time. The screening form can be accessed on the Council's website/intranet via the 'Equality Impact Assessment' link.

6.0 RECOMMENDATION(S) that

6.1 The amended 'Housing Choice' Common Allocations Policy be approved

ELLIS COOPER
DIRECTOR OF CUSTOMER SERVICES

BACKGROUND PAPERS		
Title of Document(s)	Document(s) Date	Document Location
Housing Allocation Policy	January 2015	Room 321, Civic Centre
Draft Code of Guidance for Local Authorities on the Allocation of Accommodation and Homelessness	January 2015	Room 321, Civic Centre.

Consultation has been undertaken with the Corporate Management Team in respect of each proposal(s) and recommendation(s) set out in this report.