



FULL COUNCIL REPORT

Date Written	7 th March 2017
Report Author	J Pike
Service Area	Housing Solutions Team
Committee Division	Portfolio
Exempt/Non Exempt	Non Exempt
Committee Date	22 nd March 2017

To: Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen

Common Housing Allocations Policy

1.0 SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 This report outlines the legal requirement for the Council to have an allocation policy – which outlines the rules and procedures for how social housing within the County Borough is allocated.
- 1.2 Furthermore the report outlines the considerable consultation undertaken as part of the policy development process, which has culminated in this final draft version of the Policy.
- 1.3 The Policy is referred to as ‘common’ as it is common to all four Registered Social Landlords which operate within Merthyr Tydfil – namely: Merthyr Valleys Homes, Merthyr Tydfil Housing Association, Wales & West Housing Association and Hafod Housing Association. Appropriate senior officers from all four organisations have been involved in the drafting of this Policy and are content with it.
- 1.4 The Policy itself effectively outlines how priority is awarded to persons wishing to apply for social housing. Based on the specific circumstances of the household they are awarded one of three priority bands – Band 1 is High Priority, Band 2 – Medium Priority and Band 3 – Low Priority.
- 1.5 Properties are not banded and are advertised by the respective Registered Social Landlord using a common website (managed by the Housing Solutions Team of the Council).
- 1.6 Households which apply for a particular property are shortlisted based upon their Banding (which is based upon housing need). The rules for this are contained within the Policy document.

- 1.7 This new Policy, at Section 9, provides an effective means of making the best use of adapted homes, by clearly advertising them as such, allowing citizens and their support workers (Community Occupational Therapists etc...) to make informed choices about where to live and whether a property and its adaptations will facilitate independent living or improved well-being.
- 1.8 This Policy aims to make the allocation process more robust and transparent, giving Officers, Councillors and citizens increased confidence that homes are allocated in a fair and equitable way, based upon housing need. The Policy increases choice for citizens by the removal of the current practice of banding available properties. The Policy will assist the Council and our Registered Landlord Partners in the creation of more balanced and equitable communities.
- 1.9 It is important to note that this report seeks approval for this Policy, however, it will not be implemented until later in 2017, an Information Report will be presented to Council, (likely to be in November 2017), advising of the exact implementation date. For the avoidance of doubt, the current Allocations Policy will continue to be used until such time that the new Policy is implemented.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION that

- 2.1 The draft Common Housing Allocations Policy be approved.
- 2.2 The implementation of the new Arbitras Software System, required to effectively administer the new policy be approved.
- 2.3 Council receives an Information Report, later in 2017, advising of the implementation date of this new Policy.

3.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Council is required by law (The Housing Act 1996) to have a policy which outlines how it plans to administer the allocation of social housing stock in its area.
- 3.2 Even post stock transfer, which occurred in 2009, this legal requirement remains, and is probably more important, as the Council does not own or control any social housing stock anymore.
- 3.3 The policy is referred to as 'Common' as it is common to all four Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) in the area. Therefore all four are required to agree its terms and conditions and to implement it in the allocation of their housing stock to citizens.
- 3.4 The Housing Services approach to the allocation of social housing is changing significantly, with a firm focus upon increasing efficiency, reducing administrative time spent dealing with applications. This will be achieved through a shift to online service provision (in the majority of cases). Significant safeguards, advice and assistance shall be available to those not currently able to access the internet. See Policy for further details.

- 3.5 The new Policy seeks to address the shortcomings of the current Policy which is no longer fit for purpose, having undergone a number of iterative changes in recent years in response to national policy changes (such as Welfare Reform), leaving the current Policy somewhat unwieldy for officers to use and confusing for customers.
- 3.6 A new Policy was considered the best approach to address this situation.

4.0 WHAT'S BEEN DONE TO DATE

- 4.1 A working group was established in summer 2015 between the RSL Partners and Council Officers to consider the options for change and to oversee the review exercise.
- 4.2 A seminar for members was held on Wednesday 9th September 2015 to gain views from members on some of the options they might wish to see developed going forward.
- 4.3 A small group of members subsequently met with officers in October 2015 to consider the options that should be submitted to Cabinet seeking approval to go out to consultation early in the New Year.
- 4.4 An online consultation exercise was launched by the Communications Team between 5th February 2016 and 13th May 2016 to seek the views of residents. Hard copies of the consultation document and factsheet were disseminated to public buildings throughout the Borough. A total of 133 responses were received
- 4.5 The views of residents and tenants groups was sought along with a wide range of partner organisations such as ADREF, Barnardos, Children's Services, Adult Services, South Wales Police etc...
- 4.6 Over the past 18 months or so, the Steering Group has met frequently to discuss the principles and operational detail of the new policy.
- 4.7 The new DRAFT policy has been written by the current Housing & Community Safety Manager, but with each draft being sanctioned by the Steering Group at every stage.
- 4.8 The Draft Policy was laid before Regeneration, Planning and Countryside Scrutiny Committee on the 7th February 2017 for consideration.

5.0 WHERE WE ARE NOW

- 5.1 The Policy has been agreed at Senior Officer level in all 5 relevant organisations. The Policy is a Council Policy and as such must be approved by Council before the four RSLs seek the relevant approval of their respective Boards to adopt the Policy.
- 5.2 The Policy has new branding: 'Living Merthyr Tydfil', and shall be launched as a new Policy later in 2017.

- 5.3 A new software system – ARBITRAS has been purchased using Welsh Government grant funding, to implement the new Policy. Arbitras must be built based upon the rules of the new policy, hence why the Policy cannot be implemented at this time, but must be approved, in order for the software to be built upon the Policy rules.

6.0 WHAT'S NEXT

- 6.1 Subject to approval by Council, Arbitras shall create the software package to administer the scheme. During this period (circa. 6 months), the Housing Solutions Team shall contact all persons on the current Common Housing Register, advising them of the imminent new policy (in 2017) and the requirement for them to register their current details on the new software system over the coming months.
- 6.2 This phased approach shall allow staff to verify applications to join the register over a number of months, so that when the new policy is enacted (later in 2017), all those who wish to apply for social housing are registered to do so and have had ample time to complete the online application form. Further detail on the transition arrangements is contained within the Policy.

7.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 There are no new financial implications associated with the introduction of this new Policy. All financial implications shall be met within departmental budget.
- 7.2 The Arbitras Software system has been purchased using Welsh Government grant. The ongoing licence fee will be shared between the 4 RSLs and the Council. Again within departmental budget.

8.0 SINGLE INTEGRATED PLAN AND SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT SUMMARY

- 8.1 This Policy has positive impacts on 12 factors, namely:
- People in Merthyr Tydfil benefit from a strong, sustainable and diverse economy
 - 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.
 - Prevention and Early Intervention - in order to break cycles of dependency and prevent the persistence of poor outcomes from one generation to the next.
 - Sustainable Development - enhancing the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of people and communities, achieving a better quality of life for our own and future generations.
 - 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.

- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child - empowering children's, young people's and their parents' / carers' to participate in the decision making process on services that affect their lives.
- 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.

8.2 No impact on 2 factors, namely:

- People in Merthyr Tydfil have the opportunity and aspiration to learn and develop their skills to maximise their potential
- Learning for Life.

8.3 There are no negative impacts recorded.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

9.1 An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) form has been prepared for the purpose of this report. It has been found that a full assessment is required. The form can be accessed on the Council's website/intranet via 'Equality Impact Assessment' link.

9.1.1 The positive impacts are on households where one or more members are disabled as the new Policy increases transparency and provides a greater level of information to disabled persons, to make informed choices about applying for a new home. Applicants who are pregnant and within 12 weeks of their expected due date will significantly benefit from this new Policy, as the unborn child shall be considered in the bedroom requirements for the family. With regards to race, cultural sensitivities are considered within the Policy and Language Line service is available. Carers are provided with increased priority referred to as 'support hardship' within the Policy. The Living Merthyr Tydfil website and application forms will be available in the Welsh Language.

9.1.2 The negative impacts are in respect of age, where families who have children under the age of 10 years and which live in an above ground floor flat will no longer receive increased priority. Persons aged 50 years+ and seeking Sheltered Accommodation, will no longer automatically receive increased priority, unless there are significant medical, disability or welfare issues. Finally individuals that experience a relationship breakdown and wish to move out, will not receive increased priority and will be considered adequately housed providing; it is safe to do so and there are no overcrowding issues.

9.1.3 Current proposals to address the issues are the in-depth *housing options consultation* process, whereby Housing Solutions Officers will discuss the household's circumstances, wishes, finances etc... and advise them of the most suitable type of accommodation for their needs (and aspirations where possible). For families with children under 10 years old living in a first floor flat (or higher), increased priority may be awarded if the current living

circumstances adversely affects the welfare of the family. For applicants aged 50 years+ wishing to access Sheltered Accommodation, they will be advised that only persons requiring care or support should access such accommodation. During the housing options consultation, any medical, disability or welfare issues should be identified and discussed; and increased priority awarded where appropriate. In cases of relationship breakdown, where there is any risk to safety of any member of the household increased priority will be awarded, furthermore, as separate bedrooms will be required for the 'estranged' couple, additional priority will be awarded if this results in an overcrowding situation (due to too few bedrooms).

**ALYN OWEN
CHIEF OFFICER (COMMUNITY
REGENERATION)**

**COUNCILLOR KATE MORAN
CABINET MEMBER FOR
REGENERATION, PLANNING &
COUNTRYSIDE**

BACKGROUND PAPERS		
Title of Document(s)	Document(s) Date	Document Location
Living Merthyr Tydfil	March 2017	Electronic Drive
Does the report contain any issue that may impact the Council's Constitution?		No