

RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL REPORT TO HEALTH & HOUSING COMMITTEE

Meeting date: THURSDAY, 18 JANUARY 2024
Title: REVIEW OF THE AFFORDABLE HOUSING ALLOCATION POLICY AND
A CHOICE BASE LETTING SYSTEM
Submitted by: DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING
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1 PURPOSE

1.1 To approve suggested amendments to the Council's Affordable Housing Allocation Policy (Allocation Policy) and to consider suggestions made by the Strategic Housing Working Group in respect of moving to a Choice Base Letting (CBL) System for the allocation of available properties to people on the waiting list.

1.2 Relevance to the Council's ambitions and priorities:

- Community Objectives – To meet the housing needs of all sections of the Community.
- Corporate Priorities – To match the supply of homes in our area with the identified housing needs.
- Other Considerations – To ensure the efficient and equitable operation of the policy.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 The Allocation Policy is a key document in delivering the Council's housing duty and it is essential that it is kept up to date and relevant to the housing needs in the borough. The policy relates to the operation of the social / affordable rented housing. The policy makes a significant impact both at a strategic and operational level. From a strategic perspective, the Allocation Policy determines the number of households on the housing waiting list and is therefore a key piece of evidence to inform the level of affordable housing need in the borough.

2.2 The housing waiting list and the data collected from this list is a key piece of evidence informing the level of general housing need in the borough. As such this data is used to inform the preparation of the Local Plan with regards to future housing needs and particularly the scale and type of future affordable housing need to be addressed in the Local Plan. Registered providers also utilise this information to inform strategic plans for the future in terms of investing in grant funded schemes or bidding on Section 106 sites in the borough.

2.3 From an operational perspective, the Allocation Policy is essential in the allocation of all social housing void stock, for prioritising need of those households on the waiting list and providing nominations to registered providers. The Council commissioned Onward to manage and administer the waiting list on behalf of the Council.

2.4 The Allocation Policy firstly determines who is eligible to register and then secondly once a person is eligible, the policy determines their position of priority on the waiting list. Eligibility includes a right to be housed in the UK and requires evidence of a local

connection to the Ribble Valley. The prioritisation of a person on the waiting list is determined by:

- a. If you are homeless or under threat;
 - b. The difficulties you may be experiencing in your current home, e.g. disrepair;
 - c. Your family circumstances;
 - d. The condition of your current home; and
 - e. If your health is at risk by living in the current property.
- 2.5 Officers have carried a full review of the Allocation Policy which included a number of meetings held between Onward staff and Ribble Valley Borough Council housing staff last year. This concluded in a set of proposed suggested changes to the Policy.
- 2.6 The proposed changes have then been explained to the Strategic Housing Working Group (SHWG), the minutes of which are included within the Committee agenda. The meeting of the SHWG was specifically focused on the Allocation Policy. The SHWG has endorsed the proposed changes which are summarised below. Appendix 1 includes a copy of the Allocation Policy showing all the changes as tracked changes.
- 2.7 At the SHWG meeting there was considerable discussion around the current method of allocating units and the group discussed whether moving to a Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme could improve the efficiency and fairness of the process, whilst avoiding unnecessary lengthy administrative processes that are currently in place. A CBL scheme allows an element of choice, as applicants register and once accepted as eligible can then bid for advertised void properties.

3 PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE ALLOCATIONS POLICY

- 3.1 All the proposed changes to the policy have been highlighted in red text and attached at Appendix 1. This section highlights the proposed changes with reference to key issues that are being addressed: -

Requirement to Evidence Housing Need

- 3.2 To date any person with a local connection has the right to register for housing in the Borough irrespective of their current housing situation with no need for evidence to demonstrate their need. This allows a number of households to register who have no current housing need. Consequently, the waiting list numbers potentially may not reflect the true level of affordable housing need in the borough. Households with no current housing need could be in a position of equal priority because of the length of time on the waiting list. Such households often refuse property offers and therefore a lot of time is taken screening those households out before a property is allocated.
- 3.3 It is proposed that only those in housing need can register on the waiting list.

Add Further Clarity to Local Connection Definition

- 3.4 Currently households who leave the Borough due to lack of suitable affordable accommodation are not eligible to receive the necessary points required to increase their chances of being offered an affordable property when it becomes available. The proposal is to change this to allow households that have left the borough in the past 12 months due to lack of affordable housing to be awarded their eligible points for their housing situation. Then after the 12 months their situation will be reviewed.

Eligibility Criteria

- 3.5 The eligibility criteria have been reviewed to include up to date immigration advice and armed forces connections.

Medical Points

- 3.6 The medical points have been amended to try and ensure that they are awarded to reflect where the housing is impacting on health. They have been reduced to three categories low, medium and high. Previously anyone above 70 years of age was automatically awarded additional points irrespective of their health or housing need.

Homeless Points

- 3.7 Where a household is owed the full housing duty then they are awarded the maximum points of 30. This has been increased from 20 points to ensure they are well positioned on the housing waiting list.

Consultation on the proposed Changes

- 3.8 The proposed changes to the policy will have an impact on a number of households on the waiting list who will be disappointed because they would either not be on the waiting list or their priority would have changed.
- 3.9 The amended document will be published on our website and comments will be invited over a period of six weeks. It is proposed that all households on the list will be directly consulted on the changes to the policy and be given the opportunity to comment.
- 3.10 We will also publish a press release to publicise the changes and encourage comments from residents and partner Registered Providers.
- 3.11 Following the public consultation a report will be brought back to this committee which will summarise the representations and ask committee to approve the final document.

4. CONSIDERATION OF INTRODUCING A CHOICE BASED LETTINGS (CBL) SCHEME

- 4.1 Currently when properties become available, Onward will contact people on the waiting list in order of priority. Often considerable time is wasted contacting people high on the priority list who are not interested in the particular property.
- 4.2 Considering a CBL scheme is separate from the need to review the Allocations Policy albeit connected. A CBL scheme is a means to apply the policy. An amended Allocations Policy can be approved in advance of a decision as to how affordable properties will be offered to households moving forward.
- 4.3 A CBL scheme requires an IT platform for all available properties to be registered and then once a household is registered as eligible, they can then show an interest in renting the property – referred to as placing a ‘bid’ for the property. Of those households that bid the household with the highest priority in date order will be offered the property. It is possible that at any one point in time there might not be available properties on the system.

- 4.4 Most Lancashire Authorities use such a platform either jointly as in East Lancashire or individually. We could explore whether Ribble Valley could join an existing platform and set up its own scheme or set up its own scheme on a new platform.
- 4.5 The advantages of setting up a CBL scheme are reduced administration in allocating properties and increased choice for residents. It is a more transparent system, with residents being able to see the detail of available properties and decide whether they are suitable for their needs.
- 4.6 There are associated cost implications with moving to a CBL. Initial discussions in exploring this option have suggested the cost will be in excess of £50,000 with further ongoing maintenance costs if an individual system is opted for. There is another option in respect of joining an established system e.g. joining the East Lancs system. It is understood that where a CBL system was introduced elsewhere the Registered Providers active in that area made financial contributions to the purchase and on-going maintenance costs. In Ribble Valley active register providers include Onward, Jigsaw, MSV, Together Housing, Places for People, Great Places and Heylo. We are aware that Registered Providers are in favour of CBL schemes however discussions in respect of contributions with these providers has not yet been undertaken.
- 4.7 Committee are requested to confirm whether they would like Officers to explore the options, both an individual option and joining an established system, for introducing a CBL with a report brought back to this Committee with the full details of all options.

5 RISK ASSESSMENT

- 5.1 The approval of this report may have the following implications:
- Resources – The proposed changes to the Allocations Policy do not have any financial implications. Any consultation costs will be met from existing budgets and staff resources.
 - Technical, Environmental and Legal –There are no technical, environmental or legal implications arising from the changes to the Allocations Policy. It is essential that the policy is kept up to date and reflect current national policy.
 - Political – The changes to the Allocation Policy will ensures that rented affordable housing is allocated to those households most in need.
 - Reputation – Important the Allocation Policy is kept up to date and is an accurate reflection of the needs of the borough.
 - Equality & Diversity – The proposed changes to the Allocations Policy would ensure a more equitable and fairer operation of the policy.

6 RECOMMENDED THAT COMMITTEE

- 6.1 Approve the proposed changes to the Allocation Policy for a 6-week consultation as set out in section 3 and appended to this report.
- 6.2 Delegate authority to the Director of Planning and Economic Development to make any other minor editorial amendments to the document prior to publishing the document for consultation.

- 6.3 Delegate authority to the Director of Economic Development and Planning to explore options for a Ribble Valley CBL system including engagement with partners with a full detailed report brought back to this Committee.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

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