

# Public Document Pack

## Environment and Living Scrutiny Committee

29 OCTOBER 2018

**PRESENT:** Councillor S Jenkins (Chairman); Councillors B Everitt (Vice-Chairman), M Bateman, S Chapple, S Cole, P Cooper, T Hunter-Watts, C Poll (In place of A Cole) and M Rand

**IN ATTENDANCE:** Councillors B Chapple OBE and M Winn

**APOLOGIES:** Councillors S Jarvis and R King and B Stanier

### 1. MINUTES

RESOLVED –

That the minutes of the meeting held on 25 September 2018 be approved as a correct record.

### 2. BUCKS HOME CHOICE ALLOCATIONS POLICY

AVDC was a member of the Bucks Home Choice Partnership which also consisted of Chiltern DC, South Bucks DC and Wycombe DC. Each of these authorities managed the allocation of affordable and social rented accommodation within their districts. The partnership operated a common Allocations Policy which was being reviewed in response to changes made by recent case law following the Localism Act 2011 and Homeless Reduction Act 2017. As a Local Housing Authority, AVDC had a statutory duty to consult the public and housing providers about the allocation of social housing in the county. The committee received a report which proposed policy changes that would be consulted upon in due course. A note was circulated to Members at the Committee which corrected a typographical error in the report.

The proposed changes had a material effect on who qualifies for Bucks Home Choice. Officers assured Members that there would be no major changes to the current policy. The changes would affect the relative priority band awarded to certain types of applicant and would introduce a new priority Band E. This Band was added to allow appropriate priority to be awarded to applicants in different circumstances and housing need. This Band would ensure applicants without a local connection to the area in which they apply are given less priority than those with a local connection.

Band E would be utilised for reasonable preference groups who applied but had no local connection. This would ensure the allocations scheme was lawful but still allow for applicants with a local connection to have priority. Revised priority bands would also be linked to AVDC's statutory preventative function following the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act and would allow those threatened with homelessness or living in crowded conditions to have additional priority. This was so that applicants could be re-housed before they became homeless and required temporary accommodation.

Applicants who had applied for assistance from one of the four districts in Bucks Home Choice where the council had decided they are homeless and in priority need but were determined to be homeless intentionally were currently in Band D. It was proposed these applicants would be moved to Band E so that they are not prioritised above applicants that were found to be unintentionally homeless.

All the proposed changes in the report sought to achieve the following policy objectives:

- Respond to recent case law and government guidance so that Allocations Policy was lawful
- Utilise the Allocations Policy as a homelessness prevention tool
- Continue allocating the largest properties to the largest families who need it most thereby making the best use of housing stock

The proposed changes to the Allocations Policy would have no effect on existing Lettings Policies, notably the local policy which ring-fenced a quota of properties to applicants with a connection to one of four sub groups in Aylesbury Vale. Existing applicants would not need to re-apply to be re-assessed under the new system. Instead applicants would be automatically re-assessed placed into new priority bands and notified in writing. These were subject to statutory review proceedings so it was expected there would be uplift in officer time to address this.

Members sought more information from the officers and were advised that:-

- i. There were 4,800 on the housing register across Buckinghamshire with 1,370 applicants in Aylesbury Vale. Demand currently outstripped supply and this was not expected to change. Instead the focus was on managing current supply effectively.
- ii. One of the proposed changes would ensure that those who were in supported accommodation outside their local area would maintain their local connection.
- iii. Applicants aged 16/17 would need an adult who could hold the tenancy as a trustee. It was confirmed that vulnerable 16/17 year olds would most likely be under the care of the leaving care team and a responsible adult would therefore be available. Regardless of this, it was very unusual for an allocation to be made prior to a care leavers 18th birthday.
- iv. All of the local authorities within the Partnership had been working under the same common allocations policy. There was a level flexibility in the policy based on locality which was accommodated through local lettings policies which sat underneath the common policy.
- v. It was difficult to determine which district was under the most housing pressure as there were various factors that contributed towards it. For instance, Chiltern and South Bucks had difficulty with housing numbers not coming forward and their unmet need.
- vi. It was unclear what effect the new NPPF would have on AVDC with regards to the unmet demand from other authorities and specifically the effect of unmet affordable demand. There had been discussions about a potential quota of allocations that could be received from Wycombe DC or Chiltern & South Bucks DCs; however no agreement was in place. Officers were continuing to explore potential options.
- vii. There were 51 households on the housing register that wanted to downsize property. Factors for doing so included the possibility of lower maintenance for smaller properties and potentially lower heating bills.
- viii. An under occupied property was defined as one where one or more bedroom was unoccupied. This was a challenge as these were often family homes where children had moved out and/or residents wanted to have a spare bedroom for family members or guests. Registered providers did offer incentives and choices to encourage residents to voluntarily downsize. Although some under occupiers would be affected by the 'bedroom tax', Members were assured that no pressure was applied to downsize in these instances and AVDC tried to facilitate moves. Moreover, there was not any effect on the security of tenure in existing tenancy agreements.
- ix. If no bids were received for homes in Aylesbury Vale by those with a local connection then applications would be considered by those from outside the Vale. However this was a rare occurrence due to demand.

- x. The consultation would last six weeks and communication of this would go to stakeholders and Parishes. Also the consultation would be advertised on the Bucks Home Choice website. Officers were seeking guidance about whether to write to all existing applicants as part of the consultation exercise.

RESOLVED –

That the Committee were satisfied for the proposed changes to the policy be consulted on and that Committee's comments be referred to Cabinet.

### **3. PLANNING ENFORCEMENT UPDATE**

The Committee had received an update on Development Management and Planning Enforcement on 13 February 2018 which outlined the plans for improving the service. At the time, Members wanted an update to come to committee later in 2018.

The Committee report listed a number of measures which were to be implemented including the introduction of a new computer database system later in the year. The system would be run in a test phase during December and January for implementation in February 2019. The introduction of this system would assist the integration of the environmental health and planning enforcement parts of the team as their systems were currently separate. This cross-referencing of information would reinforce the joint working already being done, most notably with Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO). Historically, planning enforcement had been reactive and reviews were underway to understand potential improvements to create resource for proactive enforcement.

Since June 2018 the enforcement service had had a number of challenges which included significant staff turnover and a sustained increase in the number of enforcement cases. There was a national shortage of planning officers and the AVDC service had carried out two recruitment campaigns but had not been able to recruit an experienced planning enforcement officer. However the service had recruited two officers from within AVDC who were familiar with the challenges of planning and the service was offering training and support. Three experienced contractors had joined the enforcement service on a short-medium term basis; two were focussing on training and developing new enforcement officers and carrying caseload whilst the third focussed on activities to progress and close historic cases.

The report contained numbers of cases opened and closed in 2017 and 2018, and the officer in attendance expected that case numbers would grow further. Members were advised that the priority of the service was to reduce the number of historic open cases so that the numbers reflected actual active cases that officers managed. Report generation that would categorise cases would also be investigated to identify casing trends.

The Committee sought further information and were advised that:-

- i. The previous team setup was:  
1 x Principal, 2 x Enforcement Officers, 1 x Admin.  
The new setup would be:  
1 x Principal, 1 x Senior Officer, 3 x Enforcement Officers (with one primarily focused on proactive enforcement). Administration would be moved to a different section to streamline enforcement activities.
- ii. Enforcement cases were not always clear cut with a quick solution available to enable a case to be closed. For instance, cases remained open if a retrospective planning application was expected to rectify the enforcement issue. Alternatively, cases remained open to log and monitor officer visits. A

- number of officer visits may be required to determine the likelihood of a breach. This evidence gathering was important as notices served required evidence.
- iii. Reports and information could be incomplete and this needed to be reviewed to ensure information shared was meaningful.
  - iv. Members would not always be aware of cases if the case was raised by a member of the public directly.
  - v. The new Cabinet Member had liaised closely with the service to obtain an understanding of the service pressures, discuss resourcing and challenge performance where appropriate.

Members were invited to give comments and suggestions which could be included within the Enforcement Policy as it was in the process of being reviewed. The Committee discussed the concerns they had with the service with the two main elements being communication and resourcing. Members considered constructive suggestions for service improvement which were as follows:

### **Communication**

- Greater communication between the service and Parishes on enforcement issues as the Parish Councils had local knowledge that may close historic cases.
- Members being informed of when a case was raised in their Ward, the process and case progression.
- An acknowledgement of a case being raised by a Member followed by an understanding of the process, action(s), and outcome of the case. A single point of contact who takes ownership of the case may help in this regard.
- Case notes are maintained in a central system which is particularly important given staff turnover and use of contractors.

### **Resourcing**

- Utilise Members to liaise in their Wards to take strain off the service.
- Consider use of technology to assist in the service if there was a business case. Drones were mentioned specifically in this regard.
- Officer time logged on cases.

The Committee saw merit in an update coming back to Members around September 2019.

RESOLVED –

That the update be noted and the suggestions for the service be considered in the imminent review of the enforcement service.

## **4. CCTV**

AVDC had a long-term aspiration to deliver a cost effective and efficient CCTV monitoring service by joining up its CCTV suite with others across Buckinghamshire. The Committee received a report which outlined a proposal for a single CCTV control room service that would bring together three control suites into one to deliver an improved service for less money. The report outlined that early indications were that AVDC could save approximately £121,000 (subject to more information on final hub costs). All local authorities needed agreement to proceed in principle. Agreement would allow further investigation into the project detail.

The project had been ongoing for around five years and progress had been made since Thames Valley Police (TVP) policy staff began implementation in early 2018. Tim

Metcalfe, the Local Police Area Commander, was also involved in the project. The Project Partnership Board, which had representatives from AVDC, Chiltern DC, Wycombe DC, Milton Keynes Council and TVP, had appointed a consultant to investigate the business case for a Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes combined control room. The service would be based at the existing control room in Milton Keynes Police Suite which had the space to allow for expansion. This suite would replace both the TVP control room at Aylesbury Police Station (which was co-funded by AVDC) and Wycombe's control room. The report outlined the business case for the merge and relocation. Officers in attendance advised Members that local knowledge would need to be re-established in a centralised control suite and that an effective CCTV Strategy would be needed in future.

The Committee sought further information and were advised that:-

- i. The project would allow a review of current CCTV coverage and quality checking of images. Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) would not be part of the review and was beyond the scope of the project.
- ii. Discussions were currently ongoing with known coverage weak spots in the town centre and car parks.
- iii. It was not known what technology would be used for the wireless cameras but it was acknowledged that upgrades needed to be future proof. It was noted that 3G coverage may be phased out in 2020.
- iv. Methods of retaining local area knowledge would be investigated in the review. To this end, retaining the physical Aylesbury control room could be a possibility.
- v. The merger would provide more resilience to the CCTV service as more staff would have the necessary training to access the control room. This had been an issue in the Aylesbury suite.

RESOLVED –

That the Committee were supportive of the merger principle and that the possibility of capital expenditure as part of the project be noted.

## **5. WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee briefly considered the work programmed for the next three meetings. It had been over two years since the Committee had received an update on Highways from BCC so Members saw merit in inviting them to attend in future.

RESOLVED –

That the current work programme be noted.

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