

Background Papers, if any, are specified at the end of the Report

BUCKS HOME CHOICE – REVISION OF ALLOCATIONS POLICY

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. That Members consider the draft revised Bucks Home Choice Allocations Policy and comment as appropriate.**
- 2. That the Head of Health and Housing be given delegated authority to agree and adopt the final version of the revised Bucks Home Choice Allocations Policy in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Health and Housing and subject to Aylesbury Vale, South Bucks and Wycombe District Councils also adopting the revised policy.**

Relationship to Council Objectives

- 1. Efficient and Effective Customer Focused Services*
- 2. Safe, Healthy and Cohesive Communities*

Implications

- (i) This is a key decision*
- (ii) This is within the Policy and Budgetary Framework*

Financial Implications

The overall costs associated with implementing the revised Bucks Home Choice are shared across the Bucks Home Choice Partnership. The contribution from Chiltern District Council is being met from existing Revenue budget. .

Risk Implications

None

Equalities Implications

The policy has been subject to a full Equalities Impact Assessment undertaken on behalf of the Bucks Home Choice partnership

Sustainability Implications

None

Background

- 1 BHC (Bucks Home Choice) is the choice based lettings scheme that is operated jointly by Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern, South Bucks and Wycombe District Councils for the allocation of social housing tenancies. The four District Councils operate a common allocations policy for:
 - assessing who qualifies for BHC,
 - prioritising applicants based their housing need and
 - allocating vacant social housing tenancies.
- 2 In response to the increased flexibilities introduced by the Localism Act 2011, the BHC Partnership (comprising the four District Councils and the four main stock transfer Registered Providers – Paradigm, L & Q, Vale of Aylesbury Housing Trust and Red Kite) commenced a review of the allocations policy. A report to Cabinet in October 2012 highlighted the main revisions that were being proposed for the policy. Members were advised that these proposals would be subject to a formal consultation exercise. The Bucks Home Choice partnership would then develop a final draft of the revised policy and this would be reported back to Members for consideration and approval.
- 3 The formal consultation exercise ran from 22nd April 2013 to 2nd June 2013. The Partnership has reviewed the results of the consultation exercise and drafted a final version of the revised policy (see **Appendix 1**). It has also prepared a draft summary of the results of the consultation which is appended to this report, **Appendix 2**, and which will be made available via the BHC website (www.buckshomechoice.gov.uk).
- 4 The consultation received 588 responses with the majority coming from BHC applicants or residents. The key findings were:
 - 80% of respondents favoured the principle that only those with a local connection should qualify to join the register
 - 87% of respondents felt that living in the District should be a key requirement to determining a local connection
 - 73% of respondents felt that having close family in a district should also be deemed as a local connection (The revised policy does not accept local connection solely on family grounds, but the Partnership has addressed this by stating that applicants aged 55+ will not be subject to local connection requirements. This ensures that the scheme will still assist the majority of applicants who do not live or work in the district, but who are seeking to move to the district to be near family to receive care or support)

- The majority of replies considered that the period of time that a person should hold a local connection before being able to apply on BHC should be 2 or more years. This reflects Government proposals to introduce a minimum 2 year local connection qualification requirement for social housing registers.
- 79% of respondents either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that applicants should only qualify to be re-housed in a District where they have a local connection.
- There was high support for those ‘not adequately housed’ and ‘homeless people’ being allowed to join the register.
- There was support that homeowners and tenants with sufficient bedrooms would be considered ‘adequately housed’, but those applicants sharing facilities (e.g. bathroom, kitchen etc.) should be considered in housing need.
- Respondents indicated support that applicants with rent arrears should only be allowed to join the register when arrears are cleared (subject to reviewing the applicant’s circumstances on a case by case basis)
- There was mixed support over the proposals relating to the bedroom standard. The partnership had originally considered that the policy would require children of the same sex to share a bedroom until the oldest child reached 21 years of age. Instead, the policy will now use the DWP housing benefit social sector bedroom standard (introduced in April 2013) which expects children of the same sex to share a bedroom until aged 16.
- Respondents clearly supported those intentionally homeless should be placed in a lower band.
- Respondents considered the ‘date of application’ to be the relevant date for any prioritisation through the BHC system.

5 The main revisions to the BHC policy are therefore unchanged from those that were reported to Cabinet in October 2012 and approved by Members. The table below summarises the main revisions by showing (i) how the current BHC Allocations Policy operates in Chiltern and (ii) how the revised policy will operate.

	Current Policy	Revised Policy
A	<p>Local Connection Qualification: BHC is open to any applicant regardless of local connection with Chiltern</p>	<p>Local Connection Qualification: Applicants will only qualify for BHC in Chiltern if they have a local connection to Chiltern. Applicants who have no local connection to Chiltern will <u>not</u> qualify. (The only exceptions to this local connection requirement will be applicants who are - seeking accommodation</p>

		designated for persons aged 55 or over or - subject to the Council's statutory homeless duty or - current/former members of the armed forces)
B	<p>Local Connection Definition: For an applicant to have a local connection to Chiltern, he/she must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - have lived in Chiltern for at least 6 out of the last 12 months (or at least 3 out of the last 5 years), or - have settled employment in Chiltern or <p>have close family living in Chiltern (and who have lived in Chiltern for at least 5 years</p>	<p>Local Connection Definition: For an applicant to have a local connection to Chiltern, he/she must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - have lived in Chiltern for at least 2 years prior to the date of application or - have been in continuous employment in Chiltern for at least 2 years prior to the date of application. <p>An applicant with close family living in Chiltern will <u>not</u> be deemed as having a local connection unless the applicant has also lived/worked in Chiltern for at least 2 years</p>
C	<p>Housing Need: BHC is open to any applicant regardless of whether or not they have a current housing need (e.g. applicants who are currently adequately housed in suitable accommodation can still apply for BHC).</p>	<p>Housing Need: BHC will be limited to applicants who have a current housing need (i.e. they are currently living in poor or unsuitable conditions, sharing facilities, homeless etc.). Applicants who are currently adequately housed will <u>not</u> qualify for BHC.</p>
D	<p>Owner Occupiers: BHC is open to owner occupiers</p>	<p>Owner Occupiers: An owner occupiers will <u>not</u> qualify for BHC unless he/she:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - is seeking accommodation designated for persons aged 55 or more or - cannot remain in his/her current address due to medical circumstances etc.

E	<p>Bedroom Requirements: BHC assesses that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - two children of the opposite sex do not require separate bedrooms until the older child reaches 8 years of age and - two children of the same sex can either share a bedroom or can have separate bedrooms 	<p>Bedroom Requirements: BHC will assess that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - two children of the opposite sex will not require separate bedrooms until the older child reaches 10 years of age and - two children of the same sex will not require separate bedrooms until the older child reaches 16 years of age. <p>(This reflects the Housing Benefit rules introduced in April 2013)</p>
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- 6 The revisions to the Policy also include:
- amendments to the qualification criteria in respect to applicants who (i) have current or former tenant rent arrears or (ii) have been guilty of unacceptable behaviour- a reduction in the level of priority awarded to households who are deemed to be intentionally homeless (from Band C to Band D) and
 - the inclusion of current and former members of the armed forces and their families (in accordance with Government requirements).
- 7 As indicated to Cabinet previously, the revisions to the BHC Policy will have a limited impact on applicants in the higher Priority Bands A, B and C. The main impact will be on the lowest Priority Band D, with a significant reduction in applicants in this banding. Most of the households who will cease to qualify for Bucks Home Choice will have had little or no prospect of being re-housed under the current policy (in view of their low priority and the high demand for accommodation). Applicants who no longer qualify for Bucks Home Choice will instead receive targeted advice and assistance on their housing options. This will be backed up by improvements to the Bucks Home Choice website that will allow applicants to enter their details on-line and receive housing advice via the website that is tailored to their circumstances.
- 8 As stated earlier, the BHC Partnership has drafted the final version of the revised policy (see **Appendix 1**). In certain sections, the wording is being finalised and this is highlighted in the draft accordingly. The Partnership is consulting with the Legal Teams within the four District Councils to confirm that the revised policy satisfies all legal requirements set down in the Housing Acts and associated guidance.
- 9 The BHC Partnership is seeking to implement the revised Allocation Policy from March 2014. This will require a lead-in period of at least

three months to manage the re-registration process for all existing applicants. Consequently, the Cabinet is asked to consider and comment on the draft revised policy and to grant delegated authority to the Head of Health and Housing in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing to:

- agree any further amendments to the policy as required and
- adopt the revised policy on behalf of the Council.

10 The final adoption of the policy by Chiltern District Council will be subject to:

- the District Council Legal representatives confirming that the policy satisfies all relevant statutory and legal requirements and
- all four District Councils (Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern, South Bucks and Wycombe) confirming that they agree to adopt the final version of the policy.

Background Papers: Draft revised Bucks Home Choice Allocations Policy
