



# Report to Growth, Infrastructure and Housing Select Committee

**Date: 1<sup>st</sup> October 2020**

**Title: Housing Allocations**

**Relevant councillor(s): Councillor Isobel Darby**

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**Ward(s) affected: None specific**

**Recommendations:** That the contents of the report are noted

## Executive summary

- 1.1 Buckinghamshire Council currently operates the Bucks Home Choice scheme for the allocation of social housing tenancies. This is a choice based lettings system whereby applicants on the Housing Register can bid for tenancies that are advertised on a weekly cycle. Social housing tenancies are owned and managed by Registered Providers (aka housing associations) and the Council will nominate tenants to a provider via the Bucks Home Choice process. The Bucks Home Choice Allocations Scheme sets down who qualifies to register for the scheme and how applicants are assessed and prioritised for re-housing. Work is underway to review this and develop a new Buckinghamshire Council Allocations Scheme for adoption by 31/3/22 at the latest.

## Content of report

- 1.2 Buckinghamshire Council has a statutory duty to operate an Allocations Scheme for the allocation of social housing tenancies within its area. This is often referred to as the Housing Waiting List or Housing Register policy and sets down:
  - Who qualifies for a social housing tenancy
  - How they are prioritised for tenancies

- How tenancies are allocated when they become available

The Council's current Allocations Scheme is Bucks Home Choice. This report provides further information on housing allocations in Bucks and associated issues.

- 1.3 **Appendix 1** provides further background information on the Council's statutory duties and how the Bucks Home Choice Scheme operates. As explained in the Appendix, social housing tenancies in Buckinghamshire are owned, managed and let by Registered Providers (RPs who are also known as housing associations). RP landlords are independent bodies who are regulated by the Government's Regulator for Social Housing. The Council does not have any broad regulatory or controlling powers over RPs. The organisations work in partnership through the Council nominating households to vacant RP social housing tenancies (via the Bucks Home Choice Allocations Scheme) and supporting RPs to deliver new affordable housing properties and other initiatives. RPs currently own, let and manage approximately 30,000 properties across Buckinghamshire.
- 1.4 To provide some context of the supply and demand situation for social housing tenancies in Buckinghamshire, as at 17/9/20 there were 5,827 households registered on the Bucks Home Choice scheme seeking social housing tenancies. During the course of the year 2019/20, 1,766 households were rehoused into social housing tenancies. This indicates that overall demand for social housing tenancies in Buckinghamshire is significantly higher than the supply of accommodation. This will vary across the county based on factors such as location and type of property.
- 1.5 The existing Bucks Home Choice Allocations Scheme was carried forward from the former District Councils to the new Buckinghamshire Council from vesting day under the Transitional Arrangements Regulations. Therefore, the scheme continues to operate on the same basis as it did prior to vesting day. It incorporates four Housing Registers based on the former District Council administrative areas and still applies district local connection requirements for each of the four Registers. The Regulations require that Buckinghamshire Council must have a new Housing Allocations Scheme in place by 1/4/2022 (two years after vesting day).
- 1.6 Work has now commenced to review the existing Bucks Home Choice Allocations Scheme and to develop and adopt a new Buckinghamshire Council Allocations Scheme. As it progresses, this work will be being informed by:
  - A review of legal requirements and case law relating to local authority allocation schemes
  - A review of experiences and lessons learnt from operating the current Bucks Home Scheme

- Input from key internal and external stakeholders
- A formal public consultation

1.7 Once the formal public consultation stage has been completed and the response considered, a finalised proposed Allocations Scheme will then be brought forward to the Council for approval. It is anticipated that this will happen in mid-2021 although there may be scope to shorten some parts of the timetable. In particular, it should be noted that the latest version of the Bucks Home Choice Allocations Scheme was formally adopted on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2019 after an extensive review of the scheme and a full public consultation on the proposed revisions. It is possible that many of the key legal and consultation issues will already have been captured in this recent policy review.

1.8 Members had previously requested feedback on some specific issues relating to Housing Allocations. These are covered in the following paragraphs:

#### **Equality Opportunities in Housing Allocations**

1.9 Local authority allocation schemes (and the detailed policies and procedures that they contain) must take account of the authority's statutory duties under equalities legislation and should not unlawfully discriminate between applicants. The current Bucks Home Choice policy was subject to an Equality Impact Assessment prior to being adopted and implemented in October 2019 to ensure that the changes made to the allocations policy did not disadvantage particular groups of people. Where any disadvantage is identified then the Council is required to mitigate this impact. Officers are currently reviewing and updating the Equality Impact Assessment following the transition to the unitary authority and a further assessment will be undertaken on the new Buckinghamshire Council Allocations Scheme as it is drafted and brought forward. The former District Council housing services were also subject to regular internal audit to ensure that the correct processes were being followed for administering applications and the Allocations Scheme was being applied and interpreted fairly to all applicants.

1.10 The Bucks Home Choice scheme is delivered via a public website at [www.buckshomechoice.org.uk](http://www.buckshomechoice.org.uk). The site can be accessed in many different languages and has been built to accessibility guidelines so that it is readable for those with sight impairment. The Housing service works very closely with support service providers within Bucks Council and external advocates in multiple agencies to help clients with particular support needs. This includes access to translation services to ensure we can make the necessary adjustments for everyone to access the housing service.

#### **Key Worker Housing**

1.11 The current Bucks Home Choice Allocation Scheme does not give any specific priority to persons in a designated key worker group. Key workers can apply to register with Bucks Home Choice in the same way as any other applicant and will be accepted onto the scheme if they meet the scheme eligibility and qualification criteria. As part of the review of the Allocations Scheme, we will assess whether or not specific provision should be made for designated key workers and, if so, how this should be applied (include consideration of who should be designated as a key worker and how they should be prioritised for a move). In considering this question, we will need to recognise that being registered on Bucks Home Choice scheme can still result in a long wait for a tenancy and will not provide an immediate housing solution for a key worker. As highlighted in paragraph 1.4, the demand for social housing tenancies significantly exceeds availability. Therefore, any extension of the scheme to incorporate and prioritise additional designated applicants (including key workers and other groups) will result in other applicants facing a longer wait to be rehoused. The review of the scheme will take this into consideration along with any other key worker housing initiatives that the Council is bringing forward.

#### **Housing Providers and Affordable Housing**

- 1.12 As stated in paragraph 1.3 and the appendix, currently Registered Providers (RPs) are the providers of social housing tenancies and other affordable housing across Buckinghamshire. In addition to vacancies arising within the existing social housing stock, Bucks Home Choice will also advertise tenancies in new build schemes that are being delivered by these providers. Some of these will be on sites that are being developed in their entirety by the RPs. In other cases, they may be a proportion of affordable homes being delivered under a Section 106 planning agreement as part of a larger private housing scheme (where the RP has an agreement with the landowner/developer to build or take on the affordable properties on the site).
- 1.13 RPs draw funds from a range of sources to fund new development. While Government provides some direct subsidy via the national Affordable Homes Programme, this has reduced over recent years. Consequently, RPs now increasingly rely on private finance to fund new development (e.g. long term loans serviced from rents and other income streams). Most RPs are not-for-profit organisations who have charitable status. However, there has recently been an increase in “for-profit” RPs being established after the Government allowed these providers to register with the Regulator for Social Housing.

#### **Legal and financial implications**

- 1.14 There are no legal or financial implications at this stage. As the review of the Allocations Scheme moves forward, legal and financial implications will be considered at the appropriate time.

## Corporate implications

1.15 This report links to the Corporate Plan priorities for “Strengthening our Communities” and “Protecting the Vulnerable” which relate to providing affordable housing and working to reduce homelessness. At this stage, there are no other specific implications to consider. Equality Impact Assessments and other relevant assessments will be undertaken as the review of the Allocations Scheme progresses.

## Consultation and communication

1.16 No consultation has yet been undertaken in respect of this issue.

## Next steps and review

The review of the current Bucks Home Choice Allocations Scheme and development of the new Buckinghamshire Council Allocations Scheme will continue.

## Background papers

### Bucks Home Choice Allocation Scheme

This can be accessed on the Bucks Home Choice website at

<https://www.buckshomechoice.org.uk/choice/>