

Appendix 1 to Report (Housing Allocations)

Social Housing Allocations - Bucks Home Choice

This note provides a broad overview of the Bucks Home Choice scheme and the process of allocating social housing in Buckinghamshire.

1. Why do we have an Allocations Scheme?

1.1 Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996 places a statutory duty on all Local Housing Authorities to have an Allocations Scheme for allocating social housing tenancies (traditionally this is sometimes referred to as the Housing Waiting List or Housing Register policy). The Allocations Scheme will set down:

- Who qualifies for a social housing tenancy
- How they are prioritised for tenancies
- How tenancies are allocated when they become available

1.2 The Local Housing Authority has some flexibility in deciding who qualifies for the scheme and how applicants should be prioritised. However, the Housing Act requires that the Allocations Scheme must give reasonable preference for rehousing to certain categories of household including:

- Homeless households
- People occupying insanitary or overcrowded housing or otherwise living in unsatisfactory housing conditions.
- People who need to move on medical or welfare grounds (including grounds relating to disability).
- People who need to move to a particular locality in the district of the authority, where failure to meet that need would cause hardship to themselves or others.

2. What is the Allocations Scheme in Bucks?

2.1 Prior to vesting day, the Local Housing Authorities in Buckinghamshire were the four District Councils – AVDC, CDC, SBDC and WDC. From 1st April 2020, Buckinghamshire Council became the single Local Housing Authority for the area.

2.2 From 2009 onwards, the District Councils operated a common Allocations Scheme called **Bucks Home Choice**. Under the Bucks Home Choice scheme:

- The District Councils all operated the same policy for determining who qualifies for social housing and how qualifying applicants are then assessed and prioritised.

- Each District Council maintained its own district Housing Register (aka waiting list) within the policy. An applicant needed to have a local connection to the district concerned in order to qualify for that district's waiting list (e.g. only applicants with a local connection to Chiltern district could apply for tenancies in Chiltern etc.). Typically, an applicant must have lived or worked in a district for at least 2 years in order to have a local connection there. The scheme does allow for some exceptions to this.
- The District Councils used a common IT system and database for managing applications and for advertising and allocating tenancies

2.3 In accordance with the Transitional Arrangements Regulations, the existing Bucks Home Choice Allocations Scheme was carried forward to the new Buckinghamshire Council from Vesting Day on 1/4/2020. Currently, the scheme continues to operate on the same basis as previously by incorporating four Housing Registers based on the former District Council administrative areas and still applying district local connection requirements for each of the four Registers. The Transitional Arrangements Regulations require that Buckinghamshire Council must have a new Housing Allocations Scheme in place by 1/4/2022 (two years on from vesting day).

3. What social housing tenancies are let via Bucks Home Choice?

- 3.1 Buckinghamshire Council does not directly own or manage any social housing stock. The former District Councils had all previously undertaken a LSVT (Large Scale Voluntary Transfer) of their housing stock to a housing association. Therefore, none of the District Councils directly own or manage any social housing tenancies.
- 3.2 All of the social housing tenancies which are let via Bucks Home Choice are owned and managed by Registered Providers (often referred to as Housing Associations). Registered Providers are independent bodies who are registered and regulated by Government to provide and manage affordable housing. The social housing tenancies that they let will typically have rents set at 60% to 80% of local market rent levels. Registered Providers own over 30,000 homes across Buckinghamshire.
- 3.3 During 2019/20, a total of 1,766 social housing tenancies were let via Bucks Home Choice across Buckinghamshire.

4. How does Bucks Home Choice Work? – Making an Application

- 4.1 Applicants to Bucks Home Choice can apply on-line at www.buckshomechoice.org.uk. Any persons who are unable to apply on-line can contact the Council directly for assistance in applying.
- 4.2 Once an application is submitted, the Council's Housing Service undertakes an assessment of the application to determine:
- Does the applicant qualify for the Bucks Home Choice scheme (i.e. Does the applicant meet the local connection criteria and other qualifying requirements for the scheme)?
 - If the applicant does qualify, what level of priority should be awarded to the application?
- 4.3 A qualifying applicant will be placed in one of five Priority Band levels ranging from Band A (the highest) down to Band E. The Bucks Home Choice scheme sets down the categories and household circumstances that fall into each band. The Council will assess the applicant's circumstances against these categories and will place the applicant in the appropriate Band that reflects their level of housing need.
- 4.4 The categories and circumstances covered by the Priority Bands reflect the statutory "reasonable preference" categories summarised in paragraph 1.2 above. They also cover some other scenarios including households who are under-occupying and wish to downsize and care leavers or clients in supported housing scheme where move on protocols are in place.
- 4.5 As at 17/9/20, a total of 5,827 households were registered on the Bucks Home Choice applications and seeking social housing.

5. How does Bucks Home Choice Work? – Allocating Social Housing Tenancies

- 5.1 Once an applicant has been accepted onto the Bucks Home Choice Scheme and been awarded a Priority Band, then the applicant can start to be considered for a social housing letting. The applicant will be set up with an on-line account on the Bucks Home Choice website.
- 5.2 Bucks Home Choice is a "choice based lettings" scheme. This means that applicants can see what vacancies are available and can choose what properties they wish to bid for. In general, the applicant will only be allowed to bid for tenancies that are located

in the district area where they have a local connection (based on the former District Council administrative areas) but there are some exceptions to this. The advertising and bidding process works as follows:

- 5.2.1. The available social housing tenancies are advertised in a weekly cycle. The advertised tenancies are available for applicants to view from Thursday.
 - 5.2.2 An applicant can view the tenancies and decide if there are any tenancies that she/he would be interested in bidding for. The applicant can make bids via her/his on-line account (although assisted bidding is available for applicants with support needs or difficulties accessing the on-line system).
 - 5.2.3 Bidding on all advertised tenancies closes on the following Monday.
 - 5.2.4 After bidding closes, officers will review the bids and create a shortlist which lists the bids for each vacancy in priority order (e.g. a Priority B applicant will be placed higher on the shortlist than a Priority C applicant)
 - 5.2.5 Once shortlisting is completed, the Council will nominate the highest placed applicants to the Registered Provider for the vacancy concerned.
 - 5.2.6 The Registered Provider will review the shortlist for the vacancy and undertake any further checks that it wishes to before making an offer of the tenancy to an applicant.
- 5.3 There will be some cases where the Council may choose to directly offer a tenancy to a specific applicant (aka a direct let) instead of advertising the tenancy more generally. For example, this may arise if there is an urgent need to move someone or the applicant has specific needs that need to be addressed by a specialist property.