

## **Appendix 2 to Report (Bucks Home Choice and Charging Registered Providers for Advertising Tenancies)**

### **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 In Buckinghamshire, the Local Housing Authorities are currently the four District Councils – AVDC, CDC, SBDC and WDC. Since 2009, the District Councils have operated a common Allocations Scheme called **Bucks Home Choice**. Under the Bucks Home Choice scheme:

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

- Each District Council maintains its own district Housing Register (aka waiting list) within the policy. An applicant needs 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 can 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 use a common IT system and database for managing applications and for advertising and allocating tenancies

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

- 3.1 All four Districts Councils have 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 (also known as a Housing Association). 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 2018/19, a total of 1,511 tenancies were let via Bucks Home Choice.

### **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](http://www.buckshomechoice.org.uk). Any persons who are unable to apply on-line can contact the District Council directly for assistance in applying.
- 4.2 Once an application is submitted, the District Council 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 During 2018/19, a total of 5,366 Bucks Home Choice applications were processed across Bucks.

## **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.
- 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 District 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 Each District Council is responsible for the process of advertising and nominating tenancies within their own district.
- 5.4 There will be some cases where the District 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.

## **6. Bucks Home Choice Allocations Scheme – Going Forward**

- 6.1 From 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020, the four District Councils will no longer exist and will be replaced by the new Buckinghamshire Council as the statutory Local Housing Authority. Therefore, the Buckinghamshire Council will be subject to a statutory duty to have an Allocations Scheme.
- 6.2 In accordance with the Transitional Arrangements Regulations, from Vesting Day on 1/4/2020 we will continue to operate the current Bucks Home Choice Scheme (including local connection criteria) based on the former District administrative areas (aka zones) until the new Buckinghamshire Council allocations policy is developed, agreed and adopted. The Transitional Arrangements Regulations require that the new Council's Allocations Scheme must be in place by 1/4/2022 which is two years on from vesting day. It is anticipated that the broad timetable for this will be as follows:

<b>Development and Adoption on Buckinghamshire Council Allocations Scheme (Estimated Timetable)</b>		
<b>Task</b>		<b>Timescale</b>
1	Initial Scheme Review by Officers including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Issues arising from current Scheme</li><li>- Current Government Guidance on Allocations</li></ul>	4 weeks

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Relevant Case law and Ombudsman decisions</li> <li>- Identifying key issues and options for consideration in developing Bucks Council scheme</li> </ul>	
2.1	Member Consultation on development on new scheme (including potential establishment of Member Working Group?)	8 weeks
2.2	Discussion with key internal and external stakeholders	8 weeks (running concurrently with Member consultation)
3	Preparation of draft Buckinghamshire Council Allocations Scheme for Public Consultation (in consultation with Legal Services)	6 weeks
4	Sign off by Members of draft scheme for Public Consultation	Council meeting
5	Public Consultation on draft scheme	12 weeks
6	Review of consultation responses	2 weeks
7	Preparation of Final draft (in consultation with Legal Service)	4 weeks
8	Report to Members for Adoption	Council meeting
9	Adoption and Implementation	16 weeks

6.3 The timescales set down in the above table are only intended as estimates and will potentially vary depending on a range of factors, including the level and complexity of changes that are made to the existing Allocations Scheme.