

Allocations Policy - Summary of Changes

Background

The Housing Act (1996) requires all housing authorities to have a scheme for determining priorities and procedures in allocating social housing. The Council's existing Allocations Policy was last reviewed in 2014 and does not include legislative changes such as the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) or the Right to Move (2015) statutory guidance.

In addition, changes to the service have followed the 2015 Vanguard intervention which are not reflected in the current policy. The following outlines all the changes made in the new Allocations Policy.

Legislation

The new policy now includes the following legislation and statutory guidance:

- The Allocation of Housing (Qualification Criteria for Right to Move) (England) Regulations 2015
- Statutory guidance on social housing allocations for local authorities in England: Improving Access to Social Housing for Victims of Domestic Abuse in Refuges or Other Types of Temporary Accommodation (November 2018)

It also includes the Government's proposals (not yet legislation) for assigning a priority to divorced or separated spouses of those serving in the Armed Forces.

Allocation of Properties

The outcome of the Vanguard intervention identified new ways of working, one was the 'Housing Options Method'. This method is an information and advice process to prevent homelessness before it occurs through understanding the customer's personal circumstances and helping them explore all housing options.

The existing policy does not allow for Officers to fully understand the customer's needs and simply requests that an application form is completed. The new policy allows for flexibility in that a drop-in service is available where customers can come and speak to an Officer and are guided through the process.

Should customers be eligible for housing, the new policy uses the 'Best Match Method' to allocate accommodation. This method is where accommodation is allocated to the most suitable applicant in the highest band working down through the housing waiting list. This is different to the existing policy in that customers use 'choice-based letting' to 'bid' for properties, often resulting in a misunderstanding of the suitability of the property.

Priority Bandings

The existing policy bands are 'urgent, high, medium and low'. It was identified that some customers felt that being put in the 'low' band made them feel like they would not ever be housed and were considered to be an insignificant priority. This often led to waste work which in few cases changed the outcome. Therefore, the new policy has renamed the bands by simply lettering them A – D. the 'A' band replaces 'urgent' through to 'D' band replacing 'low'.

Other Changes

Some other, less weighty changes have been made to the policy to give Officers more support and guidance to in turn help customers make an informed housing choice:

1. The medical priorities have been amended to include sensory and mental health conditions and reworded so the unintentional inference that alternative housing would 'heal' them is removed.
2. Where previously an income threshold devised in line with Local Housing Allowance was used, the new policy has removed a threshold altogether. By utilising the housing options method to understand the customer's circumstances, Officers can use incoming payments and outgoing expenses to guide customers in making an informed housing choice. If the customer pays child support or debt instalments it can affect their ability to afford accommodation, regardless of their income.
3. To ensure sheltered accommodation is being allocated appropriately, clearer qualification criteria has been added. The existing policy only states that applicants 'must have a need for the level of support linked with the scheme they apply for'. This criterion is difficult to quantify and open to abuse.

The new policy states that customers would benefit from the sheltered accommodation offered, that their current home is not suitable for their needs and that they have insignificant financial resources to meet their housing needs in the private market.

4. The priority bandings now include the changes in legislation. Two priorities have also been removed; 'a person or household living in any moveable structure with or without formal tenancy arrangements' and 'a tenant living in the borough with dependent children living above the ground floor'.

The reason for these to be removed is that the former criteria has a very low demand and can be administered within other priorities. The latter is that unless other priorities are evident and due to the limited accommodation available, households are unlikely to be rehoused with a garden. In addition, many customers do not express a wish for a garden as a priority, instead understand through discussions with Officers what housing options are available.

5. In order to ensure customers are able to fully understand the process, a summary document has been devised in the style of FAQs. Officers will be able to use this as a daily reference guide with the full, legislatively restricted, policy document used when more detail is required.