

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC GROWTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE		
DATE:	10th March 2021	AGENDA ITEM:	
TITLE:	ALLOCATIONS SCHEME CONSULTATION		
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The report lays out the intention to review Reading Borough Council's Allocation Scheme, the proposed changes, requests authorisation to consult on the proposals and details the timetable for delivery.
- 1.2 Appendix 1 - Consultation summary and questions.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That the Housing, Neighbourhood and Leisure Committee approve a public consultation, which takes views of residents, customers and partners, to inform a review of the Reading Borough Council's Housing Allocations Scheme.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 It is a long-standing legal requirement for Local Authorities to have a Housing Allocations Scheme setting out the rules used to determine who gets priority for social housing within their area of governance, in addition there is supporting guidance, which requires that the scheme must be kept under regular review.
- 3.2 There are certain legal requirements that the Council must follow in developing or reviewing an Allocations Scheme, set out by Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996. Fundamentally Local Authorities are required to give priority to households who attract 'reasonable preference'. The definition for 'reasonable preference' is set out in legislation, the categories include:

- homeless households
- overcrowded households
- those living in unsanitary housing conditions
- those who require a move based on medical or welfare grounds.

3.3 Beyond the legal requirement, it is important that Local Authorities keep their Allocations Scheme under regular review in order to ensure that it aligns with local and national strategic priorities whilst meeting the needs of residents and their communities. The last significant change to Reading's Allocations scheme was carried out in 2016, when the Scheme was revised to include changes brought about by the Localism Act, including the application of Qualification Criteria for certain groups, for example a 3-year residency requirement in reading for access to the Housing Register.

3.4 Local Authorities are encouraged to develop their Allocations Schemes to support broader public policy outcomes, such as:

- Encouraging greater social and economic mobility of social housing tenants
- Ensuring the most efficient use of the housing stock
- Responding to employment or skills needs specific to the area
- Creating more mixed communities and addressing the long-term sustainability of neighbourhoods
- Developing and maintaining balanced and stable communities
- Addressing specific issues at the neighbourhood level, such as anti-social behaviour and high-turnover through prioritising use of local lettings policies
- Countering misconceptions as to apparent unfairness of the allocation process
- Strengthening community cohesion, particularly in areas where tensions are known to be associated with the way housing is allocated

3.5 In October 2018, Member consultation workshops were held to discuss a new approach for an Allocations Scheme with a focus on building sustainable communities and reducing anti-social behaviour. In October 2020 Reading published its Housing Strategy for 2020-25, laying out the overall vision for accommodation in the town for the next 5 years and defining our overarching themes and underpinning priorities. The review of the Allocations scheme and the proposed consultation is fundamental to delivering on that vision:

“For all our residents to have the opportunity to live in a good quality, sustainable home they can afford, within a thriving neighbourhood.”

3.6 In carrying out a review of the Allocations Scheme, the Council aims to ensure that the scheme better contributes to the creation of sustainable communities, it demonstrates a more clear and transparent approach to letting accommodation in the town, and that it is up to date and in line with all new legislation (such as the Homelessness Reduction Act 2018).

4. THE PROPOSAL

4.1 It is proposed that a public consultation is carried out on key policy decisions that support the delivery of the themes of the Housing Strategy, within the following areas:

4.2 Sustainable Communities

Reading Borough Council identifies the need to create balanced and sustainable communities in order to improve outcomes for residents and reduce antisocial behaviour on our estates, whilst supporting the most vulnerable in the community. There are several mechanisms that are proposed to support this, discussed in greater detail below:

- Improved Tenant Mobility
- Improved Offer for Key Workers
- Tenant Behaviour Sanctions
- Renewed Local Lettings Policies
- Pre-tenancy Workshops

4.3 ***Improved tenant mobility***

Improving tenant mobility can support local economies and tenant outcomes by improving tenants' physical access to work or specific services (for example hospitals or schools). Improved tenant mobility helps to make better use of stock (reducing under occupation), improves satisfaction and quality of life and give tenants a greater sense of fairness - giving tenants a sense of investment in their home and community.

4.4 It is proposed that all Reading Borough Council tenants are given a level of priority should they wish to move and access the Housing Register and that, as their landlord, the Council is supporting tenants to live in the most suitable home for their household. In addition, it is proposed to increase the priority further for severely overcrowded tenants.

4.5 ***Key workers***

It is proposed that Reading Borough Council reviews the current position for key workers to ensure that this group have access to affordable homes, whilst supporting the creation of more mixed communities as such addressing the long-term sustainability of neighbourhoods. Key workers are classed as essential workers where there may be skill shortages in the local area, such as social workers, teachers, health, and care workers, police and fire officers.

4.6 Consultation on this offer would include:

- Provision of an exception to the 3-year residency criteria required to join the Housing Register, helping the Council and its partners to respond to employment and skill deficits within the town and supporting the recruitment of key roles.
- Awarding greater priority for this group to a number of properties each year through the creation of a quota queue. Separate to the quota queue, fixed term tenancies will be offered for specific key worker housing schemes such as the development at Arthur Hill to ensure that the properties remain available for key workers in the longer term. At the end of the fixed term they will be assisted to move on into alternative accommodation such as shared ownership.

4.7 ***Tenant behaviour sanctions***

Reading Borough Council's Allocations Scheme currently prevents those who have been evicted due to antisocial behaviour from accessing the Housing Register for 3 years. Since the introduction of this sanction a number of individuals have been identified that have been previously evicted due to serious, threatening or violent behaviours which have not been addressed, who have now seen this sanction expire and are now able to re-join the register.

4.8 It is proposed that a review process is introduced that considers whether individual applicant behaviours are likely to make them unsuitable to be a tenant subsequent to serious antisocial behaviour, and that the length of time for which they should be sanctioned from accessing the Housing Register should be consulted upon with a proposal of a standard between 5-10 years.

4.9 **Clear and Fair Allocations Scheme**

It is important to have an Allocations Scheme which is transparent, easy to understand and makes best use of housing stock to meet needs. The current Allocations scheme operates a band system as opposed to a points scheme. The system that is used does not affect individual applicant entitlement to priority, rather it is a mechanism to understand how that priority compares to others. Reading operated a points system for many years, however when Choice Based lettings was introduced in 2008, the system moved to bands as it gives a more transparent view of priority for applicants. As such, the proposal is to remain with a simplified band system. In order to make best use of housing stock, a greater focus is required on matching adapted properties with the people who need them.

4.10 ***Reduce the number of bands for simplicity***

We are proposing to simplify the Allocations Scheme by reducing the number of bands that are used to prioritise people on the Housing Register.

4.11 ***Separate register for adapted homes***

It is proposed to separate the general needs Housing Register from those that require adapted homes to make the allocation of these properties simpler whilst making it easier and more straightforward for those who need adapted properties to access them. Strategically having a separate Adapted Housing Register will help to better identify what the need is for adapted properties in Reading and provide a more coherent data source for strategic decision making for future housing developments.

4.12 **Further activities not proposed for consultation:**

4.13 ***Local Lettings Policies***

It is good practice for local authorities to develop and review Local Lettings Policies which define the type of lettings to be made at the neighbourhood level (for specific areas or housing developments) in order to allow them to address issues and create more sustainable communities. This could range from preventing allocations to people with a history of anti-social behaviour or giving priority to new homes to local people. Where required, the intention of Local Lettings Policies is to focus lettings in any given area on the presenting issues within that neighbourhood.

4.14 Reading Borough Council intends to carry out a full review of its current Local Lettings Policies to determine whether they are meeting the needs of the community, residents and prospective tenants. This review may result in the removal of out of date policies or the implementation of new ones and will support the ambition to strengthen community cohesion and create more balanced communities on an ongoing basis.

4.15 ***Pre-tenancy workshops***

Pre tenancy training, or counselling, is an effective tool that supports tenants to be better able to cope with the demands of managing a tenancy. This can be especially important for younger people, those from disadvantaged or chaotic backgrounds or those who have never held a tenancy before. This can vary from a simple explanation of the requirements of the tenancy agreement, to something more in depth, that

covers managing finances, managing responsibilities of the home (reporting repairs etc), engaging in the community, how to be a good neighbour and the implications of antisocial behaviour. It is proposed that all prospective tenants are provided with this prior to signing a tenancy.

4.16 Legal updates

A small number of technical updates are required that will not be consulted upon. These are changes that need to be carried out to formally update the Allocations scheme to ensure that policies are aligned as a result of recent changes to legislation, for example changes brought about by the Homeless Reduction Act 2018.

4.17 Next Steps

It is proposed that an 8-week external consultation is carried out with the public and key statutory and voluntary partners, including Registered Providers with the intention that a new scheme is published in Summer 2021.

Timeframe for delivery:

Time period:	Action:
10 th March	HNL Committee to sign off consultation documents and approve exercise.
15 th March - 10 th May	8-week consultation exercise completed.
May - July	New scheme drafted.
July / August 2021	Consultation outcome and draft Allocations Scheme to HNL or Policy Committee.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

5.1 This proposal will contribute to the service priorities set out in the Council’s Corporate Plan as follows:

- Ensuring access to decent housing to meet local needs
- To protect and enhance the lives of vulnerable adults and children

5.2 The proposed decision contributes to the Council’s strategic aims as follows:

- To promote equality, social inclusion and a safe and healthy environment for all

6. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

6.1 There are no environmental or climate change implications for the purposes of carrying out the consultation.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 7.1 Any significant change to Local Authority Allocation Schemes is accompanied by a requirement to consult. The Code of Guidance issued by the government **recommends** that the consultation process involves the broad community but only **requires** the Local Authority to consult with Registered Housing Providers.

Public consultation will be carried out over an 8-week period using a range of communication methods, including social media.

8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 8.1 An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is not relevant to this paper. There is no public concern about potentially discriminatory practices or impact and there is no reason to believe that some groups may be affected differently from others by the authorisation to carry out the consultation.
- 8.2 An EIA will be required for the consultation methodology once it is developed and the delivery of the new scheme.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1.1 Local Authorities must administer the allocation of social housing in line with Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996. The Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government published new guidance for local Authorities in 2020, in 'Allocation of Accommodation: guidance for local housing authorities in England'. Any consultation will be in line with the Allocations Code of Guidance. Failure to follow statutory provision may lead to legal challenge and could result in judicial review or referral to the Local Government Ombudsman.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 Any costs of carrying out the consultation arising will be met from existing budgets.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 11.1 None