



Committee and Date

Cabinet

8 March 2021

Item

Public

Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme – suggested revisions

Responsible officer

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1.0 Summary

1.1 This report lists suggested areas of review of the current Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme, in order to assist Shropshire Council's Housing Services Manager to update the policy. The report was approved by the Communities Overview Committee on 25 January 2021.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 That Cabinet note the report.

3.0 Opportunities and risks

3.1 The Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme ensures that housing associations and other social landlords agree a single policy that allocates social housing fairly while also meeting the local authority's corporate objectives. It also provides residents and those from outside Shropshire seeking to apply for social housing with clear and consistent criteria with which to determine if and when to apply for housing.

3.2 A failure to update the Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme could result in a policy that does not take into account new legal and regulatory obligations that have come into force since approval of the previous draft of the policy. Furthermore, a policy that does not reflect corporate, community or social objectives could result in allocating properties to residents deemed to be not a priority for social housing. This could in turn erode trust in the allocations policy among Shropshire residents and those seeking to move to Shropshire.

4.0 Financial assessment

4.1 Drafting and reviewing the housing allocations policy is an administrative task that forms part the council's regular work. There are therefore no cost implications in carrying out this review.

5.0 Report

- 5.1 In November 2020 the Communities Overview Committee received a report from Shropshire Council’s Housing Services Manager that gave an overview of Shropshire Homepoint. At this meeting, it was noted that the Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme (the allocations policy) had not been updated since 2014. At the manager’s suggestion, the committee agreed to carry out a review of the policy, with a view to providing elected member input into a revised policy.
- 5.2 A working group of the Communities Overview Committee (the group) carried out this work in an informal meeting with the housing services manager in December 2020.
- 5.3 To support this review, the committee also invited other elected members of the local authority to contribute through a questionnaire sent out to all members. In total 21 elected members contributed to the review through this questionnaire. The group considered these responses in tandem with its section-by-section review of the allocations policy.

6.0 Suggested amendments to the housing allocations policy

- 6.1 The group suggests the following changes to the allocations policy.
- 6.2 The group noted that the allocations policy is rather long, making it difficult for a lay member of the public to understand what housing priority band they might be allocated. The group felt that this might act as a disincentive to some people who seek housing. **An executive summary with the most important elements of the policy might help people determine their likely band.**
- 6.3 The allocations policy affords a higher priority for people whose work (or offer of work) would require them travel more than an hour in each direction. However it does not differentiate between types of work. The group discussed the difficulty in attracting some key workers to Shropshire such as care home staff and social workers. It therefore **suggests that people employed in an agreed list of key professions receive priority over other workers, irrespective of commuting time.**
- 6.4 At present the allocations policy states that “reduced preference may be given to households whose income and / or capital resources exceed £63,000.” Although the policy stated that this would be reviewed annually, no review had taken place since 2014. The group discussed the continued increase in property prices making £63,000 of housing capital relatively modest, for example in a shared property following separation where the spouse may wish for the rest of the family to remain in the home. The group therefore **suggests that this figure be reviewed upwards.**

- 6.5 The allocations policy's priority housing bands are named *Priority*, *Gold*, *Silver* and *Bronze*. The group agreed that these names might cause unnecessary confusion. It **recommends that the *Priority* band, which is the highest possible band allocation, be renamed *Platinum*.**
- 6.6 The Rent (Agriculture) Act 1976 requires a local housing authority to use their best endeavours to provide accommodation for a qualifying displaced agricultural worker. The allocations policy advises that in doing so it may refer to the local Agricultural Dwelling-House Advisory Committee. The group learned that these committees were abolished shortly after the allocations policy was agreed. However, the group recognises an ongoing priority housing need for agricultural workers. It therefore **suggests that this section of the policy be updated, and that agricultural workers whose tenancies are tied to their employment continue to receive a higher than *Bronze* banding.**
- 6.7 The group discussed at length the various criteria for a higher banding on the grounds of health conditions. Officers confirmed that the allocations teams spent a large amount of time evaluating banding on grounds of health. Elected members not at the meeting who responded to the group's questionnaire also frequently raised concerns about a lack of certainty about banding. The group agreed that this was a highly complex matter. It noted that health conditions could improve or deteriorate once an application had been made, making the job of the allocations officer more difficult still. It also accepted that sometimes it might be better for someone with a long-term condition to wait longer for a property that better suited to their needs, which could be difficult to explain to the applicant. The group therefore **suggests that the revised policy contain a dedicated section that explained how the policy prioritised allocations based on health conditions.**
- 6.8 Young people leaving the care of the local authority were identified by the group as a particular priority for the council. The group agreed with the Gold banding currently in place for this group, but felt that the restrictions in the allocations policy were unnecessary. It **suggests that the allocations policy be updated to remove those restrictions and that the revised allocations policy be strengthened to emphasise the council's commitment to ensure young people moved into suitable accommodation when they left care.**
- 6.9 The current allocations policy awards a Gold banding to "people experiencing ongoing serious violence or harassment who need to move". The group agreed that this definition may not adequately protect people who were the victims of domestic abuse. It therefore **suggests that a specific criteria of domestic abuse be created, and that the criteria for this align more closely with the work of the Shropshire Domestic Abuse Partnership.**

- 6.10 The group discussed at length the current bedroom allocations policy. In their responses to our questionnaire, this was the foremost concern of elected members. In particular, members and the group raised two specific concerns, couples where one partner required sole use of a bedroom because of medical need, and divorced couples living separately with joint custody of a child. Officers told the group that a medical need for sole use of a bedroom was already covered by the policy. Officers also informed the group that the current policy aligned with rules when determining the housing benefit element of Universal Credit. Although the housing policy could choose to be more generous in allocating additional bedrooms to families with children or shared care of children, it was considerably more likely that doing so would render the property unaffordable to those in receipt of Universal Credit, which compromised the majority of those applying for social housing through the allocations policy. The group accepted this explanation, and agreed that the policy remain unchanged. It did however **suggest that the allocations policy redraft the bedroom entitlement section to clarify the criteria for additional bedrooms based on medical need, and the criteria for bedrooms allocated to children within a family unit or shared care arrangement.**
- 6.11 The group were pleased to note the additional support provided to members of the armed forces. It agreed that a Gold banding was suitable for those serving more than four years who had been discharged or were about to be discharged honourably. **The group suggests that the requirement be changed so that there was no requirement to have been unsuccessful in finding suitable permanent accommodation.** The group also noted the lack of pledge regarding accommodation in the council's Armed Forces Covenant. It therefore recommends that the Communities Overview Committee review the covenant as part of its future programme of work.
- 6.12 The group noted that there was no specific allocation for young people in work. Younger people in work typically receive lower than average wages in a local economy that is already relatively low-waged compared to elsewhere in England. The group did not agree that younger people should automatically receive a higher allocation banding, but did agree that there should be some form of additional support or allocation for this group. This was a view shared by elected members responding to the group's questionnaire. The group therefore **suggests that the allocations policy review explores ways by which it could offer more support to young people in work.**
- 6.13 Similarly, the group noted that there was no provision in the allocations policy to prioritise applications on the basis of income. The group did not feel that a low income should result in a higher banding, as the majority of applicants were already likely to be on relatively low incomes. It did however **suggest that the applications policy, as with younger people in work, should explore ways by which it could offer some support to this group.**

- 6.14 One of the more commonly raised issues among elected members responding to the group questionnaire was a concern that applicants did not receive a regular update on how near they were to the front of the queue within their banding. The group understands that this information would have to be supplied within the context of how rapidly people in each band were allocated a property. Nonetheless it felt that some indication would be better than no indication at all. It therefore **suggests that the updated allocations policy should include a review of how the council updates applicants on their application.**

7.0 Next steps

- 7.1 The Communities Overview Committee has recommended that this report be forwarded to Cabinet for information. The committee has also recommended that the revised allocations policy return to the Communities Overview Committee, for further scrutiny before it is referred to Cabinet or Council for approval.

List of background papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)

Portfolio Holder – Housing and Strategic Planning

Portfolio Holder – Communities, Place Planning and Regulatory Services

Local Member

All

Appendices

None