

Cabinet Report

Report of Head of Housing and Environment

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To: CABINET

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Housing Allocations Policy

Recommendations

- (a) that Cabinet formally adopts the proposed Housing Allocations Policy.
- (b) authorise the Head of Housing and Environment to make minor editorial changes to the Housing Allocation Policy.

Purpose of Report

1. To inform Cabinet of the proposed changes in the draft Housing Allocations Policy.
2. To inform Cabinet of the outcomes from the public consultation on the draft policy.
3. To recommend that Cabinet adopt the proposed Housing Allocations Policy.

Corporate Objectives

4. The draft Housing Allocations Policy contributes to the council's corporate priorities of building thriving communities and reducing homelessness.

Background

5. The current Housing Allocations Policy is a joint South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council policy that came into effect from December 2013.
6. The policy describes the mechanisms by which the council assesses applications to join the housing register and make allocations of social housing within the district. It does not consider the definition of affordable housing. The leader of the council has

written to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government requesting that consideration is given to the definition of affordable housing, taking into account the impact of very high property values have on the current definition.

7. In March 2018 Cabinet approved the development of a new Housing Allocations Policy. A working group of councillors from both South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council was established to support the process.
8. Stakeholder workshops were held on 15, 17 and 22 May 2018. The workshops were attended by a broad range of stakeholders including Officers; statutory agencies; non-statutory agencies; Registered Providers and the voluntary sector.
9. The findings from the stakeholder and councillor workshops informed the draft Housing Allocations Policy.

Key changes proposed in draft Housing Allocations Policy

Oxford City's unmet housing need

Proposed planning policy

10. Vale of White Horse District Council has proposed in its Local Plan (Part 2) to help address Oxford City's unmet housing need. The proposal includes a provision of affordable housing. The sites identified to contribute towards meeting this requirement are located within the Abingdon-on-Thames and Oxford fringe sub-area.

Proposed allocations policy

11. The allocations policy proposals are subject to the adoption of Vale of White Horse District Council's Local Plan (Part 2).
12. Oxford City residents interested in bidding for selected properties in the Abingdon-on-Thames and Oxford fringe sub-area will be required to join Vale of White Horse District Council's housing register. The applicant will therefore be assessed and nominated for properties in accordance with the council's allocations policy. This includes 20% of lettings for working households.
13. Oxford City residents will be eligible to bid for selected properties in the Abingdon-on-Thames and Oxford fringe sub-area and will receive a bidding preference only for these selected properties. The preference is necessary to demonstrate that the letting is intended to address Oxford's unmet housing need. However, if no eligible Oxford City resident bids for the selected property, it will be offered to other bidders in the district.
14. Oxford City residents bidding for properties outside of the Abingdon-on-Thames and Oxford fringe sub-area will only be considered if there are no other eligible bidders. In this unlikely event, the letting will count towards meeting Oxford's unmet housing need.

Local connection criteria in Great Western Park, Didcot

15. Great Western Park, Didcot is divided by the boundary line between South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Districts Councils.

16. The draft policy will allow housing register applicants from both South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse to bid for properties on Great Western Park.
17. Properties will be advertised first to housing register applicants in the district where the property is located. However, if no eligible applicant in housing need makes a successful bid, the property will be re-advertised for applicants of the bordering council. This will be a reciprocal arrangement.

Other key changes

18. Where there is clear evidence that an applicant is not responsible for the accrual of housing debts, or a financial assessment concludes that they genuinely could not afford to meet the rental liability, the applicant may be eligible to join the housing register. They will receive advice and assistance on addressing their housing debt.
19. An applicant employed on a zero hours contract will be considered as having a local connection if employed within the district. The applicant, if nominated, will be required to demonstrate they have been working at least 16 hours per week over a six-month period.

Public consultation

20. A public consultation was held on the draft Housing Allocations Policy between 15 October and 26 November 2018. Participants were asked a range of questions that focussed upon seven key proposed changes. In total there were 180 respondents.
21. The draft Housing Allocations Policy has also been considered at Joint Scrutiny Committee on 30 October 2018.

Key consultation findings

22. A positive consensus supported the overall proposed changes to the Housing Allocations Policy. 59 per cent of respondents either strongly agreed or tended to agree with the overall changes.
23. The seven key proposed changes each received broad support from respondents. The proposal to retain Choice Based lettings and keep the current four priority bands was supported by 73 and 62 per cent of respondents respectively.
24. 57 per cent of respondents agreed that any Oxford City residents who became eligible to join the housing register would be subject to this allocations policy. 18 per cent of respondents disagreed with the proposal.
25. The proposal that properties located on Great Western Park, Didcot may be available to both South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse housing register applicants received support from 69 per cent of respondents.
26. The proposed changes of allowing certain households with rent arrears to join the register, and to consider applicants on zero-hours contracts as working households, also received positive support from respondents.

27. The proposal to keep the main objectives of the Housing Allocations Policy; to promote the fair and transparent allocation of affordable housing; to give priority to working households and to improve the opportunities for local people to access new build developments; were also supported by respondents.
28. The consultation report includes responses from the Housing Needs Manager to the key findings, including comments that either disagree or strongly disagree with the proposed changes.
29. The Housing Needs manager has considered every comment received during the public consultation. A copy of individual comments received is available to councillors on request.

Changes to draft Housing Allocations Policy following consultation

30. Further to consideration of comments received during consultation, the Housing Needs Manager has made a minor amendment to the draft HAP.
31. The wording of Section 15. v “Direct Match” which deals with cases where it is not always appropriate for applicants to be allowed to make a bid has been amended to include the option of applicants being directly accommodated into a Housing First Project.
32. Housing First projects offer a small number of assured tenancies to recent rough sleepers that have complex needs. These tenancies provide a secure housing environment that enables the former rough sleeper to engage with ongoing support towards independent living.

Alternative Options

33. Not to adopt a new Housing Allocations policy.
34. Failure to adopt the policy could result in the council being non-compliant with legislation. The policy would also not reflect welfare reform or the council’s current approach to addressing housing need.

Financial Implications

35. The new Housing Allocations Policy will be implemented within existing budgets.

Legal Implications

36. The draft policy in its entirety and the significant changes which have been incorporated has been reviewed by a specialist housing barrister who has concluded that the proposals follow what have already become fairly well-established practices in other authorities and represent a moderated approach to both the legislative amendments made and other developments in housing allocation policy nationally.

Risks

37. The draft Housing Allocations Policy reflects current legislation and regulations relating to the allocation of affordable housing. Failure to adopt the policy could result in the council being non-compliant with legislation.

Equalities

38. An equalities impact check was completed for the draft Housing Allocations Policy. A copy of the assessment is provided as a background paper to this report.

Other implications

39. There are no other implications arising from the adoption of the proposed policy.

Implementation

40. Subject to Cabinet approval, and the draft policy not being called-in by Scrutiny, the new Housing Allocations Policy will be adopted on 11 February 2019.

Conclusion

41. The draft Housing Allocations Policy has been subject to extensive stakeholder engagement and public consultation.

42. Cabinet is recommended to adopt the proposed Housing Allocations Policy.

43. Authorise the Head of Housing and Environment to make minor editorial changes to the Housing Allocation Policy

Appendix

- Draft Housing Allocations Policy

Background Papers

- Equality Impact Check
- Consultation Response report