

Rother District Council

Report to	-	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date	-	10 June 2019
Report of the	-	Executive Director
Subject	-	Housing Allocations Policy

Recommendation: It be **RESOLVED:** That Cabinet be requested to approve the draft Consultation Plan and the draft Housing Allocations Policy for consultation with residents and wider stakeholders.

Head of Service: Joe Powell

Introduction

1. The purpose of this report is to ask Members to approve the draft Housing Allocations Policy 2019 and the associated draft Consultation Plan, as attached at Appendices 1 and 2 respectively.

Background

2. The overall aim of the Housing Allocations Policy is to provide a framework for the equitable, effective and accountable allocation of social housing. Social housing is in very limited supply and accounts for only 10% of the total housing stock in Rother; this percentage is below the national average of 17%. Therefore, only those in the highest housing need, with a local connection to the area are likely to obtain social housing.
3. There is also a growing demand for social housing locally. The main factor contributing to this rise in demand is the inability of many households on low incomes to be able to afford other forms of housing. There are presently 1,600 households on the Housing Register with only 192 allocations having been awarded in 2018/19.
4. The principle purpose of a Housing Allocations Policy is to meet the Council's statutory obligations under [Section 166A\(1\)](#) of the Housing Act 1996, these include:
 - Who is eligible for the Council's Housing Register;
 - How the Council will assess applications to the Council's Housing Register and determine eligibility and priority;
 - How the Council will allocate social housing; and
 - How the Council will process requests for reviews of decisions made.
5. It is important to note that the Council does not own or manage any social housing stock within Rother as the Council transferred its social housing stock to Rother Homes, now Optivo in 1996. When the Council transferred its housing stock into new ownership and management it retained the statutory function of allocating social housing to its residents. The Council also allocates social housing to other housing associations within the district.

Introduction

6. The draft Housing Allocations Policy at Appendix 1 has been developed following an officer-led review of:
 - The level and type of demand for social housing in the district;
 - The number and type of households awarded social housing in recent years;
 - Practice in other local authority areas;
 - Formal review requests from residents;
 - Information gathered from regular engagement with community groups, parishes and other stakeholders; and
 - A Council led housing task and finish group.
7. The purpose of the officer-led review was to ensure that the draft Housing Allocations Policy continues to meet its stated objectives effectively. The proposed Housing Allocations Policy objectives are to:
 - Ensure the allocation of housing contributes towards socially, economically and demographically balanced communities;
 - Maximise the use of housing stock in the district;
 - Assist the Council and its partners in meeting statutory duties;
 - Reduce the use of temporary accommodation;
 - Prevent people becoming statutorily homeless;
 - Allocate and let social landlords accommodation fairly, openly and transparently;
 - Minimise property void periods;
 - Promote social inclusion; and
 - Promote and achieve equality of opportunity.
8. A factor in the Council's ability to make changes to the Housing Allocations Policy is that it has a duty to provide 'reasonable preference' to certain categories of household when considering both their eligibility for the register and their priority for housing as these are ensured under statute. Examples include the requirement to afford local connection to households fleeing domestic violence from another area; another example is the need to provide a level of priority to households that are homeless.
9. It could be assumed that a clear priority of the Housing Allocations Policy to prioritise social housing for households who have no home; however, there are a number of other types of urgent housing need which have to be considered. It is also important to recognise the role of the Housing Allocations Policy in supporting the redistribution of family-sized social housing from older households without children within their household to younger households with children.
10. The Council will need to consider a range of competing priorities to ensure that it meets the key objective of promoting socially, economically and demographically balanced communities. The consultation process will assist the Council in its review of the draft Housing Allocations Policy and support it to achieve its key aim to ensure the equitable, effective and accountable allocation of social housing for the district.

Proposed Revisions

11. A detailed description of the main changes being proposed within the consultation, together with consultation questions can be found at Appendix 3. The reason for any proposed change is included as well as an indication of which policy objective(s) the change is designed to promote. This summary document will form the main consultation literature and includes a number of questions about the proposed changes, the responses to which will inform the final policy document.
12. The main change proposed is to revise the banding structure. The present Housing Allocations Policy consists of four bands; the proposal is to move to a new two-band system. To remind Members, within the current Policy households are awarded one of four bands from A (highest priority) to D (lowest priority) depending on their housing and related circumstances.
13. The revised Housing Allocations Policy proposes that households in the most urgent housing need will all be given equal priority and be placed in an 'urgent priority' band. All other households, assessed as eligible for the register, will be placed in a second, lower priority band known as the 'waiting list'. The proposal is that households within the second band will be awarded points, which will be allocated according to their level of housing need. It is possible to review the proposed new banding structure in detail on pages 17-20 of the draft Housing Allocations Policy at Appendix 1.
14. A second significant proposed change is a revision of the order in which households are nominated for social housing. This process is important as the need to nominate households according to their level of housing need does not support the Council to meet its objective to promote socially, economically and demographically balanced communities. Most social housing is located in Bexhill and there is an even greater shortage of social housing in rural areas; therefore, it is perhaps desirable to ensure those with a local connection to a respective rural parish are prioritised over those who are from other areas of the district. An explanation of the parish clusters and how these are defined can be found in Appendix 1 of the Housing Allocations Policy document at Appendix 1 of this report.
15. It is proposed therefore, that when awarding social housing the Council will firstly prioritise households on the Housing Register with the highest level of housing need; from the remaining list of households (who will have the same level of priority) an assessment of local connection will be made to reduce the list of potential nominees further; finally, the assessor will consider how long any remaining households have been on the Housing Register and nominate the remaining households accordingly.

Consultation

16. The draft consultation plan, as attached at Appendix 2, sets out the groups that will be consulted and the methods of engagement. The majority of the consultation will take place via an online questionnaire, however, telephone and written consultation responses will be accepted.
17. The consultation questionnaire, attached at Appendix 3, sets out a number of questions related to the draft document and proposed changes to the policy.

The intention is to keep the questionnaire concise with the main objective of collating views on proposed changes.

Conclusion

18. A review of the current Housing Allocations Policy is recommended so that the Council can continue to respond to increasing demand for social housing effectively, improve the efficiency and transparency of allocations and revisit the Council's priorities for allocation. In order to complete this review the Council is obliged to consult local residents and other stakeholders on the proposed changes so these can be revised and adapted to meet the needs of the community. It is recommended, therefore, that Cabinet approve the draft Housing Allocations Policy for consultation with residents and wider stakeholders.

Malcolm Johnston
Executive Director

Risk Assessment Statement

If the Council fails to allow consultation of the revised Housing Allocations Policy to take place, Rother will be breaching a statutory duty to consult and will not be able to introduce the revisions.

The Housing Allocations Policy must be regularly reviewed to ensure changes in demand for social housing are considered and households prioritised depending on their circumstances so that the Policy remains fit for purpose. Failure to do so could result in the Council not making best use of its housing stock to prevent and relieve homelessness. This may result in the number of households made homeless, impacting on the health and wellbeing of these households while also increasing the cost to the Council of accommodating homeless households in temporary accommodation.