

**BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL and MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL**

<b>To: Strategy Committee</b>	<b>Report Number: M101</b>
<b>From: Housing Panel</b>	<b>Date of meeting: 18 October 2012</b>

**HOUSING ALLOCATIONS POLICY REVIEW**

**1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to highlight the proposed amendments to the Allocations Policy which are necessary due to changes in legislation and welfare reform.

**2. Recommendation**

- 2.1 That the revisions to the Allocations Policy, as summarised in Appendix B, be approved.

The Committee is able to resolve this matter.

**3. Financial Implications**

- 3.1 Failure to make changes to the size of accommodation which is offered is likely to have an impact on the income stream into the Housing Revenue Account.
- 3.2 Failure to agree a common policy with the other Gateway to Homechoice partners will result in higher costs to change the IT software.

**4. Risk Management**

- 4.1 This report is most closely linked with the Council's Corporate / Significant Business Risk No. B10 and CTR1 Key risks are set out below:

Risk Description	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation Measures
Failure to act upon the requirements of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 could lead to unpreparedness for changes due to come into effect in April 2013	Noticeable	Low	Proposed changes to the allocations policy
Failure to optimise early opportunities for joint procurement resulting in loss of financial benefits for both councils	Noticeable	Low	Agreement by both authorities to a common policy

**5. Consultations**

- 5.1 An event with representatives of local authority staff and Council Members, housing association partners, tenant representatives, and voluntary and statutory agencies was held in January 2012. Opinions were sought on possible changes to the policy. The event was by invitation with 75 delegates attending.

- 5.2 A multiple choice online survey aimed at Gateway to Homechoice customers was placed on the website. Customers were invited to participate via a web message. Overall, the average response rate was 5% of the active housing register.
- 5.3 Managers of our local authority housing teams were asked to complete the questions used in the online survey to capture the views of staff.
- 5.4 Recommendations were then made by the Gateway to Homechoice Steering Group and a second stage consultation carried out between 8 May 2012 and 30 July 2012.
- 5.5 Members briefings were held in both authorities during July.

## **6. Equality Analysis**

An equality impact assessment has been completed on the revised allocations policy. The assessment did not show any particular areas of concern or that any communities were unfairly disadvantaged under the existing scheme or allocations policy. <http://www.babergh.gov.uk/housing-and-homelessness/council-housing/finding-a-new-home/about-gateway-to-homechoice/>

## **7. Shared Service / Partnership Implications**

- 7.1 Babergh and Mid Suffolk share a common policy and web based IT software. Service integration will be facilitated if this continues to be the case.

## **8. Key Information**

- 8.1 Babergh has been part of a sub-regional choice based lettings scheme (Gateway to Homechoice) since 2009. The eight local authorities in the partnership (Babergh, Braintree, Colchester, Ipswich, Maldon, Mid Suffolk, Suffolk Coastal and Waveney) share a web based IT system and a common allocations policy.
- 8.2 The policy has been reviewed as a result of the Localism Act and welfare benefit reform.
- 8.3 The Localism Act removes the requirement to operate an open housing register which was introduced by the Homelessness Act 2002. Local Authorities may now decide which classes of applicants are, or are not, qualified to join the register. They may also decide to give additional preference to groups of people such as those in work, volunteers or good tenants.
- 8.4 From April 2013 working age social housing tenants will have a reduction in their housing benefit entitlement if they are considered to be under-occupying their property. The current allocations policy gives applicants a bedroom entitlement which could result in loss of benefit. For example a boy and a girl sharing a bedroom are currently entitled to a bedroom each once the older child is five years old. From next April housing benefit will be restricted until the older child is ten.

## **9. Proposed changes to the policy – see Appendix B**

- 9.1 Definition of a household – this is to be made clearer and consistent with the definition used as part of the homelessness legislation.

- 9.2 **Deliberate changes to households** – For example priority will not be awarded where two families choose to move into one home and become overcrowded as a result or act in a deliberate way that makes their housing situation worse.
- 9.3 **Homeless prevention priority** – Where a household can only remain in their existing accommodation on a short term basis additional priority can be given. This priority will be reviewed once the date they are required to move has been reached to see if there is still a risk of homelessness. Where applicants have failed to make reasonable bids for vacancies the local authority will bid on their behalf and if an offer is unreasonably refused their priority will be removed.
- 9.4 **Bedroom entitlement** – In assessing how many bedrooms a household is entitled to our existing policy is more generous than the housing benefit rules for private rented accommodation which will be extended to social housing from 2013 for working age claimants. It is recommended that the policy is changed to avoid allocating properties which are not affordable. It is also recommended that the same priority is given to those who are overcrowded in private rented accommodation as is currently given to those in social rented properties.
- 9.5 **Additional priority for certain groups** – It is proposed that additional priority is extended in line with emerging legal changes for ex-service personnel and also for those who have been approved as foster parents but not to be so wide as to cover more subjective groups such as volunteers, those who are working and good tenants.
- 9.6 **Restricting those who have recently moved into social housing** – The existing policy enables new tenants to reapply to the housing register as soon as they have moved. The new proposal restricts those who are housed from reapplying for twelve months (unless there are extreme circumstances). It is hoped this would deter applicants from making inappropriate choices and give fairer access to others.

## 10. Appendices

Title	Location
A. Gateway to Homechoice Draft Policy	<a href="http://www.babergh.gov.uk/housing-and-homelessness/council-housing/finding-a-new-home/about-gateway-to-homechoice/">http://www.babergh.gov.uk/housing-and-homelessness/council-housing/finding-a-new-home/about-gateway-to-homechoice/</a>
B. Summary of proposed changes	Attached

A hard copy of Appendix A is available in the Members' Room.

Authorship:

Sue Lister  
Corporate Manager – Supported Housing  
Heather Sparrow  
Corporate Manager – Housing Options

Tel. 01449 724758 or 01473 825766

Email: [sue.lister@midsuffolk.gov.uk](mailto:sue.lister@midsuffolk.gov.uk)  
[heather.sparrow@babbergh.gov.uk](mailto:heather.sparrow@babbergh.gov.uk)

### Summary of Gateway to Homechoice Allocation Policy changes

Subject area	Topic	Proposal	Feedback	Recommendation	Section of policy
Household	Defining a household	Adopt same definition used under homeless legislation:  “Any person/s that can be reasonably be expected to reside with the applicant”.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistent with homeless assessments</li> <li>• Help with assessing entitlement to bedroom and overcrowding priority awards.</li> </ul>	Adopt proposal	4.5
	People who are not part of the household	Lodgers and live in help not to be classed as a member of the household	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistent with homeless assessments</li> <li>• Help with assessing entitlement to bedroom and overcrowding priority awards.</li> </ul>	Adopt proposal	4.6

Subject area	Topic	Proposal	Feedback	Recommendation	Section of policy
	Two households coming together on one application	<p>A full assessment of both parties existing accommodation will be carried out with the intention of establishing if either party's accommodation is large enough for the new household structure. The PO will advise the household of the outcome of the assessment.</p> <p>If the either party's existing accommodation is large enough to meet the needs of the new household structure the application will be awarded Band E.</p> <p>If the household disregards the POs advice and moves in to the unsuitable property they will be considered as deliberately making their circumstances worse in order to increase housing priority.</p> <p>If both parties accommodation is found to be unsuitable the household will be eligible for additional bedroom entitlement (and can therefore bid on eligible properties) however overcrowding priority will not be awarded for 12 months. The household can apply for additional priority on medical and/or welfare grounds.</p>		Adopt proposal	4.8

Subject area	Topic	Proposal	Feedback	Recommendation	Section of policy
Statutory Homeless applicants	Location and time limited restricted bidding	Statutory homeless applicants (Bands A & B) will be subject to the following restrictions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restricted to the PO area with the statutory homeless duty</li> <li>• Restricted to 4 weeks to bid for properties. During the 4 week period the PO reserves the right to bid on behalf of the applicant for suitable properties.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meet local concerns and housing need</li> </ul>	Adopt proposal	8.3
Homeless prevention	Location and time limited restricted bidding	Homeless applicants given homeless prevention priority (Band B) will be subject to the following restrictions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restricted to the PO area with the statutory homeless duty</li> <li>• The PO will set the time period for bidding (linked to notice periods). At the end of the time period the PO will review the bidding and reserves the right to bid on behalf of the applicant for suitable properties/review banding award.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meet local concern and housing need</li> </ul>	Adopt proposal	8.4
Discharge of homeless duties into the private sector	Policy and procedure	Policy and procedure has been developed for discharging statutory duties to homeless applicants. The policy is referenced in the allocation policy document and can be found as Appendix 2.		Adopt proposal	Appendix 2

Subject area	Topic	Proposal	Feedback	Recommendation	Section of policy
Bedroom entitlement and overcrowding priority	Children of the opposite sex	The qualifying age for an extra bedroom and overcrowding priority to 10 years old.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proposal in line with housing benefit rules</li> <li>• Reduce risk of potential affordability issues for households who rely on housing benefit</li> <li>• Clearer for customers</li> </ul>	Adopt proposal	9.1.4 & 17.2
	Children of the same sex	Children of the same sex are expected to share a bedroom. Consideration for an extra bedroom will be given on medical and/or welfare grounds if the eldest child is 16 years old.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proposal in line with housing benefit rules</li> <li>• Reduce risk of potential affordability issues for households who rely on housing benefit</li> <li>• Clearer for customers</li> <li>• Best use of social housing stock</li> </ul>	Adopt proposal	9.1.4 & 17.2

Subject area	Topic	Proposal	Feedback	Recommendation	Section of policy
	Overcrowding priority for applicants in social and private sector accommodation	Same overcrowding priority for applicants in social and private sector accommodation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fairer system</li> <li>• Meet E&amp;D concerns</li> </ul>	Adopt proposal	16.2
Additional preference for certain groups	Extra priority for Social Services registered and approved foster carers	Foster carers who are registered and approved by Social Services will be considered for additional priority under welfare priority awards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A robust procedure and policy is required to establish the point at which extra priority should be applied e.g. the point of registration and approval by Social Services</li> </ul>	Adopt proposal	17.22.4
	Ex service personnel	In line with legal requirements, ex service personnel will be considered for additional preference (if they meet the set qualification criteria). Applicants meeting the set qualification criteria will be prioritised within their priority band when they apply for eligible properties.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In line with legal requirements.</li> </ul>	Adopt proposal	3.6.1.4

<b>Subject area</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Proposal</b>	<b>Feedback</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Section of policy</b>
People housed into social housing	Time limited restricting	Allow returning applicants (who have been housed into social housing) to re join the register, however they will be restricted from participating in the scheme for 12 months.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prevent customers from choosing unsuitable accommodation</li><li>• Fair to existing applicants waiting on the register</li></ul>	Adopt proposal	4.9