OUTCOME REPORT

REVIEW OF:

THE ALLOCATIONS SCHEME 2022 – 2027

STAGE 2 DETAILED CONSULTATION RESULTS

SUMMARY

The stage 2 consultation exercise for the Allocations Scheme was publicised on the Council's website, social media, residents' newsletters a press release and 325 direct emails. A variety of online and in person events were held and detailed contributions were received from 70 stakeholders. The five proposed major changes and eleven proposed minor changes to the Allocations Scheme were largely supported and have remained in the recommendations with some minor adjustments for to establish clarity as listed in the main body of this report.

INTRODUCTION

This report presents the results of the stage 2 consultation on the Epping Forest District Council review of the Allocations Scheme (the Scheme) 2022- 2027 which forms part of a review of the Big 4 housing strategies along with the Tenancy Policy, the Homelessness and Rough Sleepers Strategy and the overarching Housing Strategy.

The review began on 4 May 2021 and is due to conclude in Spring 2022.

Subject to Cabinet approval, the review will result in the publication of a new Allocations Scheme, and a Tenancy Policy (both of which will then be due for review again in 2027), along with an updated five-year Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2022-2027 and an overarching Housing Strategy for 2022-2027.

STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

The consultation was coordinated across all four items; to take account of the interest of some, but not all, stakeholders in more than one of the service areas, and the interdependencies between many of the proposals.

The consultation was split into two stages.

Stage 1 Initial Consultation: An invitation to stakeholders to influence the review from the outset by suggesting key themes and priorities they would like to be included in the draft updates of any or all the 'Big Four' policies and strategies.

The stage 1 consultation opened on 21 June 2021 and closed on 6 September 2021 and the findings were published on 22 October 2021.

Stage 2 Detailed Consultation: An invitation to stakeholders to comment on the draft proposals and major changes to the Allocations Scheme for the Council to consider before any revision to the draft recommendations are presented to Cabinet in spring 2022.

The stage 2 consultation for the Allocations Scheme opened on 12 November 2021 and closed on 24 December 2021.

The same approach is being followed for the stage 2 detailed consultation for the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy and the overarching Housing Strategy. The Tenancy Policy did not go stage 2 consultation as no major changes were requested.

METHODOLOGY

The consultation was designed to give everyone with an interest in housing in the district the opportunity to contribute to the review and was publicised in the same way as for stage 1.

Stage 2 consultation for the draft Allocations Scheme 2022-27 highlighted the proposed changes to the scheme and included a workbook inviting comment on all or some changes and a presentation with key questions about the main changes.

The same audience was approached as for stage 1 via social media, a range of direct emails, bitesize briefing sessions and webinars, a stakeholder workshop, and an online survey with specific questions.

325 stakeholders were invited to contribute and sent a link to the online survey including:

- Registered providers of social housing in the district
- The clerks to the town councils and parish councils in the district
- The Community Safety Partnership and other statutory services
- Community groups including the Faith Covenant and the Tenant and Leaseholders Panel
- Essex County Council and the district, borough, and city councils in Essex
- Third sector partners with an active interest in Housing in the district
- All elected Members of the Council and Council staff

As well as a press release, the consultation and links to the survey (along with background reading material) were widely publicised on the Council's website, in the Residents newsletter, on Facebook, and at relevant forums including the Tenant and Leaseholders' Forum and Live Well, Be Well and Age Well groups.

CONTRIBUTIONS

In total 70 people contributed to the stage 2 consultation. The majority of responses were provided during in-person meetings or Microsoft Teams meetings.

Contributors included:

- 12 Members of the Council
- 42 Professional Stakeholders
- Representatives from the County Council
- 2 neighbouring Local Authorities
- 2 Registered Providers
- 6 Residents Groups /Tenant and Lessee Panel members
- 5 Town and Parish Council Members

PROPOSED MAJOR CHANGES - FEEDBACK

1) Medical priorities: should the two current medical priorities be replaced with three, and if so, how should this be introduced?

Contributors predominantly agreed with the proposal to replace the two current medical priorities with three and that they should be introduced retrospectively without being too burdensome on tenants, starting with applicants in Band C.

Several requests were received to see examples of the level of medical need that would be included in Bands A – C.

Follow-up actions

The guiding principles for the three proposed medical priorities were established along with the recommendation to introduce the re-banding retrospectively.

2) Downsizers: should downsizers be eligible for a spare bedroom, and should any allowance for an extra room and/or any financial incentive be extended to include fixed term tenants with less than five years remaining?

Contributors generally agreed with the proposal to allow downsizers to move to a property with a spare room.

There was some difference of opinion on whether the financial incentive should be offered to people with less than 5 years remaining on their tenancy. More than one person suggested reducing the lower time limit to three years. A greater number suggested introducing a 6-month limit.

There was general agreement that cash incentive was unlikely to be the main reason a tenant would downsize but does enable those people to move who may not otherwise be able to afford to do so.

It was highlighted that 2-bed properties are most in demand and most likely to be taken by downsizers seeking a spare room, and that sheltered housing is in least demand. Some suggested adjusting the incentives to reflect the variable demand for property size and type.

Follow-up actions

Proposals were drawn up to generally offer £1,000 per room downsizers gave up, with the exception of downsizers moving from a 3-bed to a 2-bed that only needed a 1-bed who would be offered £500, and downsizers moving into sheltered accommodation being offered an extra £1,000 (including those tenants moving from 1-bed general needs accommodation to 1-bed sheltered housing).

3) Homeless households that the Council has a main housing duty towards – should this cohort of applicants be placed in reasonable preference Band B and given the opportunity to bid on suitable properties via Choice Based Lettings (CBL) for their one suitable offer, unless or until a suitable direct offer is made via auto – bidding or direct allocations?

The general consensus of opinion was that homeless households should be awarded reasonable preference Band B and allowed to bid on CBL unless or until they received a suitable direct offer.

One contributor asked for provision to be made to ensure people do not take advantage of the homelessness route to access a Council house. They were reassured that the same checks and balances would still apply.

Several asked whether awarding a priority band to homeless households would increase the waiting time for general applicants in Band B. It was explained that the increase in numbers of applicants in Band B should be counterbalanced by the increase in advertised properties which would have otherwise been allocated outside of CBL.

Follow-up actions

Proposals were drawn up to allow homeless households to whom the Council has a main housing duty to bid for a reasonable period of time before being placed on auto bidding and/or receiving a direct offer.

4) Local Lettings Plans: should the option to include local lettings plans be introduced to the Allocations Scheme?

The proposal to include the option of local lettings plans was generally supported in exceptional circumstances for a set period of time and subject to scrutiny and Cabinet approval. Concern was raised that local lettings plans risked introducing discriminatory exclusion policies if not properly and transparently administered, and that the need for local lettings plans should be community led rather than officer led.

Follow-up actions

Proposals were drawn up to ensure that stringent rules be applied to introducing any local lettings plans that would be considered by Cabinet on a scheme by scheme basis, to address specific local, subject to periodic review and in accordance with legislation and regulatory guidance.

5) Rent arrears and unacceptable behaviour: should the 7-year disqualification period be replaced with case by case risk-based assessment?

The vast majority agreed with replacing the 7-year disqualification period with a case by case risk assessment. There was greater consensus over rent arrears than anti-social behaviour on the condition that the applicant demonstrated a commitment to maintaining a satisfactory rent account with a repayment plan and pursue money advice and/or debt counselling as appropriate.

Some concerns were raised over rehousing applicants responsible for anti-social behaviour and whether a shorter time-limit of 3-5 years be introduced. A proposal was made to differentiate between ongoing anti-social behaviour and a spent conviction.

Follow-up actions

Proposals were drawn up to ensure fair consistent guiding principles be applied to proportionate risk-based assessments for disqualification due to rent arrears or anti-social behaviour that focus on support, accountability, probability of reoccurrence and community interest rather than penalty.

OTHER FEEDBACK

6) Affordability

Affordability of current accommodation in private rented sector was raised by several contributors who asked whether this should attract additional priority.

Follow-up action

After careful consideration it is recommended that ‘affordability’ includes too many variables to legitimately be included as a need, and that promoting and incentivising access to the private sector, and the safety net of the homelessness duty are preferable alternatives.

7) Age threshold for young people to join the housing register

Several proposals were made to lower the age limit for joining the housing register from 18 to 16, primarily to enable looked after children to join before they risk becoming homeless if they leave care at 18.

Follow-up action

Proposals were drawn up to keep the age limit to 18 pending the outcome of the Countywide review of the Care-leavers Protocol due in 2022/23.

8) Supplementary waiting list

Concerns were raised about the existence of a supplementary waiting list if considerations to regenerate sheltered housing progress therefore making it more desirable to qualifying local households on the register.

Follow-up action

Proposals were drawn up to review the relative value of the supplementary waiting list in the event of a regeneration programme when anticipated practical completion dates are known.

9) Supported Housing Move on

A request was made to work closely with Essex County Council (ECC) to achieve their aspirations to support adults with disabilities to step down to general needs accommodation.

Follow-up action

An agreement in principle was reached for the Rehousing Team Manager to continue to liaise with ECC regarding stepdown arrangements to improve the flow through supported housing, and to keep the Development Service Manager updated with demand for specific disability adapted accommodation.

10) Band A direct offers and auto bidding

The suggestion to consider Band A applicants for direct offers and auto bidding after a period of inactivity or failure to secure a suitable property (with the exception of downsizers) was largely supported.

Follow-up action

Proposals were drawn up to enable applicants in Band A to be considered for auto bidding and/or direct offers if appropriate.

11) Waiting time

Contributors reached unanimous agreement that the priority date for an applicant moving up a band should be the date they moved up to that band rather than the date they joined the housing register.

The majority of respondents agreed that it would be reasonable for applicants who moved up a band then moved down again to retain the date they were originally placed in that band.

Follow-up action

Proposals were drawn up to modify the priority date to reflect the date that an applicant joined that band rather than the date they joined the Housing Register.

12) Management transfers

Opinion was split on whether management transfers should be excluded from the under-occupation incentive payment where the applicant's need is for a smaller property than the property currently occupied.

Follow-up action

Proposals were drawn up to exclude management transfers from the under-occupation incentive payment.

13) Definition of household

Opinion was split on whether the 2-year requirement to be considered a member of the household should be changed.

Follow-up action

Proposals were drawn up to align the definition of household for the purpose of housing allocations to the following definition for homeless households.

'An applicant or any other person who usually lives with the applicant as a member of their family or someone who might reasonably be expected to reside with them.'

14) Cancelling applications who failed to bid for 12 months

Opinion was split on whether to cancel applications where applicants failed to bid for 12 months.

Follow-up action

Proposals were drawn up to allow applicants to remain on the housing register even if they failed to bid for 12 months - in recognition of:

a) the scheme being choice based; and
b) the provision to allow auto bidding and direct offers for Band A management priority transfers and Band B main housing duty homelessness applicants.

15) Supported accommodation

The majority agreed to remove the restriction for applicants in supported housing to only be considered for flatted accommodation, largely because in most cases applicants leaving supported accommodation required 1-bed accommodation and by default virtually all 1-bed social rented housing is flatted accommodation.

Follow-up action

Proposals were drawn up to regularise the policy removing restrictions on bidding for flatted accommodation to include applicants leaving supported housing.

16) Residents leaving supported housing

Opinion was split on whether residents leaving supported housing should be entitled to receive one suitable offer or two.

Follow-up action

Given the need to improve the flow through supported accommodation proposals were drawn up to keep with the current policy to make one suitable offer.

NEXT STEPS

The draft Allocations Scheme 2022-2027 has been revised to take account of the stage-2 consultation feedback and will be presented to Stronger Communities Select Committee for consideration, comment, and agreement on 1 March 2022 prior to being submitted to Cabinet for approval on 7 March 2022.

For further information please contact the Housing Strategy Team Housingstrategy@Eppingforestdc.gov.uk

VERSION CONTROL LOG

Version	Date	Details	Author
00.01	21.02.2022	Draft for Cabinet	Janice Nuth
01.00	21.06.2023	Publication on Website	Janice Nuth