

Report to:	EXECUTIVE
Relevant Officer:	Andrew Foot, Head of Housing
Relevant Cabinet Member	Councillor Christine Wright, Cabinet Member for Housing
Date of Meeting	12 March 2018

ALLOCATION OF SOCIAL HOUSING

1.0 Purpose of the report:

1.1 Following consultation To seek the adoption of a new policy for the allocation and letting of social housing in Blackpool.

2.0 Recommendation(s):

2.1 To consider the consultation report attached at Appendix 3(b).

2.2 To adopt the revised allocations policy, attached at Appendix 3(a), for social housing in Blackpool, to take effect from the launch of the updated My Home Choice Fylde Coast system.

3.0 Reasons for recommendation(s):

3.1 To ensure that the allocation of social housing continues to reflect local needs. The consultation report has been broadly supportive and the adoption of the revised policy will ensure continued consistency across the wider Fylde Coast.

3.2a Is the recommendation contrary to a plan or strategy adopted or approved by the Council? No

3.2b Is the recommendation in accordance with the Council's approved budget? Yes

3.3 Other alternative options to be considered:

Not to implement the revised allocations policy which would result in variations in allocations across the Fylde Coast.

4.0 Council Priority:

4.1 The relevant Council priority is “ Communities: Creating stronger communities and increasing resilience”.

5.0 Background Information

5.1 The Executive gave approval on 17 July 2017 to enter into a new partnership agreement with local social housing providers, Fylde and Wyre Councils to further develop the My Home Choice Fylde Coast sub-regional system for letting social housing, and to contract with Civica to provide an updated system. The Executive also gave approval to develop and consult on a revised allocations policy that will be used with the new system.

5.2 Following public consultation, this report now seeks approval of the revised allocations policy, known as the Fylde Coast Consistent Assessment Policy. The policy covers who is eligible to join the housing register for social housing, how applicants are assessed and prioritised and how properties made available by local social housing providers, including Blackpool Council’s own properties, are to be let.

5.3 The new Policy is based on the one adopted in 2012, amended with a stronger local connection requirement in late 2013. In the last 4 years, the total number of social homes that become available for letting has reduced, as on average social tenants stay in their homes for longer and in Blackpool some of the homes with the highest turnover have been re-developed, particularly at Queens Park. The demand for social housing remains high, while private rented sector rents have been static, incomes are under pressure and there are slightly increasing numbers of people threatened with homelessness. The “bedroom tax” changed the balance in demand between different sizes of homes, with strong demand for one bedroom flats, but the immediate impact of this has worked its way through the system now and there is strongest demand in Blackpool for family houses. Demand is weakest for two and three bedroom flats, which are unattractive to families and unaffordable to others if they are reliant on Housing Benefit.

5.4 The new Policy also takes into account the expected impact of the new Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which takes effect in April 2018 and Blackpool’s draft new Homelessness Prevention Strategy. Many of the principles remain the same in the new Policy, but the new Policy seeks to work with the updated lettings system to make the process of applying for a social rented home simpler. It also seeks to cater better for many people with low housing need who are either not able or not willing to wait for a long time on the housing register to find a new home. These are often households who are struggling to afford market rents or dissatisfied with the quality of their existing home, but do not meet the statutory housing need thresholds. The new Policy seeks to continue to give some additional preference to working

households while continuing to let most homes to people with the greatest housing needs.

5.5 The principal changes in the new Policy are:

- To make the local connection required to join the housing register a local connection to the whole Fylde Coast area rather than the current connection to individual boroughs. However, preference will still be given in letting homes in each borough to those applicants whose strongest link is to that individual borough.
- Introducing two ways of letting properties, with at least 50% reserved for applicants in housing need (Bands A-C) and prioritised according to level of need, and the rest available to all applicants and let on a first come, first served basis. The balance of lets will be monitored, with a target to let two thirds of all properties to those with a statutory housing need – similar to the current 64%.
- To simplify the housing register and priority bands so that only those with a statutorily defined housing need are given a priority band and the bands are reduced to A- high need and urgent requirement to move, B – high need, and C- low need. Qualifying applicants without a defined housing need will undergo a much simpler assessment process and will only be eligible for the first come first served homes. This should help make the application process much quicker and simpler for many people, and reduce the costs of assessing applications.
- To introduce restrictions on existing social housing tenants using the system to find a new home, so that the system will only be open to existing social housing tenants who have a housing need, or who are in employment.
- To give priority for 20% of the homes let on a first come first served basis to applicants in paid or voluntary work.
- To allow more flexibility in the sizes of homes that households can express an interest in. Currently, applicants are only allowed to bid for homes with a particular number of bedrooms. The new proposal will allow households an “extra” bedroom if they can show that they can afford the additional rent. This additional choice should make social housing more attractive to working households who would not otherwise consider it.

5.6 A report on the public consultation that took place in November and December 2017 is attached at Appendix 3(b). The consultation responses raised a number of issues that have led to small changes in the policy and lettings arrangements, but there was overall support for the principal elements of the new Policy. As well as consulting on changes to the Policy, a question was also asked about the income and savings threshold that is used to limit access to the housing register to households with an income of less than £60,000 and savings of £30,000 (for those under 55 years of age).

There were opposing views on this issue, but on balance support for maintaining the threshold at the current level.

5.7 Once approved by each of the Fylde Coast local authorities, the new Policy will come into effect with the launch of the new My Home Choice system, which is scheduled to be in September 2018 once software development and testing has been completed. The new Policy cannot come into effect before then because implementation relies on the new system being in place.

5.8 Is the Corporate Delivery Unit aware of this report? Yes

The Corporate Delivery Unit has been involved in a number of stages in the development of the policy and supports the process undertaken.

5.9 Does the information submitted include any exempt information? No

5.10 **List of Appendices:**

Appendix 3(a) - Fylde Coast Consistent Assessment Policy

Appendix 3(b) - Consultation Report

Appendix 3(c) - Equalities Impact Assessment

6.0 Legal considerations:

6.1 The changes to the Fylde Coast Consistent Assessment Policy have been subject to statutory consultation, and are compliant with the relevant legislation.

7.0 Human Resources considerations:

7.1 There are no specific proposals that place additional pressure on human resources within the Council. The implementation of the new Policy, alongside the new system, will be undertaken using existing resources in the Housing Options team, and revised approaches to letting Council housing will be delivered by staff within Blackpool Coastal Housing.

8.0 Equalities considerations:

8.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed and is attached at Appendix 3(c). This found that no one with any of the protected characteristics should be adversely affected by the new Policy.

9.0 Financial considerations:

9.1 There are no financial implications from the new Policy; the costs of the new system have already been budgeted for, and it should help promote the efficient letting of the Council's housing stock.

10.0 Risk management considerations:

10.1 Regular monitoring of outcomes through the Fylde Coast Housing Providers group will help ensure that the system continues to achieve our objectives.

11.0 Ethical considerations:

11.1 The proposals are consistent with the Council's values, and aim to balance the need to continue to help those in the greatest need with providing opportunities for everyone to find the housing that they need.

12.0 Internal/ External Consultation undertaken:

12.1 Public consultation has sought views on the changes to the Consistent Assessment Policy and system improvements, as set out in Appendix 3b.

13.0 Background papers:

13.1 None.

14.0 Key decision information:

14.1 Is this a key decision? Yes

14.2 If so, Forward Plan reference number: 8/2018

14.3 If a key decision, is the decision required in less than five days? No

14.4 If **yes**, please describe the reason for urgency:

15.0 Call-in information:

15.1 Are there any grounds for urgency, which would cause this decision to be exempt from the call-in process? No

15.2 If **yes**, please give reason:

TO BE COMPLETED BY THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

16.0 Scrutiny Committee Chairman (where appropriate):

Date informed: 9 February 2018 Date approved:

17.0 Declarations of interest (if applicable):

17.1

18.0 Executive decision:

18.1

18.2 Date of Decision:

19.0 Reason(s) for decision:

19.1 Date Decision published:

20.0 Executive Members in attendance:

20.1

21.0 Call-in:

21.1

22.0 Notes:

22.1