

To: Cabinet

Date: 11 December 2024

Report/Comments of: Scrutiny Committee

Title: Scrutiny feedback to Cabinet – Social Housing Allocation

<b>SUMMARY OF REPORT CONSIDERED</b>	
<b>Report Title:</b>	Social Housing Allocation
<b>Purpose/Description of Report:</b>	To provide an update on how the Council carries out the function of allocating all social housing properties.
<b>Key Decision:</b>	No
<b>Scrutiny Lead Member:</b>	Cllr M Brown, Scrutiny Committee Chairman
<b>Relevant Portfolio Holder:</b>	Cllr Allnatt, Portfolio Holder for Housing, Leisure and Landlord Services

## 1. Introduction and Overview

The Scrutiny Committee met on 28 November 2024 to consider the topic of social housing allocation.

The report presented to the Committee updated Members on the following areas:

- an understanding of how a customer can be considered for social housing allocation and the associated processes and procedures;
- how the council carries out the function of allocating all social housing properties;
- the demand on the waiting list over the last 2 years, and
- the changes made to the Council's allocations policy since 2021, prior to consideration of the refreshed policy by Cabinet in December 2024.

## 2. Summary of Feedback/Recommendations for Cabinet Consideration

- A query was raised in respect to the tenants on the low priority banding in particular what are the waiting times and how do they move to the next level. In response it was explained that the low priority was introduced for applicants

for sheltered schemes and extra care scheme because whilst they may be adequately housed, their circumstances may change in the future, and they would require a particular type of property which is of a restricted type (by age / health need). In addition, Members were informed that the banding priority assesses tenants based on their medical needs, the size of their household based and their housing need. Each case is assessed in line with the policy framework to determine banding and priority.

- In response to the question what is proactively being done to meet with private landlords and the housing associations to increase the rent supply in the Borough, it was explained that the Council are liaising with private landlord and lettings agents in order to try and prevent tenants being evicted in the first instance, e.g. via a section 21 notice. A rising issue is that, due to forthcoming changes in legislation, Officers are finding that there are a significant number of landlords selling their properties. In such cases, the Council won't be able to resolve the issue but can be proactive in trying to prevent a homelessness situation. It was noted that when private rented tenants receive an eviction notice, they need to present to the Council as soon as they get the notice to enable advice and support to be provided.
- The question was asked on how the Council would manage the increase in demand and reducing access to social housing as the private rented sector is becoming increasingly unaffordable to those on low incomes. In response, the Committee was informed that for the last 18 months, Officers have been proactive in telling people and telling residents that the Council is here to try to prevent tenants being required to leave their homes, so as to prevent their homelessness situation wherever possible. Officers noted that it is important to encourage tenants to approach the Council for advice and support.
- The Committee were concerned that residents were getting the perception that they're at the top of the list before the property gets allocated to someone else and it was queried how could the Council better feed the message back to them on if they've been successful. In response it was recognised that the perception would be from the bid position on the website at the time the bid is placed, which is subject to change based on other bids placed including auto-bids, which are placed automatically, immediately before the bid cycle closes. A Member commented that a simpler way to avoid the elation and deflation could be to state that the bid has been accepted and the order of bids doesn't appear until after the bidding is closed or explicitly stating that the order shown may change once the bidding period is closed.
- Members were reassured that those applicants without internet access can request to be on an auto bid. It was noted that generally it would only be people in a priority band who are on auto bid but if they are in a lower band they can request to be on that or they can telephone and apply through customer services or in person via the support hub.
- The query was raised on whether there is a way that the Council can get properties out of void sooner to have them available for applicants. Members were informed that all Council voids will go through a process including gas and electric safety checks and that there is ongoing work to reduce voids times.
- It was noted that there are instances where a parent and child are only allowed a one bed property. It was stated that those decisions are made for parents who don't have their child 100% of the time and that the

circumstances of each case are assessed. In addition, the Council do take account of its space standards, so we are trying to encourage people that if they have their child at a weekend that maybe they can do things like sofa beds or whether the bedroom could be partitioned.

- A query was raised on whether those tenants with mental health issues could request a property with an extra room for family/friends so that support can be provided. In response, the Committee were informed that it would depend on whether the tenant requires a permanent carer (the qualification is five out of seven nights). The Council would also require relevant evidence and confirmation that the person acts as the carer.
- Following a discussion on the statutory framework for banding, Members were informed that the guidance is that the Council is required to prioritise applicants in housing need and follows guidance on reasonable preference as well as being obliged to adhere to the Public Sector Equality Duty.
- The Committee queried whether there was scope for a pragmatic approach in situations where residents living in a three-bedroom property could downsize to a two-bedroom property, instead of a one-bedroom property as stated by the policy because by taking a one-bedroom property, would take away the stock that the Council requires. In response it was stated that Officers would look at what flexibility can be given to situations like this, taking account of financial and legal constraints such as bedroom tax. It was noted that giving consideration to policies around downsizing may help address homelessness and housing availability pressures.
- A discussion ensued in regard to tenants with pets. Members were informed that Government guidance is that claimants should not be separated from their pet, so they would wait for a property with a garden however, there are some areas that don't allow pets. It was noted that some flat tenants have a dog and therefore it wouldn't be a necessity for a pet owner to have a property with a garden. It was accepted that giving consideration to policies around pets may help address homelessness and housing availability pressures.
- The issue of the panel referred to in the report was raised, and the Committee were told that the Panel is for appeals only and not to determine applications. The membership of the Panel was outlined to Members.
- The Committee were concerned about problem tenants. It was confirmed that the Council can't do criminal checks but can do checks with the Safer Communities Team and can exclude applicants from the housing register in some cases (where the offence is assessed as tenancy related). There are local lettings policies in place in some areas, but they have to be proportionate and specific to an issue or area. It was confirmed that the Council must also adhere to the requirements of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act and also that applicants may be allowed a second chance dependent on the specific circumstances and access to the support needed.
- Following a query regarding adaptations for people who are in private rented properties or are owner occupiers, Members were informed that the Council would refer them to the light bulb project, a county project which can then put them forward for assessment from an occupational therapist for adaptations, for example, through disabled facilities grants. It was noted that being able to adapt a property could prevent a homelessness situation occurring.
- When asked about the bidding process and frequently asked questions, it was confirmed that these could be put onto the internet so that applicants can be

directed there for answers. Officers also offered to provide a guide to Members on the things they are asked about most, which the Committee felt would be very helpful to manage enquiries and expectations.

- The Committee were keen that holistic support is provided for people and although it was clarified that Housing Options would focus on housing need it was noted that support is offered and that Officers connect applicants with support.
- Members were reassured that the Council wouldn't exclude people who have a genuine need but would have to assess every case on a case-by-case basis.
- Members wanted to ensure that the Council feeds back information on housing need into the planning process and housing associations, however it was confirmed that the Strategic Lead for Supporting Communities does provide some information and evidence, where appropriate, to support planning considerations.
- It was suggested that it would be useful for the Council to better define what is meant by local connection.
- Whilst it was confirmed that the relevant information and guidance is on the letter sent to the applicant/household, the Committee wanted to ensure that the appeals process is clearly outlined.
- The Scrutiny Committee thanked the Strategic Lead for Supporting Communities, the Assistant Director for Customers and Communities and the Director for Housing and Communities for their input. Members commented on what a good job the team do and gave examples of the support provided to applicants in their wards.

**Written by: Scrutiny Committee Chairman in consultation with Members of the Scrutiny Committee.**