

Title of Report:	Update on the Housing Allocations Policy - following the amendments approved at Executive in December 2014
Report to be considered by:	Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission
Date of Meeting:	1st December 2015
Forward Plan Ref:	

Purpose of Report: To update members of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission on the amendments to the Housing Allocations Policy approved at Executive in December 2014

Recommended Action: Reference Only

Reason for decision to be taken:

Other options considered:

Key background documentation: Allocation of accommodation: guidance for local housing authorities in England, CLG, June 2012
Statutory guidance 'Providing Social housing for local people' (CLG, \Dec 2013)

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OSMC Report

1. Introduction

1.1 West Berkshire Council's current Allocation Policy was adopted in October 2013. In December 2014, the Executive approved some amendments to the policy in light of new Statutory Guidance. This report is to update members of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission on the implementation of the amendments.

2. Amendments to the Housing Allocation Policy.

2.1 The Housing Allocations Policy has now been in place since October 2013. In December 2014 the Executive approved some key amendments to the Housing Allocations Policy.

2.2 The key changes agreed by Executive were as follows:

- (a) Qualification - amend local connection qualifying criteria to residency or meaningful paid employment of at least 16 hours a week for 2 consecutive years. (Other aspects of local connection criteria remain the same)
- (b) Social tenants and labour mobility – to allow for exceptions to local connection qualifying criteria to be applied to certain social tenants who need to move in order to sustain or take up employment
- (c) Foster carers – inclusion in the policy to award an additional bedroom for approved foster carers.
- (d) Homeless Households – new wording inserted to allow deferral of a CHR application when a household is placed into temporary accommodation following acceptance of a full homelessness duty to allow the Housing Service to identify support needs.

2.3 To be able to fully implement these changes some modifications were required to "Locata" the Housing Register data base.

2.4 To ensure the amendments were implemented with minimal impact on both housing staff and service users, the software provider was requested to build a semi automated assessment.

2.5 The benefits of using this method for the implementation include: The service user is only required to answer three questions about their local connection as opposed to completing a whole new application form. The application is then automatically determined as Qualifying or Non Qualifying and Service Users and Registered Providers have not had to miss out on a bidding cycle.

3. Implementation of Amendments to the Qualifying Criteria

3.1 The amendments to the Housing Allocations Policy were implemented on 1st October 2015.

- 3.2 All 2973 live applicants on the Housing Register were set to a hibernated status as part of the mini re-registration process. This meant they were unable to access their Home Choice account to place bids or review their bidding status without being directed to and answering three questions relating to their local connection.
- 3.3 Awareness of the amendments and the requirement to answer the local connection questions was notified to all members on the housing register using a message on the Homechoice Website and an advanced notification email or letter to all members.
- 3.4 The amended Housing Allocations Policy and amended Scheme User Guide were both uploaded and available via the Council's Website.
- 3.5 The implementation date was set to be a Thursday as this is the first day in the bidding cycle. Of the overall 2973 applicants we have 927 active bidders and the majority of applicants bid at the start of the bidding cycle.
- 3.6 Applicants have been advised that if they fail to complete the mini re-registration process their applications will be removed.

- (1) Email Notifications: Of the 2973 applicants set to hibernated status on the 1st October 2015, 2323 had previously provided an email address.

All of these applicants were emailed on the 22nd September to raise awareness of the need to answer the three questions.

1626 applicants who had failed to respond were sent a 2nd follow up email between the 1st and the 6th of October.

1156 applicants were sent a 3rd reminder email on the 9th October 2015.

- 3.7 Letter Notifications: Of the 2973 applicants set to hibernated status on the 1st October 2015, 650 applicants had not provided the Housing Service with an email address.

All of these applicants were written to on the 28th September to raise awareness of the need to answer the three questions.

479 Applicants were sent a reminder letter on the 13th October 2015.

- 3.8 Text Message Notifications: The use of SMS messaging has been used to specifically target active bidders.

On the 1st October all applicants who had provided a mobile phone number and had placed a bid since the 10/08/2015 were sent a text message reminder equating to 486 applicants.

On the 6th October all applicants who had provided a mobile phone number and have placed bids in the 2015 year were sent a text message reminder - equating to 320 applicants.

- 3.9 The mini re-registration process concluded on the 23rd October 2015. At this point 1196 applicants had not logged in and answered the three local connection questions

Total number of applicants still hibernated: 1196

Of which have provided an email address: 804

Of which have not provided an email address: 392

Of which have placed a bid since 1st January 2015: 142 of which 72 have identified vulnerability on their Common Housing Register application.

These applicants were removed from the Common Housing Register on 23rd October 2015 for failing to re-register.

- 3.10 All 1196 Applicants were written to and advised that they have been removed and provided with a form asking the three questions and a pre-paid envelope to provide their response. The internal process we have implemented is any applicant that contacts the Housing Service within a 60 day period will have their application automatically reinstated providing they provide a response to the three Local Connection questions.
- 3.11 Prior to the removal process the Housing Service made additional attempts to contact the 90 households who had placed bids at some point this year and had a vulnerability identified on their application form. These additional attempts included calling them directly or raising awareness/seeking support from their identified support network
- 3.12 As of the 11th November 2015, 145 applicants have returned the form requesting that their application is reinstated.

4. Homeless Households

- 4.1 Following the input of OSMC in the latter part of last year, the Allocations Policy was amended in relation to homeless households as follows:

Applicants to whom a full housing duty has been accepted and who are placed in temporary accommodation will have their CHR application deferred to allow the Housing Service time to identify any ongoing support needs and to confirm that the applicant is able to effectively manage and sustain a tenancy prior to being offered settled accommodation. The usual period of time that an application will initially be deferred for is four months, however the Housing Service have the discretion to reduce this period of time in exceptional circumstance. Any decision to reduce or increase the deferral period will be assessed by a panel of two Housing Managers.

- 4.2 This amendment was not introduced retrospectively but will apply to all applicants accepted as homeless from 1st October 2015.
- 4.3 Housing Options staff have been making applicants aware of this at the point they have made a homelessness application and to date we have not received any adverse responses to this implementation.

5. Foster Carers and Social Mobility

- 5.1 A mechanism has been built into the "Locata" Database for us to implement the remaining key changes to the Housing Allocations Policy. As applicants apply to the Common Housing Register or notify us of a change of circumstances we will

determine if the foster carers or social mobility provision applies and assess their application accordingly.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 The implementation of the amendments has now been concluded, this was done with minimal disruption to the Service User and appears to have been well accepted.
- 6.2 In consequence of the re-registration process the overall number of households registered on the Housing Register has decreased.

	Live Applicants	Qualifying	Non Qualifying
Pre Re-registration	2966	1157 (39%)	1807
Post Re-registration (As of 11.11.15)	1936	744 (38.4%)	1192

It was expected that the overall number of applications would reduce in consequence of applicants failing to respond to the review request. The Overall % of Qualifying applicants has however not changed significantly and this confirms the position that we did not anticipate a high number of applicants would be affected by the amendment to the Local Connection Criteria.