

# Residents, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Panel Meeting

Thursday, 17 November 2022

Dear Councillor

## RESIDENTS, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL - THURSDAY, 17TH NOVEMBER, 2022

I am now able to enclose, for consideration at next Thursday, 17th November, 2022 meeting of the Residents, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Panel, the following report that was unavailable when the agenda was printed.

<b>Agenda No</b>	<b>Item</b>
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5	<b><u>New Housing Allocations Policy Impact (Pages 3 - 32)</u></b>
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[To receive a report on the impact of the new Housing Allocations Policy].

If you have any queries about this meeting, please contact the Scrutiny Team:

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# Residents, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Panel

17 November 2022

<b>Report title</b>	New Housing Allocations Policy Impact		
<b>Cabinet member with lead responsibility</b>	Councillor Bhupinder Gakhal		
<b>Wards affected</b>	All wards		
<b>Accountable director</b>	John Roseblade, Director of City Housing and Environment		
<b>Originating service</b>	City Housing		
<b>Accountable employee(s)</b>	Michelle Garbett	Service Lead – Housing Strategy	
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<b>Report to be/has been considered by</b>	City Housing and Environment Leadership Team	1 November 2022	
	Cabinet Member Briefing		16 November 2002

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## Recommendation(s) for action or decision:

The Residents, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Panel is recommended to:

1. Consider how effective the development of an interactive information dashboard to show housing statistics for each ward would be to Councillors. Could this assist with responding to enquiries from Constituents?
2. Discuss concerns arising from the types of advice sought by constituents in Councillor wards.

## **1.0 Purpose.**

- 2.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Panel Members with details of the revised Housing Allocations Policy following full implementation in September 2021.
- 2.2 This report seeks to give Panel Members information and detail of;
- An overview of the changes to the Allocations Policy as approved by Cabinet in 2020 updated with minor changes made via delegated authority in August 2022.
  - The current Housing Register
  - Lettings Data
  - The efforts being undertaken to make more housing stock available
  - Support given to people in need of housing related advice
  - Support that is/can be made available to Councillors to better support their constituents and manage expectations

## **2.0 Background.**

- 2.1 Local Authorities are required by the Housing Act 1996 to have a scheme for determining priorities, and the procedure to be followed when allocating housing accommodation both to first time applicants and transferring tenants including nominations to Registered Providers (Housing Associations). The Council's Allocations Policy was adopted in 2007 and is managed through a choice based letting (CBL) scheme – Homes in The City. The policy had been subject to periodic updates to ensure that it stayed abreast of any changes to legislation. The first wholesale review of the Allocations Policy commenced in 2019 alongside various stakeholders culminating in Cabinet approval on 19 February 2020. Some of the changes required significant changes to the CBL system delaying full policy implementation until September 2021.
- 2.2 Housing Strategy, alongside Wolverhampton Homes, carried out a further review of the policy in February 2022; some minor changes were required to the policy which subsequently received approval in April 2022.
- 2.3 City of Wolverhampton Council (CWC) own 21,816 properties (as at 14/10/2022) within the City, managed by four managing agents; Wolverhampton Homes; an Arms-Length

Management Organisation (ALMO) with New Park Village, Bushbury Hill and Dovecotes all being Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs). Each managing agent is required to allocate and let properties in accordance with the Council's Allocations Policy. When the policy received original approval in 2020, the Council housing stock was 22,280 properties; the current stock figure shows a reduction of 464 properties since then. The Council's stock is reduced by an average of around 200 properties per year through Right to Buy. There are also a number of long term voids earmarked for demolition that are no longer available to rent. There were 956 properties that became available for letting during 2021-2022. The lack of available property for let and the reduction through Right to Buy each year serves to significantly reduce the number of applicants assisted through the Council's scheme and is the main reason for an Allocations Policy review, ensuring that those in the greatest housing need would have the greatest opportunity of accessing social housing.

- 2.4 The review of the Allocations Policy established five new policy objectives which reflect the need for the Council to make best use of its homes, whilst meeting its statutory responsibilities:
- i. Ensure people in the greatest housing need have the greatest opportunity to access suitable housing that best meets their needs.
  - ii. Make use of a range of housing options and tenures to prevent and alleviate homelessness.
  - iii. Make best use of the Council's and partner registered providers housing stock.
  - iv. Manage applicants' expectations by being realistic about stock availability, to support them in making informed choices about their housing options, and the extent to which they are able to express reasonable preference.
  - v. Ensure that the Council's legal duties and corporate responsibilities are met and that they contribute to delivering the Council's priorities.

### 3.0 New Housing Allocation Policy – Adopted Changes.

	Changes	Outcome
1.	<b>Updated policy objectives</b>	<p>The new objectives focus on helping those in greatest housing need, whilst setting realistic expectations for people due to increased demand for homes and smaller number of homes becoming available.</p> <p>Focuses on people considering all housing options that may be open to them and in doing so making the best use of housing across the city and ensuring the needs of vulnerable people are met.</p>

2.	<b>A new banding priority for foster carers and those approved to adopt who require a larger property.</b>	<p>Band 1 priority will be given to foster carers who need a larger home.</p> <p>This supports the achievement of key corporate priorities; assisting children and young people to get the best possible start in life by being able to secure housing that meets their needs more quickly, and also helps to encourage families in the City who are minded to become foster carers or adopter, providing more settled homes to children and young people in care.</p>
3.	<b>Increase the priority given to Wolverhampton Care Leavers and exempt them from any residency requirements up to the age of 25.</b>	<p>Care Leavers up to the age of 25 no longer have reduced priority if they are currently placed or have in the past been placed or lived outside Wolverhampton.</p>
4.	<b>Introducing a new band of need called the 'Emergency +' Band.</b>	<p>This new banding is being introduced to ensure those with absolute highest level of need are given the greatest priority, supporting the Council in meeting its Legal and Corporate responsibilities.</p> <p>This new band is awarded to applicants with Emergency Homeless priority who are <u>also</u>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• care leavers,</li> <li>• or armed forces families who need to move from armed forces accommodation,</li> <li>• or applicants that also require a substantially adapted property</li> </ul> <p>This priority can also apply to cases where multiple agencies have met and agreed that the applicant requires immediate rehousing due to a significant threat to life.</p>
5.	<b>Ensure the limited number of Council homes that becomes available to let are allocated to those most in housing need.</b>	<p>Those with no housing need or without a specific need to live in Wolverhampton are not able to have a housing application. However, there will be more guidance on support on the range of housing options that can be explored.</p> <p>Maintaining a housing register only for those applicants in housing need ensures best use is made of the limited homes that become available, enable more effective management of applicants and give an accurate measure of the housing needs in the City.</p>
6.	<b>Remove the preference attached to 1 in 4 of all properties that become available to let to someone with a local connection to an area</b>	<p>Properties that are relet are no longer advertised with a preference for applicants with a local connection to that area.</p> <p>Applicants are still able to bid for homes they are interested in, in areas they wish to live, however we will be unable to consider those with local connection ahead of those in higher priority. This also</p>

	<b>over those with the greatest housing need.</b>	supports the objective of giving those in the greatest need the greatest opportunity to be housed. 40% of new build homes will still be advertised to transferring social housing tenants with a local connection to the area the properties are in under the New Build Local Lettings Plan.
7.	<b>The policy recognises that people living in good quality houses of multiple occupation (HMO), are adequately housed and have no housing need on this basis alone.</b>	The Council, with partners, is working to ensure all HMOs are of a satisfactory standard and are using its licensing powers to do so, improving standards across the private rented sector as it provides an important housing offer in the City.  The policy will maintain priority for families and people of pensionable age living in HMOs. However single people and couples will no longer get priority if they are sharing a kitchen, bathroom or toilet with other people.
8.	<b>Allowing applicants to bid and accept an offer of housing if in arrears up to £400 (or £600 if universal credit is involved)</b>	The amount of tolerated debt has been increased from £60 to £400 (or £600 if universal credit is involved) to bring it up to date and in line with the average monthly rent of a Council property, particularly in response to the impact that Universal Credit is having on households and deprivation levels in the City.
9.	<b>Allow children of the same sex to share a bedroom post the age of 15.</b>	Children of the same sex are able to share a bedroom until they are 21.  Enabling children of the same sex to share a room until they are 21, in terms of eligibility, will ensure that only those with the largest families will be considered for the largest and rarest council homes and give a greater range of properties for applicants with large families to bid for.  This is in line with Government guidance on the allocation of social housing.
10.	<b>Improve the powers of Multi-Agency Panels to award a wider range of housing priority when assessing the needs of individual cases.</b>	Multi-agency panels can award Emergency+, Emergency priority or Bands 1, 2 or 3 depending on the circumstances evidenced in addition to a package of support.
11.	<b>Applicants owed a housing duty that are refusing to cooperate with Housing Options will be placed in Band 3.</b>	Homeless priority can be reduced to Band 3 for failing to engage with the support offered. This encourages applicants to cooperate with the Housing Options Team to work to resolve their housing need.
12.	<b>Improve the Council's ability to protect applicants or other</b>	Decisions to exclude applicants from certain areas or property types would be taken on a case by case basis, with the provision of supporting evidence from partner organisations.

	<b>residents by restricting the property type or location where an applicant can bid if they would otherwise pose a risk to themselves or others.</b>	A panel of officers will make decisions based on the evidence provided and applicants will have the right to request a review of the decisions once they are informed.
13.	<b>Increasing the priority of overcrowded families living in one-bedroom properties.</b>	Priority has increased to Band 1 for applicants who are short of one bedroom whilst living in a one-bedroom property. Priority will increase to Emergency for applicants who are short of two or more bedrooms whilst living in a one-bedroom property.
14.	<b>Households that are overcrowded will receive higher priority than families that are not overcrowded but have no access to a private garden.</b>	Applicants who are overcrowded go into Band 2 or higher depending on the level of their overcrowding. Council or a housing association who have children under 12 years old but do not have access to a private garden will go into Band 3. Nearly 65% of the council properties that become available are flats and maisonettes many of which will not have private gardens for sole use. It is vital that applicants consider these homes as suitable for families as less houses become available, compared to the amount of families registered on Homes in the City.
15.	<b>Allow the largest families that are overcrowded to improve their housing situation by moving to a property where they may still over-occupy but to a lesser extent than before</b>	Families that would be eligible for seven or eight bedroom homes can be considered for smaller homes (normally four bedroom parlour homes, five bedroom and six bedroom homes) to help to provide housing options for those with the very largest families in the City. All decisions regarding these changes of eligibility will be approved by a senior officer.
16.	<b>Ensure the Allocations policy meets current needs by removing those criteria that are not used i.e “the two tenancies for one rule”</b>	Applicants where both parties will be releasing a council home, if they both transfer together, will no-longer get priority specifically for this. However, priority could be given for other reasons such as overcrowding.
17.	<b>Applicants assessed as having lesser preference would have their application suspended until the affected criteria has been resolved or a repayment plan has been adhered to for at least 3 months.</b>	As Band 4 is being removed and to avoid customers who are currently breaching their tenancy or have been in their tenancy for less than 12 months applicants with lesser preference will now have their application suspended until the affected criteria has been resolved or a repayment plan has been adhered to for at least 3 months.
18.	<b>Allow households with Emergency and some</b>	Applicants awarded the Emergency+ band, Emergency Band or Band 1 social needs will retain this priority irrespective of lesser



	<b>Band 1 priorities, to bid and accept offers of housing, despite factors that would otherwise reduce their priority to the lowest Band in the policy.</b>	preference categories. Agreements and support will be put in place to work with the tenants to overcome the difficulties they are experiencing such as a payment plan to clear reduce their arrears.
19.	<b>Extend the preference of 10% of properties to lower bands (Band 2/3) to include Band 1.</b>	5% of properties advertised with a preference to Band 1 and another 5% with a preference to Band 2/3.
20.	<b>Amend the 'residency rule', which requires applicants to have lived in the City for 2 or more years before their housing needs can be fully assessed.</b>	Applicants who do not have a local connection to Wolverhampton i.e. they are not living in the City or they have not lived in the City for the last 2 years will no longer be able to have an application.  However, there are a number of exemptions to this criteria based on recent case law and urgent needs to move to Wolverhampton, such as to receive or give care to someone living in the City.
21.	<b>Applicants whose income or assets exceed set levels will no longer be able to bid for homes or be offered homes.</b>	Applicants with assets (including savings and equity) of more than £23,250 or those with an income (not including any welfare benefit income) above £48,000 will no longer be able have an application  However, they will be advised of a wide range of housing options they can explore.

#### 4.0 Current Waiting List Data.

4.1 The table below shows the numbers of applicants in each band on the waiting list as at 19 September 2022. There were 4,930 applicants currently on the list. Prior to the implementation of the new policy in September 2021 and the removal of Band 4, the list had over 11,000 applicants.

<b><u>Application Category Code</u></b>	<b><u>Numbers</u></b>
Band One	1,791
Band Two	1,950
Band Three	674
Emergency	499
Emergency Plus	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,930</b>

4.2 Revising the Allocations Policy to focus on those in the greatest need of social housing ensures that the Council can apply its resource into greater support to not only those but by providing advice and assistance; assist others into other types of tenure.

4.3 With this renewed focus came the introduction of a new band, 'Emergency Plus'. This new band recognises the needs of those who are not only homeless but have significant additional needs, this includes people with disabilities who need purpose built/adapted homes and allows the Council to identify those needs early and speeds up the process of allocating a suitable property.

4.4 The revised objectives as set out in the Allocations policy are clear in their commitment to providing a home to those people in the greatest housing need and to offer advice and guidance on a range of alternative housing for those seeking accommodation. Despite this, the number of people in housing need is growing, set against a backdrop of reducing stock, a cost of living crisis affecting availability of affordable housing in the private rented and home ownership sectors, in addition to pressures on the Housing Revenue Account that may have an impact on the delivery of new build housing and investment programmes.

4.5 Council housing remains the safest and most secure tenure choice and City housing services are committed to increasing the availability of homes to enable those who need it, to have access to it. Social Housing can help in providing stable homes and in building strong, mixed communities. It offers a sense of safety and belonging, enabling a sense of togetherness and pride in local areas. Whilst housing services believe this and continue to work to increase available stock, the reality is that social housing in the City is now a scarce resource. Sadly, there can be no guarantees of a property of choice and it is essential that we continue to work around managing expectations whilst always seeking out ways in which we can improve stock availability.

## **5.0 Housing Supply and Demand.**

5.1 Available council housing for people in housing need is becoming increasingly scarce. In the financial year 2020-2021, the number of properties becoming available to let was 956. So far in the current financial year there have been 411 properties become available to relet so we are predicting less than 900 homes will become available to relet this financial year:

- For the financial year 2020-2021 the average was 76 properties per month.
- To date, for the financial year 2022-2023 the average is 69 properties per month.

5.2 The highest level of demand is for 2 and 3 bed houses and bungalows (particularly 2 bed bungalows). However, similar to many surrounding towns and cities, Wolverhampton has more flats and maisonettes available for letting which many applicants do not wish to consider, with 67% last year. In some instances, this means each property can take longer to allocate than the targets set and therefore applicants wait longer on the housing register as they will only consider a house or bungalow.

- In financial year 2021-2022, there has been a total of 55 bungalows become available -; 36 x one bedroom, 16 x two bedroom and 3 x three bedroom. Nine of the 16 x two bedroom bungalows will not be relet due to estate redevelopment (Tarran estate prefabs).
- A total of only 262 houses have become available in the same period - 94 x two bedroom houses, 161 x three bedroom houses and 7 x four bedroom houses. No five or six bedroom houses have become available for let.

It is not unusual for a house to attract over 200 bids (expressions of interest) when advertised.

## 6.0 Housing Applications

- 6.1 There were around 16,000 applications made to Homes in the City between September 2021 and October 2022. Social housing is not only a more affordable form of housing, it offers a security of tenure unmatched with any other housing provider and remains the first choice for many in the City of Wolverhampton.
- 6.2 The table below demonstrates a sample of the number of applications being received each month. The number of applications has risen year on year with the trend continuing, despite the Council no longer having an open register. Prior to the full implementation of the new policy in September 2021, people were able to apply for rehousing regardless of having any housing need.

Year	Month	No. of applications
2019-2020	August	376
	September	310
	October	377
	November	306
2020-2021	August	389
	September	495
	October	496
	November	566
2022-2023	July	624
	August	712
	September	702

6.3 It is difficult to estimate the average length of time someone may wait to be housed from the point of making an application as this will depend on a number of factors such as required type of property, chosen area, any specialist need, and the number of bedrooms needed.

Utilisation of bids also affects waiting time; an applicant not able to take advantage of their full bidding allocation each week (i.e. three bids) may find it much longer to be rehoused especially if only bidding on 'in demand' properties.

6.4 As an example, the length of time a homeless household in Emergency Band can wait for the allocation of a 4 or 5 bedroom houses will depend on available properties and the number of other applicants waiting for the same type of accommodation. There are currently 21 households living in temporary accommodation requiring 4 or 5 bedrooms with the average time these applicants have been placed in temporary accommodation being almost nine months. As detailed in paragraph 5.2, only seven x 4 bedroom houses became available last year.

## 7.0 Enquiries with Lettings Team, Wolverhampton Homes.

7.1 The Lettings Team receive the highest number of enquiries from MP's and Councillors of all sections within Wolverhampton Homes. On average, over 650 enquiries are received each year from Councillors and MP's. The main reason for the enquiry is:

- constituents not being offered a property they have bid on
- dissatisfaction with the priority banding awarded to their application
- the length of time they have been on the housing register

7.2 The number of enquiries is not inclusive of customer enquiries received via the website, by email or by phone. Whilst it is completely understandable that applicants will require help and support, the volume of contact made with the Lettings Team will contribute to delays in responding in a timely manner.

## **8.0 Allocations Process**

8.1 The allocations process is prescriptive and timebound, relying on applicants to bid on available properties, be responsive to requests for information when needed and make a decision on a property offer in a timely manner. There are certain requirements that must be addressed before a formal offer can be made, namely the production of documentation to confirm applicants eligibility, however this is sometimes delayed in forwarding. Delays can also occur when applicants refuse properties as the process must begin again in terms of eligibility checks or in some cases, a need to re-advertise the available property for a further week.

8.2 If a homeless applicant refuses a property, there is a requirement by law to allow the applicants a right to appeal which can then cause further delays to the process of allocation.

## **9.0 Continuing Service Improvements**

9.1 The overarching aim of the Allocations Policy is to ensure that preference is given to those in the most housing need. 61% of all allocations made in financial year 2022- 2023 so far are to applicants with households with some level of homeless priority.

9.2 The Allocations Policy is adhered to across all of the managing agents. There is transparency in relation to any offers made and the outcome of those offers. Significantly, there have been no challenges made against the Council in relation to its application of the policy.

9.3 The Covid-19 pandemic created significant delay to the turnaround of void properties and therefore the letting of available properties. There was a significant backlog in ready to let property, reaching 150 ready to let properties, this is steadily being rectified and at 4 November 2022, there were 38 ready to let homes; this being lower than the pre lockdown figure. Housing Solutions continue working hard towards reducing this figure further.

9.4 The Homes in the City website has recently moved onto the Council's platform providing a simpler customer experience, the site which was managed by Wolverhampton Homes on behalf of the Council, had been a standalone site for many years and in need of significant investment. The site offers information for customers on all aspects of applying

for housing, advice on housing options and information on how to make the best use of your bids.

- 9.5 There are good working relationships between the Councils Housing Team and Wolverhampton Homes' Lettings Team, with regular collaboration to support better decision making and continued improvements to systems/processes. Liaison between internal teams at Wolverhampton Homes (Voids and Lettings) to ensure priority is given to prepare void properties allocated to the most urgent cases of those in the highest level of need are settled into homes as quickly as possible.

#### **10.0 City Wide Housing Advice and Support.**

- 10.1 There are various partners across the City who contribute to the delivery of housing advice; this includes charitable organisations such as Refugee Migrant Centre, the Good Shepherd, P3 and Citizens Advice. The Council works closely with all agencies who support with not only housing advice but providing access to accommodation, especially for those residents experiencing homelessness.
- 10.2 The Council and in particular Homelessness Services, are looking to strengthen this advice service by providing a web-based solution. This would empower people to access quality housing advice and make informed decisions with regard to their housing need and tenure choices.
- 10.3 Homes in the City sits within the Councils website and offers guidance and support on housing options including how to apply to join the Councils housing register. The website offers a full range of accessibility options using assistive technology, this allows users to interact with the website in a way that suits them best, including,
- Read-aloud function for people who struggle or have sight issues
  - Translations into over 100 languages where English is not their first language. This includes over 50 that can be read aloud
  - Changing the style and size of the font
  - Changing the website colour palette to help those with different forms of colour blindness

There are also features such as:

- A magnifying glass
  - Dictionary
  - Screen mask/screen ruler to help people users focus on specific sections
- 10.4 Wolverhampton Homes (WH) who manage lettings on behalf of the Council replicate a range of similar features through their own website, in addition they can offer face to face

sign ups, home visits where an applicant is unable to provide information any other way, this can include face to face interpreter services where required and Occupational Therapy assessments where an applicant is unable to evidence their medical need any other way. In addition, support is given via phone and email including the use of WhatsApp and text. Wolverhampton Homes are keen to ensure that they are able to offer a tailored service that can meet the varying needs of applicants.

- 10.5 The Council's Rent with Confidence scheme is inclusive of both a preventative and targeted approach in addressing the quality and availability of private rented housing. The scheme is multi-faceted with a drive to level up the sector in the City, paying particular attention to supporting the sector in understanding its rights and responsibilities thus creating a quality alternative to social housing, reducing pressure on the housing register and allowing people to access housing more quickly.
- 10.6 Rent with Confidence scheme has introduced a 'Call us First' scheme aimed at private sector landlords and letting agents operating in the City. Eviction in the private sector is the most common reason for homelessness. The scheme is proactive in that it asks landlords and letting agents to give early indication that they are planning to serve notice on a tenant to terminate their tenancy.
- 10.7 There is an Allocation Policy training module available to all Council staff with 116 staff members completing the training so far. The module is due to be updated in the coming months.
- 10.8 The Council's Housing Team have established a forum bringing all Registered Housing Provider operating in the City to come together in bi-monthly meetings. It allows the opportunity to build relationships between providers and the Council and seeks to provide a forum for honest discourse on many different areas.

### **11.0 New Housing Supply.**

- 11.1 The Council continues to prioritise the increase of supply of affordable housing in the City and has a number of schemes to support this intention. City Housing operates a '*Market to Affordable Housing Conversion Programme*', identifying former council properties that are available to purchase and where they meet the criteria (demand, value for money etc.). In 2021-2022, a total of 28 properties were added to the Council stock, so far in 2022-2023, six property purchases have completed with a further seven awaiting completion. Private Sector Housing continue to prioritise working on bringing empty homes back into use with 20 properties being brought back into use in the first two quarters of 2022-2023.
- 11.2 New build housing development activity, funded by the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), continues with the first phase of new homes being delivered in Heath Town next month. There will be 40 new homes - 16 x four bedroom houses and 24 x two bedroom houses.

- 11.3 The Small Sites Programme will develop a number of small in-fill sites and bring forward a further 34 units of accommodation. In addition, there are two community led developments within Bushbury and Heath Town estates, that will result in a further 14 new properties.
- 11.4 The Council's wholly owned housing company, WV Living, delivers approximately 200 new homes a year and endeavours to deliver 25% affordable housing where possible. The Marches, Wednesfield development has brought forward a total of 266 homes – 99 for outright sale, 100 Help to Own, 29 Affordable Rent and 28 Shared Ownership. Hampton Park, Bushbury will bring forward 178 homes – 133 Outright Sale, 29 Affordable Rent and 16 Shared Ownership. All affordable units are owned and managed by the Council through its managing agents.

## **12.0 Questions for Scrutiny to consider.**

- 12.1 How can we, as a City Housing Team better support Councillors and their constituents with their understanding of the level of housing need and social housing availability in the City.
- 12.2 What could we do better to support and encourage residents to take up alternative housing options?
- 12.3 How can we better communicate with each other and support our residents in a meaningful way, perhaps consider developing Councillor access to housing allocation data for each Ward to help inform initial enquiries before submitting a formal enquiry?
- 12.4 Is there anything that would be useful to Councillors that City Housing could provide on a regular basis so as we can ensure that you are kept informed generally of housing related issues, good practice etc?

## **13.0 Financial implications**

- 13.1 There are no financial implications arising from the content of this report. However, there is an impact on the Housing Revenue Account from the length of time taken to let properties through lost rental income while they are empty.

[JM/01112022/L]

## **14.0 Legal implications**

- 14.1 There are no legal implications arising from the content of this report. Any reference to changes to the Allocations Policy are those that have already received approval either through Cabinet or delegated authority.

[CS/10112022/1]



## **15.0 Equalities implications**

15.1 The new Housing Allocations Policy was subject to a comprehensive Equalities Analysis.

## **16.0 Other implications**

16.1 Climate change and environmental implications

There are no Climate Change and Environmental Implications as result of this report.

16.2 Health and Wellbeing Implications

There are no Health and Wellbeing complications as a result of this report.

16.3 Human resources implications

There are no Human Resources implications as a result of this report.

16.4 Corporate landlord implications

There are no Corporate Landlord implications as a result of this report.

16.5 Covid Implications

There are no Covid implications as a result of this report.

## **17.0 Schedule of background papers.**

- 17.1 19 February 2020, Allocations Policy Review, Cabinet  
22 April 2020, Housing Allocations Policy Amendment, IEDN  
11 November 2020, Housing Allocations Policy Implementation, Cabinet  
16 June 2021, Housing Allocations Policy Implementation 2021 'Go Live' update, IEDN  
6 April 2022, Revision to the Housing Allocations Policy, IEDN

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# New Housing Allocations Policy Impact

Residents, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Panel  
17 November 2022

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Presenter:

**Michelle Garbett**

Service Lead- Housing  
Strategy

[wolverhampton.gov.uk](http://wolverhampton.gov.uk)

## Background

- Local Authorities are required by the Housing Act 1996 to have a scheme for determining priorities, and the procedure to be followed when allocating housing accommodation.
- The Council's Allocations Policy was adopted in 2007 and is managed through a choice based lettings scheme (CBL) - Homes in the City
- Wholesale review in 2019 with Cabinet approval in 2020.
- Some changes required significant changes to the CBL system delaying full policy implementation until September 2021.
- Review in February 2022 resulted in further minor changes to the policy with subsequent approval via IEDN in April 2022.

## New Allocations Policy Objectives

- Ensure people in the greatest housing need have the greatest opportunity to access suitable housing that best meet their needs.
- Make use of a range of housing options and tenures to prevent and alleviate homelessness.
- Make best use of the Council's and partner registered providers housing stock
- Manage applicants' expectations by being realistic about stock availability, to support them in making informed choices about their housing options, and the extent to which they are able to express reasonable preference.
- Ensure that the Council's legal duties and corporate responsibilities are met and that they contribute to delivering the Council's priorities.

## Recap - Main Policy Changes

- A new banding priority for foster carers and those approved to adopt who require a larger property.
- Increased priority for Wolverhampton Care Leavers and exemption from residency requirements up to the age of 25.
- Introduction of an Emergency + Band
- Ensure that Council housing is awarded only to those most in housing need.
- Remove the 1 in 4 of all properties being let to those with a local connection over those with the greatest housing need.
- Increasing the amount of tolerated debt from £60 to £400 (or £600 if Universal credit is involved).
- Same sex children are able to share a bedroom until they are 21.
- Increased priority of overcrowded families living on one-bedroom properties
- Allow the largest families that are overcrowded to move to a property where they will still over-occupy but to a lesser extent.
- Extend the preference of 10% of properties to lower bands (Band 2/3) to include Band 1

## Waiting List Data

- The table shows the numbers of applicants in each band on the waiting list as at 19 September 2022. There were 4,930 applicants on the list. Prior to the implementation of the new policy in September 2021 and the removal of Band 4, the list had over 11,000 applicants.
- Revising the Allocations Policy to focus on those in the greatest need of social housing ensures that the Council can apply its resource into greater support to not only those, but by providing advice and assistance; assist others into other types of tenure.
- With this renewed focus came the introduction of a new band, 'Emergency Plus'. This new band recognises the needs of those who are not only homeless but have significant additional needs, this includes people with disabilities who need purpose built/adapted homes and allows the Council to identify those needs early and speeds up the process of allocating a suitable property.

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<b><u>Application Category Code</u></b>	<b><u>Numbers</u></b>
Band One	1791
Band Two	1950
Band Three	674
Emergency	499
Emergency Plus	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>4930</b>

## Supply and Demand

- Available council housing for people in housing need is becoming increasingly scarce. In the financial year 2020/21, the number of properties becoming available to let was 956. So far in the current financial year there have been 411 properties become available to relet so we are predicting less than 900 homes will become available to relet this financial year:
  - For the financial year 2020/2021 the average was 76 properties per month.
  - To date, for the financial year 2022/2023 the average is 69 properties per month
- The highest level of demand is for two and three bed houses and bungalows. Significantly, 67% of properties coming up for let last year were flats and maisonettes.
- In the financial year, 2021-2022, there has been a total of 55 bungalows become available, nine of which cannot be relet due to redevelopment works.
- For the same period, 262 houses became available with only 7 four beds coming up for let and no five or six bed homes.
- Often there are more than 200 plus bids placed advertised houses.



# Housing Applications

- There were around 16,000 applications made to Homes in the City between September 2021 and October 2022. Social housing is not only a more affordable form of housing, it offers a security of tenure unmatched with any other housing provider and remains the first choice for many in the City of Wolverhampton.
- The table demonstrates a sample of the number of applications received each month. The number of applications has risen year on year with the trend continuing, despite the Council no longer having an open register  
Utilisation of bids affects waiting time; an applicant not able to take advantage of their full bidding allocation each week (i.e. three bids) may find it much longer to be rehoused especially if only bidding on 'in demand' properties.
- There are currently 21 households living in temporary accommodation requiring 4 or 5 bedrooms with the average time these applicants have been placed in temporary accommodation being almost nine months.

Year	Month	Number of applications
2019-2020	August	376
	September	310
	October	377
	November	306
2020-2021	August	389
	September	495
	October	496
	November	566
2022-2023	July	624
	August	712
	September	702

# Lettings Team Enquiries

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- The Lettings Team receive the highest number of enquiries from MP's and Councillors of all sections within Wolverhampton Homes. On average, over 650 enquiries are received each year from Councillors and MP's. The main reason for the enquiry is:
  - constituents not being offered a property they have bid on
  - dissatisfaction with the priority banding awarded to their application
  - the length of time they have been on the housing register
- The number of enquiries is not inclusive of customer enquiries received via the website, by email or by phone

# Continuing Service Improvement

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- 61% of all allocations made in financial year 2022/2023 so far are to applicants with households with some level of homeless priority.
- The Allocations Policy is adhered to across all of the managing agents. There is transparency in relation to any offers made and the outcome of those offers. Significantly, there have been no challenges made against the Council in relation to its application of the policy.
- Void turnaround was significantly delayed as a result of the global pandemic, at its highest, there was 150 voids awaiting works. This now at around 50 and improving monthly.
- The Homes in the City platform has been modernised and now sits within the Council website.
- Relationships between City housing team and Lettings are open and transparent as are the relationships between lettings and other areas of Wolverhampton Homes and priority is given to ensuring that those in the greatest housing need are housed as swiftly as possible.

# New Housing Supply.

- The Council continues to prioritise the increase of supply of affordable housing in the City and has a number of schemes to support this intention. In 2021-2022, 28 former council homes were purchased and put back into Council stock. So far in 2022-2023, six properties have been purchased with seven more awaiting completion.
- Private Sector Housing have put 20 empty homes back into use in the first two quarters of 2022-2023.
- Homes developed through the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) continues and the first phase of homes being developed in Heath Town will become available shortly. This will see 16 four bed houses and 24 2 bed houses added to Council stock.
- The small sites programme will see a further 34 homes developed and there are two community led developments in Bushbury and Heath Town that will result in a further 14 properties.
- WV Living have brought forward a total of 266 homes on The Marches development in Wednesfield. – 99 for outright sale, 100 Help to Own, 29 Affordable Rent and 28 Shared Ownership. Hampton Park, Bushbury will bring forward 178 homes – 133 Outright Sale, 29 Affordable Rent and 16 Shared Ownership.

# City Wide Housing Advice and Support.

- The Council works closely with a variety of partners across the City who contribute greatly to offering housing advice and support.
- Both the Council's website and Homes in the City offers guidance and support on housing options and ensures that the platforms are accessible to all using assistive technology, allowing users to interact with the website in a way that suits them best. Wolverhampton Homes Lettings Team offer a range of services including face to face sign ups, interpreter services, home visits, WhatsApp and text alongside email and telephone, seeking to provide a full range of services that can be tailored to meet an applicants needs.
- The Council's Rent with Confidence scheme is inclusive of both a preventative and targeted approach in addressing the quality and availability of private rented housing.
- Rent with Confidence scheme has introduced a 'Call us First' scheme aimed at private sector landlords and letting agents operating in the City. The scheme asks landlords and letting agents to give early indication that they are planning to serve notice on a tenant to terminate their tenancy.
- An Allocations Policy training module is available for all staff members.
- City Housing has established a bi monthly meeting bringing providers of social housing in the City together

## Questions for Scrutiny to Consider

How can we, as a City Housing Team better support Councillors and their constituents with their understanding of the level of housing need and social housing availability in the City.

What could we do better to support and encourage residents to take up alternative housing options?

How can we better communicate with each other and support our residents in a meaningful way, perhaps consider developing Councillor access to housing allocation data for each ward to help inform initial enquiries before submitting a formal enquiry?

Is there anything that would be useful to Councillors that City Housing could provide on a regular basis so as we can ensure that you are kept informed generally of housing related issues, good practice etc?

## **Michelle Garbett**

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