

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE:
THURSDAY 19 NOVEMBER 2015
DIGITAL NOMINATIONS SCHEME
REPORT OF THE JOINT HEAD OF REVENUES AND HOUSING SUPPORT
(Contact: Jon Dearing, Tel: (01993) 861221)

I. PURPOSE

To consider this report and the recommendations and submit comments to Cabinet for consideration at its meeting on 9 December 2015. The recommendations in the report will ultimately be for approval by Council.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- (a) That a digital nominations approach is adopted for a trial period commencing in summer 2016, with stakeholder consultation to be undertaken after 12 months, and the findings of that review to be considered by Cabinet late in 2017; and
- (b) That the proposed new Allocations Policy (see [Appendix C](#), page 14) be adopted for the period until the stakeholder review has been completed and consideration given to the findings.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1. A briefing paper was produced in 2007 (see [Appendix B](#), page 11) which reported the progress of the introduction of schemes across Oxfordshire; the funding opportunities available to authorities at that time; and, the potential risks of not implementing a scheme.
- 3.2. As we now know, the compulsion/penalty issue was not invoked by the government, however, the vast majority of authorities did adopt a scheme and the Chartered Institute of Housing believe that over 95% of authorities in England now operate a digital approach to nominations.
- 3.3. Since members last considered the approach there has been significant change in terms of housing provision, technology, legislation and policy. Perhaps more importantly the present government have extended still further the principles of tenant choices both in respect of lettings but also in respect of Right to Buy legislation. The purpose of this report is to provide an update and reconsideration of the advantages and disadvantages to tenants, the Council and its partners of adopting a DNS approach and to propose a way in which that approach could be trialled by the Council.

Digital Nomination Scheme Overview

- 3.4. A digital approach to nominations 'opens up' the letting of social housing. DNS allows housing applicants to view details on, choose between, and apply (or 'bid') for currently available-to-let properties. This contrasts with traditional housing allocation systems where applicants are normally faced with only the stark choice of whether to accept or reject a property deemed 'suitable' by a social landlord or Local Authority. In this way, DNS can transform the letting of social housing from a producer-driven function to a consumer-led service. This is strongly in line with government principles of freedom and consumer choice.

Practical Application

- 3.5. A customer applies to the Local Authority to be included on the Housing Waiting List in exactly the same way as applicants do now (although we will be able to improve this process by allowing electronic applications). From there, the process is straightforward:
- Once the application has been approved (in accordance with the WODC Nominations/Allocations Policy criteria), the applicant is issued with a banding based on their needs (i.e. points) and a bidding reference,
 - The applicant can then bid for available properties; which will be advertised wherever and however often WODC decide (typically this would be fortnightly on a dedicated website, with paper copies available across the District). There are digital access issues to address but the Housing Team and Customer Service officers would be fully trained to assist applicants with searches, application changes and bidding for properties, Applicants will be able to see all available properties on-line but also in a paper Newsletter. They will be able to bid from their own homes; WODC terminals across the District (which are currently being installed as part of the roll-out of Universal Credit); over the phone; by text; or with assistance from the Service's existing Client Support Officers (who can take 4G Laptops out to Applicant's homes if required). The elderly are most commonly thought of as the group with digital access issues. It should therefore be noted that, of the 1,236 Applicants currently on the Housing Waiting list, only 5.63% (69 people) are aged 75 or over.
 - WODC would have complete control over how many bids each applicant could make per week/fortnight and would manage any changes to their circumstances or application details in exactly the same way as we do now (although, again, we will be able to offer customer improved electronic means of notifying us of changes),
 - A list will then be made of all bids against each individual property and, in the same way as we currently work, the successful bid will be decided based on priority need and suitability,
 - As with the current manual system, the Housing Provider will contact the successful applicant to initiate the tenancy process.
 - Under the current Policy (section 10.1), the Ward Member is then contacted by email and given the opportunity to comment on the Nomination. This is a manual process and may therefore be cumbersome to incorporate effectively into a digital process. However, since the approval of that Policy (in 2013) we have experienced a less than 50% response rate from Members and no nomination has ever been changed as a result of that process. This is partly because the applicant often currently resides in a different Ward to where the nomination is being made; and that Ward Member is simply not, therefore, familiar with that household.
- 3.6. In essence therefore, the DNS approach is an electronic version of the waiting list/manual processes that WODC already have in place to manage the Common Waiting List and make nominations to vacant Social Sector housing.

The National Picture

- 3.7. Successive governments have supported the use of digital schemes and the DCLG acknowledge that the DNS approach as potentially beneficial in:

- Facilitating greater ‘ownership’ of letting decisions by housing applicants themselves; thereby enhancing tenants’ commitment to their home and neighborhood;
 - Promoting greater mobility for those moving into, or within, social housing;
 - Making better use of the housing stock (i.e. properties owned by local authorities and housing associations but also, potentially private sector landlords and part-ownership properties).
- 3.8. Locally, we have detailed feedback from our Shared Service partners, Cotswold District Council. They have successfully been operating a digital scheme since June 2004; and moved to a collaborative approach to DNS (with all of the other Authorities in Gloucestershire) in September 2009. All of the partners in that collaboration (known as Gloucestershire Home-seeker) have continued to benefit from the efficiencies, transparency and customer choice that the approach provides; and all are committed to continued use of the approach.
- 3.9. Initial concern at Cotswold was centred around ‘opening the flood gates’ to applicants from Gloucester City. However, it has become clear that the nominations policy underpinning the scheme continues to control lettings as directed by local political choice and this enables local connection policies to remain sacrosanct.
- 3.10. As indicated in the 2007 briefing ([Appendix B](#), page 11) a collaborative Choice Based Lettings approach was formed across the Oxfordshire Districts. Unlike the Gloucestershire partnership, this partnership focussed on the joint procurement of software (but with each Authority having its own contract) and having a common Nominations/Allocations Policy. While all of the Oxfordshire Districts still operate their own Choice Based Lettings Schemes, the partnership came to an end in 2013 and there are no plans to re-establish this. Opportunities for realising the benefits of a partnership approach do not therefore exist in Oxfordshire; however this does ensure that Policy is truly independent from residents of Oxford City and the other Oxfordshire Districts.

Transparency and Choice

- 3.11. One of the main advantages of operating a DNS system is that it provides a substantially higher level of transparency than a traditional allocations process. Some of the problems that the Council currently experiences in this regard with the absence of such a system are:
- Applicants cannot see all properties that are currently available and this leads to a ‘I’m missing out on something better’ mentality. This can lead to refusals of offers and unrealistic expectations from prospective tenants.
 - Hard to let properties remain vacant as those further down the waiting list are never made aware that they are available and therefore never consider them as an option.
 - Vital information such as the requirement to have a local connection to properties on a new development is not freely available. This leads to unrealistically raised expectations and significant numbers of unnecessary enquiries to the Housing Team as new developments near completion.
- 3.12. The transparency and choice provided by a digital approach means that:
- Applicants can make good choices based on their current and future needs, as they see the whole range of properties. As DNS offers applicants a

comprehensive picture of their options it can inform them to adjust their preference area choices; giving them a much better chance of securing a home.

- Those further down the waiting list can bid on 'hard to let' properties. This means that they are let rather than standing empty; and the total waiting list is reduced.
- Applicants feel that they have made more of a choice (rather than being subject to an allocation) and they are therefore more likely to sustain that tenancy and display better tenant behavior than they may have if they felt they had been 'placed' somewhere.
- As applicants can see pictures and detailed descriptions on-line they can quickly disregard properties that they may otherwise have been led into the allocation process upon. A good example of this is where applicants with disability access requirements are allocated to a property because the description is 'bungalow'. With DNS, applicants can see that, actually, this particular property is a bungalow but has unsuitable steps up to the front door. Again, avoiding this, prevents raising expectations unnecessarily and saves applicants and staff time.
- Those that are over-accommodated but not on the transfer list can see what is available and may therefore be more likely to take an interest in transferring. This would lead to the release of much needed family accommodation and lessen the financial burden on those that are currently significantly over-accommodated.
- The system could be configured to include private sector rental opportunities and the proactive promotion of alternative tenure options, such as shared-ownership schemes. This would open up different options for applicants, improve choice and support the Government objective of maximising home-ownership.

Local Control

- 3.13. The introduction of a digital approach would allow the Council to maintain the current control it has over the common waiting list, its Allocations Policy and protocols; as well as providing additional data that will allow even better control over a range of housing related activities. Anecdotally, the key concern historically around the adoption of a digital approach was loss of control over nominations/allocations. However, DNS would still allow the Council to maintain an entirely locally managed register and set local Nomination Policy parameters around ineligibility in respect of immigration status; criteria for preference groups; homelessness management; non-qualifying circumstance criteria; local connection etc.
- 3.14. Essentially, the DNS system is an electronic tool to assist the authority in better managing its local Nominations Policy. There are (regardless of whether we adopt a DNS approach or not) some changes needed to the Council's Nomination Policy but DNS would not weaken our control. In fact, Cotswold DC's Allocation Policy is tighter in many ways (including Local Connection) than this Council's.
- 3.15. The current Nomination Policy does need updating in relation to legislative changes, changed officer designations and procedural arrangements that have required alterations since it was last reviewed in 2013. In relation to the adoption of DNS a 'band' approach appears to work better with the technology than a 'points' approach but is not an absolute necessity. However, the 'band' approach

does have other advantages that the Council needs to consider whether it decides to trial a digital approach to nominations or not:

- It simplifies the criteria and is easier for customers to follow,
 - It presents a straightforward grid of criteria for each band. The detail behind those can be adjusted as necessary; for example the definitions of “significant medical need” and “urgent medical need” (and the relationship between those two phrases) can be altered in the detail of the Policy. However, the criteria/the grid stays the same; providing a sense of simplicity and consistency.
 - It ‘bands’ priority based on a level of need and once you are at that level additional circumstances regarded to be at the same level do not alter your priority. This significantly reduces ‘point chasing’, which significantly reduces staff time spent updating applications.
- 3.16. The proposed new Allocations Policy (see [Appendix C](#), page 14) is organised differently from the current Nominations Policy but has identical principles and criteria. The principle difference is that our current points system is simplified into a chart of priority bands. So when there are multiple bids on one property the applicants will be prioritised by band and then (where there are more than one bid from applicants in the highest band) by date of application. The other key features of the proposed policy mirror our current Policy. We have been more descriptive in some areas but there is no change in the criteria.
- 3.17. Aside from retaining local control over our policies, DNS offers some additional intelligence opportunities; namely:
- We would be able to track individual applicant’s bidding activities and, for example, where applicants never bid on any property they could be removed from the register. This gives us increased control over register numbers and helps us concentrate on those who need our assistance the most.
 - Real preference data, in terms of accommodation type, tenure type and location, could be used to inform planning/development decision making processes.

Registered Provider’s View

- 3.18. Generally, Registered Providers regard the DNS approach to be very advantageous in terms of transparency and choice for their prospective tenants. This was demonstrated at our most recent quarterly Housing Provider Forum where Housing officers were asked whether the Council would be considering a digital approach in the future. All of the RP’s represented at that meeting reported that residents benefit from the use of DNS in all of the other Districts in which they operate and that they would support the Council in any way they could if we decide upon that approach. Cottsway Housing Association is also very supportive of a more transparent approach and has written a formal letter of support which is included as [Appendix A](#) to this paper (page 9).
- 3.19. A formal consultation process would be undertaken to establish the views of all of the 32 Registered Providers that West Oxfordshire DC nominate to. This would include consultation on the system and the proposed new Policy. However, we already know that the three largest providers are in full support of the digital approach and they account for more than 95% of the stock that we manage the Common Waiting list for.

Vision 2020

- 3.20. As mentioned in paragraph 3.8, there is a DNS partnership in operation across Gloucestershire Districts; which obviously includes all three of our current Vision 2020 partners. This partnership has been very effective in terms of delivering transparency for applicants and efficiencies and ease of process for the District Councils.
- 3.21. Gloucestershire Home-seeker's contract with their current software provider (Abritas) is due to expire in August 2016 and the six Districts have already initiated a project to ensure that a new system is procured and in operation for a further (minimum of) three years from August 2016. This offers an opportunity for WODC to join that existing partnership and therefore take advantage of their collaborative experience; sharing of legislative and appeal responsibilities; economies of scale in terms of buying power and future development influence with software providers; and would also align with wider ambitions around the Vision 2020 Programme.
- 3.22. The partnership has considered the possibility of this Council joining and resolved to offer the Council a place (with the partnership re-branded as 'Homeseeker Plus'; taking out the reference to Gloucestershire) for a trial period of twelve months; assuming that we gain Political approval to do so.
- 3.23. This opportunity gives the Council not only the advantages set out above but also gives the chance to test the digital approach. The 12 month trial was a stipulation of the Gloucestershire Homeseeker Board, as some member authorities were nervous about expanding outside of Gloucestershire. However, it would provide this Council's members and officers the opportunity to assess the suitability of the digital approach (and its impact on customers) without making any long-term commitments to the approach.

Conclusions

- 3.24. There are a number of positive and negative conclusions to be drawn from this report, which would clearly benefit from further discussion and examination. The key conclusions around a digital approach are summarised as follows:
- 3.25. Positives:
- (i) It is widely regarded to offer greatly improved transparency and better informed choice for our housing applicants, leading to more settled communities and reductions in transfer requests,
 - (ii) We can maintain complete control over our Allocation, Nomination, Homelessness, Development/Planning Policies and, in fact, would gain improved access to data that can better inform the development of those Policies,
 - (iii) There are immediate efficiency savings (in the region of £38,000 pa) to be realised. But this approach also opens up the opportunity to expand joint working arrangements between the WODC and CDC Housing Operations Team; which would lead to potential additional future efficiency savings.
 - (iv) There are income generation opportunities (Registered Provider contributions) available, that will reduce the ongoing cost of adopting a digital approach,

- (v) We would improve the relationships that we currently have with our Registered Provider partners and open up further opportunities for improved relationships with Private Sector providers,
- (vi) This approach would align our systems and processes with our Housing Authorities partners across the Vision 2020 partnership; particularly if we decide to accept the offer to join the Gloucestershire Home-seeker (Homeseeker Plus) partnership.

3.26. Negatives:

- (i) There can be access restrictions, as not all applicants have access to (or perhaps the skills to utilise) digital access channels. However, there are support mechanisms that we can put in place to significantly lessen this risk. It should be noted that WODC already has public access terminals available and that we have secured DWP funding to increase the number and spread of these terminals as part of the introduction of Universal Credit,
- (ii) Our current manual systems are more expensive in terms of staffing support but come with no ongoing cost in terms of system development, support and maintenance. Procuring a system would bring these ongoing costs; although there is already agreement (10th December 2014 Cabinet) to procure electronic waiting list software and DNS is a minimal additional cost (that should be easily offset by efficiency savings and income generation),
- (iii) The Member input in the Nomination process could not easily be incorporated into a digital approach. Section 10.1 of Nominations Policy requires officers to request Ward Member approval of every nomination that is made. As explained in paragraph 3.5, this is not an effective process and requires a review. There are, however, opportunities for Member input at the Application stage, which could be significantly more valuable in our management of the housing allocations process in its entirety. This would provide Members with the opportunity to provide local knowledge and information that could influence an Applicant's inclusion on the Waiting List.

4. ALTERNATIVES/OPTIONS

The Council could decide to continue with the current approach and processes. However, some change would still be needed to the current Allocation Policy (as detailed in paragraphs 3.15 to 3.17 of this report; and the Council would restrict its opportunities to make allocations more transparent, improve processes, improve joint working opportunities and make efficiency savings.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1. Cabinet have already agreed £50,000 of Planning and Housing Delivery Grant funding at their meeting on 10th December 2014, for core Waiting List, Allocations and Homelessness Management System. Providers include DNS as a core part of any system offer. Since then, Cottsway HA has offered an 'up-front' payment of £25,000 to help system purchase and implementation; which gives us a healthy potential budget of £75,000. Cottsway HA has also provided a letter of support in relation to the adoption of a DNS system across West Oxfordshire and a copy is included as [Appendix A](#) (page 9). The Gloucestershire collaboration costs are not

yet clarified but it is anticipated that they will be significantly less than the total £75,000 potential funding available.

- 5.2. Following the successful implementation of a DNS system there are significant resource savings to be realised as the self-serve nature of the digital approach means that less resource is required to manage waiting lists and nomination processes. By choosing to go with the joint procurement with Homeseekers Plus the Council will have the opportunity to operate Joint Allocations Team with Cotswold DC's Housing Operations Team. In addition to revenue savings there is an excellent opportunity to establish good practice processes very quickly and share resources around the support functions. The annual efficiency saving associated with this Joint working is estimated to be circa £38,222 per annum for WODC (based on current year salary figures). Structure changes would, of course, require approval from the Council's Human Resources Committee; which would be sought in the early part of 2016/17, ready for the live date in August 2016.
- 5.3. Most Authorities that operate a DNS system make an administration charge to the Housing Providers for adding their void properties to the system. The Gloucestershire Home-seeker partnership charge an annual lump sum payment for key providers and charge smaller (lower volume) providers per property. This reduces the annual support and maintenance costs to the Member Districts.
- 5.4. There will be on-going costs in relation to the development and maintenance of the software. These are estimated to be £9,000 per annum but would be comfortably absorbed within the resultant levels of efficiencies mentioned in paragraph 5.2 above.

6. REASONS

To update Members on the progression of digital allocations processes and put forward an opportunity for WODC to trial this approach.

7. RISKS

The risks in different areas are highlighted within the background paragraphs of this report. There is limited financial risk associated with the recommendations in section 2.

Jon Dearing

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Date: 9 November 2015

Background Papers:

None



Jon Dearing
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12 October 2015

Dear Jon

We would like to take this opportunity to engage West Oxfordshire District Council's cabinet to consider their position on housing allocation, in particular the introduction of a digital nominations system (DNS).

Digital nominations offer the council, landlords and customers a number of tangible benefits.

- Greater opportunity for shared services, easing moves between RPs
- Maintain control of, and manage, local lettings policy
- Greater transparency to support better joint working
- VFM/cost savings, reduction of duplication in tasks, reduction in refusals, reduction in void time and cost, best use of stock based on identified need
- Improved availability of detailed information to inform the local housing strategy.

Benefits to customers

- Community sustainability/cohesion
- Customer choice of property, location, landlord
- VFM, Transparency and their 'position' in the bidding process
- Accountability through improved transparency
- Increased Customer Satisfaction, active participation in the process
- Affordability, active and conscious decision at bidding
- It was also a recommendation from Cottsway resident scrutiny panel

An opportunity now exists to design and build a process which is fair, whilst applying local housing policy, and places the applicant at the centre of the decision making. A digital nominations scheme would be a key contributor in creating communities that are stable, viable and inclusive.

Cottsway Housing Association is a registered society under the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014.

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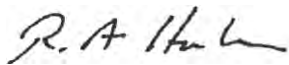
We would like to build on our partnership with WODC and to seek opportunity to deliver services which reflect the changing needs and aspirations of our present and future customers.

Cottsway can offer financial and practical support to pilot of DNS in WODC, drawing on our extensive knowledge and experience managing property in this area.

Welfare reform and the recent budget announcement continues to impact on our customers and influence our thinking and planning. To minimise loss of benefit eligibility, and to maximise use of stock, DNS will support 'right property right household'.

The introduction of DNS will bring cost benefits and efficiencies to WODC, Cottsway and other RPs operating the in the area. It enables greater engagement from customers throughout the process and provides for more sustainable tenancies and settled communities.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. A. Hawkins'.

Rob Hawkins
Head of Housing

Choice Based Lettings Briefing for Members

What is Choice Based Lettings?

CBL allows people to apply for advertised affordable housing vacancies - often in the local press or through an inter-active website. Applicants can see the full range of available properties and apply for any home to which they are matched. The successful applicant is the person with the highest priority for the property which they have bid for.

A CBL scheme must incorporate the following elements:

- Applicant initiative – advertising all properties, enabling applicants to bid
- Social housing market information – popularity of areas and stock type etc
- Property and neighbourhood information
- Labelling and selection criteria – either under a points scheme or based on bands
- Needs of vulnerable groups including homeless households must be met

At present, each local authority can set its own detailed policies and procedures for selecting successful applicants within the terms of current legislation, i.e. regard must be given to the 'reasonable preference' categories of housing need and 'additional preference' can be given to local connection.

It is possible to have a sub regional CBL that is based on a single back office administrative system but with each local authority area operating its own policies

The requirement to introduce a scheme by April 2010

"Homes for All", the Government's 5-year housing plan, set out the Government's plans for taking forward its choice-based lettings (CBL) policy. The aim is to have in place nationwide choice based lettings by 2010. "Homes for All" also made clear that the Government is keen that choice-based lettings systems should operate sub-regionally or regionally, recognising that housing markets do not follow local authority boundaries.

It is not yet a statutory obligation to operate a CBL system but as the target time draws nearer, local authorities and Registered Social Landlords are being 'encouraged to introduce CBL. Specialist advisers have been employed by CLG to promote adoption of CBL and funding has been made available as a contribution to the costs of setting up a scheme. It is likely that authorities and RSLs that do not introduce CBL may be penalized in some way at some point.

On 3 September 2007, Erica Tinsely from GOSE emailed WODC advising that GOSE recently met with Alison Venning, CLG's Choice Based Lettings Adviser, for a review of progress towards CBL across the region. She said that during their discussion it became clear that West Oxfordshire, was becoming an island surrounded by areas where tenants would have choice. She requested that the council should reconsider its position on this. Alison Venning has offered to come and give a presentation to Members to explain how CBL works on 17 September 2007.

This is timely in that the CLG has issued details of the third bidding round for CBL, which closes on 12 October 2007. It will enable the Council to take an informed view as to how to proceed.

This year the Department is making approximately £1.7 million available to enable set up of CBL. This is the third and final year of the funding for sub-regional schemes. This year those local authorities who were not successful in previous funding rounds or who are not already involved in a sub-regional CBL scheme are invited to submit proposals for funding to:

- allow them to join existing sub-regional schemes; or
- to support the development of new sub-regional CBL schemes

Pros and cons of CBL

CBL is promoted as a way of providing applicants with increased understanding of allocations because it is seen as a more transparent way of making allocations. Applicants are told what vacancies are arising and they can see what level of priority the successful applicant has. Applicants are only considered for properties that they have asked for and the theory is that they can then adjust their voting so that they can try and increase their chances of being successful. It is also sometimes said that because the Applicant has actively requested that vacancy, they will be more content with being offered it and

therefore more likely to be good tenants.

To be successful, a CBL system needs to be set up in such a way that no applicant is disadvantaged. Systems have now been developed to track individual voting activity to ensure that intervention can be made where applicants who might be expected to have voted are not. Applicants can also opt for automatic voting within parameters that they have set for themselves so that they don't have to keep track of vacancies being advertised.

The policy parameters for setting priority can also be adapted to ensure that the objectives of current allocations policies that prioritise homeless applicants for example or which promote best use of the available stock can be maintained under CBL.

Safeguards need to be built into any scheme to prevent nuisance bids and to ensure that void times are not unduly prolonged.

CBL probably works best where properties are in low demand. However, in high demand areas, CBL can result in applicants becoming disenchanted because they are continually bidding without success and it is difficult for those administering the scheme to be able to indicate when their application might be successful. CBL schemes carry additional costs to the administering organisation due to the need to advertise and maintain more sophisticated software systems.

Oxon Sub regional scheme

Vale of White Horse has been operating CBL since September 2004. Cherwell District Council and Oxford City Council launch their district CBL scheme in January 2008. South Oxfordshire District council launches district CBL in April 2008

The scheme works on the basis of a 'sub-regional hub' arrangement. This will be a stand-alone website with telephony attached (phone and text bids) hosted by Abritas. All 4 districts will upload information into the hub. (Oxford City will do this from an interface from their Northgate back office system - the others all use an Abritas back office system anyway)

Each authority has its own system for prioritising applicants based on banding according to level of housing need. This applies to 90% of general needs vacancies. Within each band, priority can be given to the applicant that has a local connection with the District/city that the vacancy is situated within. Local lettings policies and move on policies can also be operated.

Each local authority can operate its own rules with regard to number of bids that can be made at any one time and each can operate its own targets with regard to the percentage number of transfers, homeless, applicants that are housed.

In addition, there is a sub regional banding policy which will be applied to 10% of general needs vacancies (excluding 4 beds). The Authorities have yet to agree how their 10% quota will be selected but there is agreement that the net effect to any one authority should be neutral over the year - i.e. numbers out match numbers in. The banding is based on prioritising homeless cases, existing tenants who are under occupying or who are overcrowded, health needs and other welfare needs rather than prioritising people because they have a housing need and need to move from one part of the sub region to another.

100% of sheltered and adapted properties will be open to people under the sub regional banding scheme.

The plan is to implement the sub-regional scheme in two phases. **Phase 1** will include setting up the sub-regional CBL, formalising the partnership and going live with the basic scheme. **Phase 2** will take place between January & December 2008 and will include evolving Phase 1 and adding value to the scheme – in particular, working towards commonality, alignment and, if possible, a single system.

Partner authorities will adopt the same bidding methods meaning that all four will be able to offer internet, automated telephone, Minicom, SMS text and paper coupons.

All partners will advertise properties on a fortnightly cycle on the website and through a free newsheet. Details will also be kept in the offices of all partners, plus voluntary and statutory agencies, libraries and other community facilities. Home seekers can express an interest via the website, SMS text, automated telephone (or Minicom). The band and date of successful applicants will be published to enable other home seekers to make informed bids.

Homebuy and private rented vacancies will also be covered by the scheme in due course

The partner authorities estimated set up costs of £219,750 (inclusive of a full time project manager to oversee implementation) and they were successful in bidding for grant of £101,085 from the CLG. As a guide, SODC estimated implementation costs of £56k.

Annual ongoing costs of administration are estimated in the region of £15 for SODC.

Options and risks

1. Do nothing

The Council and RSLs operating in the District will increasingly come under pressure to introduce CBL. It would appear that this bid round will be the last opportunity for the Council to seek a funding contribution towards setting up a scheme.

2. Consult Applicants and other stakeholders to see whether they want the Council to introduce CBL and on what basis. Then decide way forward.

It would not be possible to carry out this exercise prior to the bid deadline

This consultation may result in the provision of information which would indicate that customers would like changes to the existing policy and system to give them 'real choice'

It would be advantageous to make this a joint exercise with major stockholders as the results of such consultation could have implications for the way in which they offer properties.

For example, Portsmouth City Council found that their applicants did not want the hassle of having to bid for properties but instead wanted 'real choice' once a property was offered to them in respect of what work was carried out or not in the vacant property prior to their occupation and a greater choice over when they needed to move in.

3. Decide in principle to seek to join the Oxon sub regional scheme and make a bid for funding

Consultation with customers could follow

The Council would benefit from the work that the other authorities have already carried out but on the downside, the Council would have to accept the terms of operation already agreed. There are likely to be concerns about the sub regional banding scheme which would prioritise people from outside of the District for 10% of general needs vacancies.

4. Decide to set up District CBL by target date and align with Oxfordshire sub regional scheme, perhaps with a view to joining when terms more acceptable to local authority



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

www.westoxon.gov.uk

West Oxfordshire District Council Housing Allocations Policy

Version 27/10/15

1 Introduction.

- a) It must be recognised that the demand for affordable social housing within the West Oxfordshire District Council area is very high and cannot be met from the available resources. Only those in the highest housing need, with a local connection to the area are likely to obtain housing through the scheme. However, the Housing Advice Service will be able to discuss a range of housing options with those in need.
- b) The policy has been updated to take into account the Localism Act 2012, Welfare Reform Act 2012 and the Statutory Code of Guidance on the Allocation of Accommodation 2012. It also has regard to the Council's Homelessness and the Right to Move.

2. Overview of West Oxfordshire District Council

- a) West Oxfordshire District Council enables Social Housing landlords to advertise their homes and applicants are asked to express an interest in them. This will be known as a "bid" for a property. Once a bid is placed the computer system will place applicants in order of band, band start date and whether they meet the criteria of the advert. Priority for properties goes to those who have a local connection with the local authority.
- b) All Applicants seeking social housing will be assessed against the same clear set of criteria laid out in the Banding table. Depending on their circumstances, Applicants will be placed into one of four bands Emergency, Gold, Silver or Bronze subject to final verification by West Oxfordshire District Council.
- c) Once an application has been made, Applicants are advised of their banding and application date, together with a unique reference number. This enables them to bid for social housing vacancies being advertised across the District.
- d) The preferred method of bidding for properties is via the internet on the West Oxfordshire District Council website. Alternatively bids can be made in person by visiting various locations throughout the District or by using the automated phone line, digiTV and text. Applicants are able to monitor the success of their bid (and their bidding history) via the West Oxfordshire District Council website.
- e) Once the Bid deadline has passed, the successful applicant is normally the highest priority household matched against the criteria for the property, including where local connection applies. Responsibility for letting each available property lies with the Social housing landlord. The appropriate landlord must confirm that the details on the application are still correct before making an offer. This is known as verification and will originally have been undertaken by WODC at the time of application. Incorrect information will result in the offer being withdrawn and the applicant re-assessed. Social Housing Landlords may sometimes choose to invite the "top" three
 - a. Applicants to a viewing of the property before a final offer is confirmed.
- f) An application for sheltered housing for certain schemes may need an assessment of the support needs, prior to an offer being made.
- g) The banding and the application date of the successful applicant, together with the total number of bids made for each property, will then be published. This enables Applicants to develop realistic expectations regarding their chances of success and likely waiting period.

3. Equal opportunities.

West Oxfordshire District Council is committed to the elimination of discrimination. They promote equality of opportunity for all and work towards this goal in the provision of services.

We are committed to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by the act
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and others who do not share it.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not share it
- Removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by people who share a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic
- Taking steps to meet the needs of people who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of people who do not share it
- Encouraging those people who share a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low

4. Social inclusion

- a) All partners of West Oxfordshire District Council believe that Applicants should be given every assistance to access the housing register and search for suitable properties.
- b) The Mental Capacity Act 2005 introduced a legal obligation on health and social care commissioners to jointly commission advocacy services. All statutory and voluntary agencies who work within the community either helping or advising Applicants are given information and training in order to fully understand the West Oxfordshire District Council scheme and assist their clients to register and search for suitable housing.
- c) To further assist Applicants the following methods may be used: -
 - Applicants potentially disadvantaged by the scheme will initially be identified from the application process. Staff may contact these Applicants and offer them a home visit or interview. Staff will seek to establish what the support needs are and identify ways of enabling the Applicants to participate in West Oxfordshire District Council digital scheme. This may include sending copies of the adverts in large print to an applicant or simply providing advice.
 - All agencies funded through Supporting People should be in a position to provide their clients with help on housing issues.
 - Disadvantaged Applicants are able to nominate a person (including family members, friends or a professional worker) to help them bid or bid on their behalf for suitable properties.
 - Translation services may be provided wherever appropriate (this will reflect the demand for such a service).
 - If no other alternative is available, West Oxfordshire District Council staff may bid for suitable vacancies on a vulnerable applicant's behalf where they have no support or use the system Autobid function.

5. Who is eligible to register?

West Oxfordshire District Council's digital scheme is open to almost anyone in housing need. It may include existing tenants looking to transfer to another property, homeless families looking for a permanent home and other households who rent in the private sector, own (or are buying) a property or lodging with family or friends. A household may include anyone that may reasonably be expected to live with them as part of their application.

6. Who is not eligible to register?

- a) Persons from abroad deemed ineligible through immigration rules and regulations as follows:
 - i. Person subject to immigration control who is an over-stayer or visitor to the country,
 - ii. Illegal entrants,
 - iii. Asylum seeker,
 - iv. Person in the country on condition that they have no recourse to public funds
Person from abroad who is in breach of the European Community Right of residence Directive,
 - v. Person whose only right to reside in the UK arises under European law based on their status as a job seeker or an initial 3 months right of residence,
 - vi. Person from abroad who has been the subject of a sponsorship agreement for less than 5 years and whose sponsor is still alive,
 - vii. Person with limited leave not granted as a result of a claim for asylum.
- b) Persons under 16 years of age. (It should be noted that a tenancy would not usually be given to Applicants under the age of 18 years. A guarantor would normally be required for any person under 18 years of age who is offered and accepts a tenancy).
- c) Persons who are ineligible for a tenancy in their own right may still be included within a household application and for determining the bedroom need of the household.

7. Who doesn't qualify for social housing in WODC?

- a) West Oxfordshire District Council's Policy has been established under the terms of the Housing Act 1996, as amended and the Localism Act 2012. This gives local authorities the right to decide who will not qualify for social housing.
- b) Anyone found to be non-eligible or non-qualifying will be entitled to a review of the decision with the reasoning and actions needed to remedy the situation for future application given in writing. – see section 39 for the review/appeal procedure.
- c) An applicant may not hold two tenancies at one time. They must be able to end the current tenancy before any further offer is made.
- d) A joint tenancy shall only be granted to eligible and qualifying Applicants subject to the policies of each individual Social housing landlord.
- e) An applicant will not be accepted for social housing if we are satisfied that:
 - i. They have sufficient financial resources to resolve their own housing need.
 - ii. Where they have unreasonably disposed of financial resources that could have

- enabled them to purchase/obtain their own accommodation.
- iii. They own or part-own a property which is suitable for their needs, or where those needs can be resolved through adaptation, sale or where, if they sold it, they could afford to buy another property. We may make exceptions to this rule in the case of proven social or medical needs.
 - iv. The applicant, or a member of their household, has been responsible for unacceptable behaviour serious enough to make them unsuitable to be a tenant of the Authority or a Social Housing Landlord at the time of application. Each case would be considered upon its own merits and subject to the spirit of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 according to individual circumstances.
- f) Behaviour that may be regarded as unacceptable is as follows:
- i. History of anti-social behaviour or disruptive nuisance to neighbours, Racial harassment,
 - ii. Criminal activity in the vicinity of the property,
 - iii. Drug use or dealing,
 - iv. Any other breach of the tenancy agreement such that the landlord would be able to apply for a possession order:
 - v. Domestic violence causing a partner or other family member to leave the property,
 - vi. Deterioration of the dwelling-house due to waste, neglect or default
 - vii. Deterioration of furniture provided by the landlord due to ill treatment
 - viii. Tenancy induced by a false statement
 - ix. Premium received or paid in connection with a mutual exchange
 - x. Eviction from a dwelling within the curtilage of a building held for non-housing purposes due to conduct such that given the nature of the building it would not be right for occupation to continue
- g) The applicant or any member of the household has former or current rent arrears (8 weeks rent or more) or other housing debts such that the registered social landlord would be able to apply for a possession order.
- a. This will apply unless there is evidence that the debt arose directly as a result of a person's disability.
 - b. Existing social housing tenants who are non-qualifying because of rent arrears will be considered as an exception on an individual basis if proved that they cannot afford to stay in their current tenancy as a result of Welfare Reform Act changes.

8. Non-qualifying Considerations

As part of the assessment consideration will be given to the household's personal circumstances, the level of the debt, the household's history of arrears and any other factors that may be relevant. Such applicants will be informed of the actions required from them to demonstrate that there has been a change in their behaviour such that they will be become qualifying e.g. a satisfactory landlord reference for a period of time or regular repayments are made without fail against an agreed repayment plan for a period of time.

9. Reasons for suspending an application.

- a) If we become aware that a household has rent arrears or other housing debt accrued after an application has been registered and verified the applicant will be given the opportunity to clear the debt before an offer proceeds. If the applicant is unable to do this, they may be suspended for a period as required to clear the debt before they can bid for other properties but each case will be considered upon its own merits. If a

partner landlord becomes aware of such a debt they will advise the relevant local authority who may suspend or cancel the application as non-qualifying depending on the circumstances.

- b) All applicants are expected to bid on all suitable property types in a reasonably wide range of areas. Failure to do so may result in suspension or demotion for a period.
- c) Whilst West Oxfordshire District Council aims to give applicants choice for good reason it also needs to help social landlords let their available homes in an efficient way. If an applicant refuses 3 properties that the local authority considers were suitable, the application may be demoted or suspended for a period.
- d) An immediate review of an application will be undertaken if an applicant is found to have acted (or failed to act) in a way which deliberately worsened their housing situation. This could lead to the applicant being suspended, or being demoted to a lower band, for a minimum of 6 months.
- e) Applicants will be advised as to what action/s will be necessary to lift the suspension or demotion.

10. Giving False Information

- a) Any applicant who knowingly or recklessly gives false information or knowingly withholds information in order to secure a home to which they are not entitled may lose any home provided to them and may also be prosecuted. Where false information is given and the applicant becomes non-qualifying, the application will be removed. Where false information is given and the applicant still qualifies, the application will be suspended. The law imposes severe penalties, including substantial fines up to £5000 or imprisonment, when an offence is proven.
- b) It is the applicant's responsibility to update an application for any change of circumstances which can include moving home, changes to household members, birth of a child, changes in medical condition and changes in welfare situations. Failure to update an application following a change in circumstances could mean the application is inaccurate, contains false information, and has the wrong priority banding.
- c) Any future application would be subject to review before acceptance onto the scheme.

11 Local Connection

- a) Local Connection is defined in Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 as:
 - i. Those who are normally resident in West Oxfordshire, and that residence is or was of their own choice (Local Authority Agreement guidelines suggest this as having resided in West Oxfordshire District for six of the last twelve months, or three of the last five years, where residence has been out of choice);
 - ii. Those who are employed in West Oxfordshire District (Local Authority Agreement guidelines suggest this as employment other than of a casual nature);
 - iii. Those who have family connections in West Oxfordshire District (Local Authority Agreement guidelines suggest this as immediate family members who have themselves lived in the area for five years).
 - iv. Members of the armed forces have a local connection to the District (Those currently serving, served within the immediate preceding 5 years; bereaved spouse or civil partner who has recently or will cease to be entitled to Ministry of Defence accommodation following the death of their service spouse and the

- death was wholly or partly attributable to their service; existing or former members of the reserve forces who are suffering from a serious injury, illness or disability which is wholly or partly attributable to their service).
- v. Other special circumstances at the discretion of the Head of Revenues and Housing Support, in consultation with the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council. This might include those in exceptional circumstances such as a National Refugee Crisis situation.
- b) In addition, for certain properties which were developed under restrictions imposed by a Section 106 agreement (Town and Country Planning Act 1990), applicants may need a connection to a defined local area.

12. Multi agency arrangements.

- a) West Oxfordshire District Council have entered into an agreement to use the Oxfordshire Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) in dealing with the exchange of information on any household who has been convicted of a serious offence. Any household that confirms on their application form, or who is suspected, or accused, of being a high-risk offender, will be subject to the provisions set out in the information exchange protocol.
- b) Before any known offender is offered housing, full consultation will be undertaken with the relevant support agencies to assess the risks involved. It does not however guarantee the provision of a tenancy.
- c) Re-housing of high-risk offenders will be carried out in consultation with the relevant agencies to minimise the risk to the public. The long-term aim is to influence the successful accommodation and resettlement of high-risk offenders, thereby minimising the risk of re-offending, protect the public and the victims of offenders. WODC in partnership with MAPPA may bid on behalf of any household that falls within this category.
- d) West Oxfordshire District Council also take part in Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) meetings which aim to provide risk information for people who have experienced domestic abuse.

13. Balanced communities.

- a) To help maintain balanced and sustainable communities, West Oxfordshire District Council may decide the proportion of properties to be allocated to the four housing need bands and where local connection applies.

14. Housing Needs Bands – see table below

14.1 – Banding Introduction

- a) Applicants need to meet the criteria in one box to be assessed in that band in the table below.
- b) Special rules are required for those in the armed forces to comply with The Localism Act recognising the services they have offered the country. On discharge members of the armed forces, as defined in 11 (local connection), with Homeless priority need (dependent children or vulnerable as a result of disability) will be awarded Gold band for 6 months from the discharge date. Homeless with a non - priority need are given Silver band from their discharge date. Should they become homeless again within 5 years of the discharge

priority need or unintentionally homeless applicants will be awarded Gold band again for 6 months from Notice being received. Non-priority need or Intentional homeless will get Silver band backdated for 6 months from the Notice being received.

c) Right to move. For social housing tenants who need to move to another district in order to take up a job or live closer to employment or training.

In order to qualify the social housing tenants must demonstrate that the job /apprenticeship will alleviate significant hardship and that there are no other options available to them.

To determine qualification the following detail will need to be established.

- The distance and/ or time taken to travel between work and home.
- The availability of transport taking into account the level of earnings.
- The nature of the work and whether similar opportunities are available closer to home.
- Other personal factors such as medical conditions and childcare which would be affected if the tenant could not move.
- Whether failure to move would result in the loss of an opportunity to improve their employment circumstances or prospects, for example, taking up a better job, a promotion or apprenticeship.

Those applying for the Right to Move must be able to prove that the employment contract is

- For 12 months or more.
- For a minimum of 16 hours per week.
- Not short term, ancillary or voluntary.

Those who qualify for Right to Move will get an additional banding preference of silver, identifying that there is a „significant welfare need that would be alleviated by a move to more suitable accommodation. West Oxfordshire District Council expects that a maximum of 1% of the allocations per year would be able to assist tenants who need to move for work related reasons.

14.2 – Property Size

Emergency Band

Existing West Oxfordshire District social housing tenants willing to move to a smaller non family social housing property within the District..

Gold Band

Existing West Oxfordshire social housing tenants willing to move to smaller family sized accommodation if this has been agreed with the local authority to release a property of higher demand or limited availability.

Or

There is major overcrowding in the current property – lacking 2 or more bedrooms (this will not apply if the applicant has allowed one or more people to move in to the property, this is called deliberately worsening your own situation)

Or

Environmental Health has inspected the property and has served any Notice on the landlord that the property is overcrowded – subject also to the applicant not deliberately worsening your own situation

Silver Band

There is overcrowding in the current property – lacking 1 bedroom – (this will not apply if the applicant has allowed one or more people to move in to the property, this is called deliberately worsening your own situation)

14.3 - Property condition

Emergency Band

Where Environmental Health has inspected the property and requires immediate vacation of the property because of an imminent risk of harm due to disrepair, major defects or grossly inadequate facilities. They could serve an Emergency Prohibition Order on the landlord in these circumstances.

This award is time limited for 1 month when it will be reviewed. It can be extended if no suitable properties have become available in this time scale or a direct match can be made.

Gold Band

Where Environmental Health has inspected the property and has served a Prohibition Order or Suspended Prohibition Order on the landlord that repairs have to be undertaken but the landlord is unable/unwilling to comply. In most cases the landlord will be required to undertake repairs to remedy the problem and when completed this should resolve the issue.

14.4 - Homelessness

Gold Band

The applicant has made a homelessness application to one of West Oxfordshire District Council and the full duty to secure accommodation for the applicant has been accepted.

This is time limited for 1 month when it will be reviewed. It can be extended if no suitable properties have become available in this time scale and a tenancy in the private sector or a direct match into social housing may be made to end the homelessness duty.

Silver Band

The applicant has been assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness. Legally this is taken as within 28 days of being homeless. Homelessness legislation is complicated so contact should be made through Housing Options/Advice Team to discuss the circumstances if threatened with homelessness.

14.5 - Medical/welfare needs

None of the below refer to having a medical condition in its own right. It is only when the current housing is directly affecting that medical condition that priority is awarded. In other words even when a member of the applicants household has a very severe set of medical conditions, if their housing has little or no bearing on their health then no priority will be awarded.

Emergency Band

The applicant assessed as immediate need of re-housing on medical grounds. This is most likely to be when they have had a major incident, are in hospital or other emergency provision and unable to return to the existing home because of changed medical condition.

Or

Exceptional circumstances where there is proven threat to life or limb. This would normally be based on information provided by the Police or Emergency services.

Or

Exceptional circumstances where the current property has a critical detrimental effect on their welfare. This would normally be based on information provided by Emergency services, multi-agency meetings or Social Care services.

These are time limited for 1 month when they will be reviewed. It can be extended if no suitable properties have become available in this time scale or a direct match can be made.

Gold Band

Urgent medical/welfare need or long term disability that would be alleviated by a move to more suitable accommodation. This would apply when the situation is so serious that it would not be reasonable to expect the applicant to continue to live at the property for any length of time, given their particular medical/welfare circumstances but not a life threatening emergency. Proof of the situation would be required from Social Care services or other medical specialists.

Silver Band

Significant medical or welfare need that would be alleviated by a move to more suitable accommodation. This could be a situation/medical condition or group of situations/medical conditions that could apply to one or more members of the household which because of the particular household circumstances significant distress is caused. A medical form is completed by the applicant, which is assessed by a Housing Officer (with supporting medical evidence where necessary).

Depression and asthma are the most commonly quoted medical conditions. Where these are mild and not directly related to the current property priority is unlikely to be awarded.

14.6 - General

Gold Band

Move-on from supported accommodation where a planned move is agreed by the relevant local housing authority. When someone is placed in accommodation based supported housing and is not in their home/lead authority area there is a presumption that they will be reconnected back to their home area when ready to move-on from the supported accommodation. The support provider will also discuss other housing options before putting forward for social housing.

There are 2 requirements for this priority:-

1. that the supported accommodation provider has confirmed that the resident is ready for independent living by completing the standard move-on form detailing the work they have completed with the resident and assessment of any remaining support needs.;
2. that Est Oxfordshire District Council has been involved in the move-on planning and accepts that they are the appropriate local authority to re-house this applicant by awarding this priority.

Or

As a result of a multi-agency decision agreed by West Oxfordshire District Council. Where multi agencies including the local housing authority are involved with a particular household and meet to agree a way forward to resolve an urgent housing situation this priority can be awarded to better protect the public/local neighbourhood.

Or

Left in occupation/succession of social rented housing such as succession where the household is required to move. This applies to an applicant who is living in a social rented property but does not have a tenancy. This may be because the household is too big or too small for the accommodation and they are required to move into a property suitable for their size or age. These are time limited for 1 month when it will be reviewed. They can be extended if no suitable properties have become available in this time scale, a direct match may be made.

	Property Size etc	Property conditions (this only applies to the district where the Notice is made)	Homelessness (this only applies to the district where any duty is owed)	Medical/welfare needs	General
PLATINUM BAND	Giving up family sized social rented housing in the County to move to smaller non-family accommodation	Where a property has been assessed by Environmental Services as causing an imminent risk of serious harm due to disrepair, major defects, inadequate facilities. e.g. Emergency Prohibition Notice served (Time limit 1 month)		Assessed as immediate need of rehousing on medical grounds OR Exceptional circumstances where there is a proven threat to life or limb OR Exceptional circumstances where the current property has a critical detrimental effect on their welfare (Time limit 1 month)	
GOLD BAND	Giving up family sized social rented housing in the County to move to smaller family sized accommodation based on local housing demand OR Major overcrowding – lacking 2 or more bedrooms OR Where a Prohibition Notice (or Suspended Prohibition Notice) has been served by Environmental Services due to overcrowding (Does not apply if already awarded gold for Homelessness)	Where a Prohibition Notice (or Suspended Prohibition Notice) has been served on a property by Environmental Services due to disrepair, major defects or inadequate facilities and the landlord is unable/unwilling to comply	Full Statutory Homelessness Duty accepted (Time limit 1 month)	Assessed urgent medical/welfare need or long-term disability that would be alleviated by a move to more suitable accommodation	Move-on from Supported Accommodation where a planned move is agreed by the relevant local housing authority OR As a result of a multi-agency decision agreed by the relevant local housing authority OR Left in occupation of social rented housing such as Succession where the household is required to move (Time limit 1 month)
SILVER BAND	Overcrowding – lacking one bedroom (Does not apply if already awarded silver for Homelessness)		Homeless or threatened with homelessness.	Assessed significant medical or welfare need or disability that would be alleviated by a move to more suitable accommodation.	
BRONZE BAND	ALL OTHER APPLICANTS				

15. Time limited bands.

- a. Certain categories have a time limit of one month. This is given to recognise an urgent need. It is therefore important that Applicants in this category are bidding for all suitable properties types each week and in a wide range of locations. At the end of the one month period the case will be reviewed.
- b. If the applicant is in a time limited band and has either not bid for suitable properties advertised within the 1 month or has been unsuccessful in obtaining an offer of a tenancy within the one month limit, a direct match of a property may be considered. Where a private sector tenancy is available, suitable and affordable at the time Housing Officers may look to secure a tenancy in the private rented sector.
- c. West Oxfordshire District Council may however decide to demote an applicant to the band below at the end of the one month period if it is obvious that the applicant is choosing to wait for a particular type of property or immediate location and not treating their circumstance as urgent.

16. Definition and implication of dates.

- a) The date when the application is registered and assessed into a housing needs band is important as this will form part of the short-listing process.
- b) The **application date** is the date a fully completed online application form is submitted by the applicant.
- c) The **effective date** is the date a completed application form is placed into a housing band after verification by WODC.
- d) The **band start date** is the date of application or the date an applicant moves up to a higher band following a change of circumstances.
- e) If moving to a lower band, normally the original effective date will apply. If however there have been a previous number of changes of band, the effective date will be reviewed by WODC to ensure that the applicant is not disadvantaged (or given an advantage) by the change in circumstances.
- f) Where an applicant has been unable to obtain settled accommodation due to their employment (e.g. Armed Forces Personnel, tied accommodation) the case will be reviewed and the application date may be backdated depending on the circumstances.
- g) If the applicant's circumstances change, they must update their online application to show the change as this may lead to moving up or down the housing needs bands. An offer of a tenancy will be withdrawn if any change is not declared.

17. Bedroom need assessment

- a) The bedroom need for a household is assessed to match Housing Benefit rules because from April 2013 the same rules apply to all renting households including social housing. One bedroom is required for:

- An adult couple,
 - A person aged 16 or over.
 - 2 children aged up to 16 years of age of the same sex.
 - 2 children aged up to 10 years of age of different sexes.
- b) When a child is born, the applicant must provide evidence of the birth as soon as possible and the bedroom need will then be re-assessed to ensure it is still correct.
- c) An extra bedroom will be considered where the following applies:
- I. A carer who provides the applicant or their partner with regular overnight care, who is not normally living with them. Evidence will be required to substantiate any claim which may include the care component of DLA (Disability Living Allowance), PIP (Personal Independent Payment) or attendance allowance, or details of a care package from a care providing agency funded by Social Services.
 - II. An independent medical adviser has confirmed the need for an extra bedroom.
 - III. In all cases an assessment of affordability will be undertaken, with discretion for the final decision being with WODC and social housing landlord.
- d) Potential children of foster or adoptive carers will be considered in the bedroom need assessment on an individual basis once they have been accepted by the appropriate Social Care Panel.
- e) No visiting children should be included on the application and they will not be included in the bed room need assessment.

18. Medical / Disability assessment.

- a) Physical disability.
- a. An applicant's (or member of the household included within the application) physical condition will be assessed by a Housing Officer or Support Worker, where deemed necessary and feasible, referred to Children & Families or Adult Social Care for a Housing Needs Report. An assessment will then be carried out and a detailed report compiled.
- b) Medical condition.
- a. Applicants will be asked for details of any medical condition and the reasons why their current property affects that condition. A WODC Housing Officer will assess whether the current property has a detrimental effect on their social and or medical well-being. Where necessary a medical report may be requested from the appropriate independent medical advisor. The applicant may be required to pay towards the related costs incurred. Their assessment will be based on the applicant's (or member of the household included in the application) medical condition, the affect their property has on that condition and how moving to an alternative property can help.
- c) Following the assessment, the applicant will be informed in writing of the outcome

and any change to their banding. If the applicant disagrees with this assessment they may ask for the matter to be reviewed under Review/Appeal Procedures (see section 39).

- d) Where an applicant's (or member of the household included in the application) medical circumstances change substantially, a new medical assessment form should be submitted along with any supporting evidence.

19. Hazard assessment/disrepair.

- a) The application form asks Applicants about the condition of their current home. Where an applicant indicates the property possesses potential risks to Health and Safety they should contact their landlord in the first instance. If unresolved, the applicant may ask the Public Protection service of the local authority where they live to inspect the property.
- b) Following an inspection the landlord may be required to undertake works to rectify the problem. Where this is not possible or appropriate a level of priority will be awarded, which will determine the band in which the applicant is placed.

20. Completed applications.

Once the applicant has been assessed and accepted on to the West Oxfordshire District Council scheme, they will receive, where possible within 28 days, notification, confirming their application details. This will include;

- a) The band in which the applicant has been placed (bronze, silver, gold or emergency).
- b) The property size for which the applicant is eligible.
- c) The effective date (and band start date if applicable).
- d) A reminder about the importance of notifying any change in circumstances.
- e) A unique reference number to allow Applicants to make bids.
- f) Details of the documents required before an offer of accommodation can be made.
- g) Details of where to find the West Oxfordshire District Council appeal procedure.

21. Change of circumstances

- a) It is the responsibility of each applicant to update their own information every time there is a change in their circumstances.
- b) Applicants will be notified of any effect of a change of circumstances on their banding within 28 days of providing any requested evidence.

22. Annual renewal process

- a) Where an applicant has not made any bid on any property, nor updated their application in any way within the previous twelve months, they will be contacted to see if they still wish to remain on the West Oxfordshire District Council Register. If there is no response within 28 days from the date of the letter being sent, the application will be cancelled. If the applicant contacts the Local Authority within 28 days of their application being cancelled and indicates that they still wish to be

- considered for housing, the application will be reinstated from their last effective date.
- b) Applicants must renew their application if requested to do so by West Oxfordshire District Council.

23. Cancelling applications.

- a) An application will be cancelled from West Oxfordshire District Council's list:-
- I. At the request of the applicant.
 - II. Where an applicant does not respond to an application review within the specified time limit.
 - III. Where the applicant moves and does not provide a contact address. Where the applicant has died.
 - IV. Where an applicant has accepted the offer of a tenancy after a successful bid.
- b) An application will be cancelled from the West Oxfordshire District Council Register and the applicant will be notified in writing where the household has been deemed non-qualifying as a result of perpetrating Anti-Social Behaviour or Racial Harassment since registering on West Oxfordshire District Council.

24. Re-joining the Housing Register.

Where an applicant wishes to re-join the housing register at a later date, their new date of application will be the date they re-register.

25. Looking for a home.

Once Applicants have been registered as active on West Oxfordshire District Council's register and notified of banding and unique reference number, they can start to look and bid for a suitable property of their choice.

26. Advertisements.

All partner landlords are committed to advertising their available properties as widely as possible. Properties will be advertised in a number of ways on at least a fortnightly basis including:

- Website:
A dedicated website for West Oxfordshire District Council is accessible to anyone with Internet access. The website will allow Applicants to view all available properties in West Oxfordshire and bid „on-line“ for properties of their choice.
- Newsletters:
Adverts placed into free West Oxfordshire District Council newsletters, which can be viewed in a number of localities across the District.
- DigiTV:
Adverts can be viewed through DigiTV

27. Bidding for a property.

- a) Where an applicant meets the eligibility criteria, they may bid for that property within the deadline given. It makes no difference to the final shortlist what time during the week/fortnight the bid was placed. Property details and information should be carefully read as some properties will have additional requirements that make the property unsuitable for the applicant e.g. the number of people the property is suitable for – some have only single bedrooms.
- b) Applicants may have up to a maximum of three bids in any one bidding cycle. Until a decision has been made as to who will receive the offer, a bid will remain live. The applicant can withdraw their bid if they wish to bid for another property during the same bidding cycle.
- c) Applicants may bid for properties via the West Oxfordshire District Council website, by DigiTV, phone, text or approved assisted bidding (family member, support worker etc.).
- d) At the time the bid is placed, the applicant will be given their current position on the shortlist. This is only an indication, as the position can change, as other people bid or bids are withdrawn. Even if an applicant's position is shown as number 1, they may be subject to a by-pass if they do not meet the criteria of the advert or the scheme.

28. Advertisement deadlines.

All advertisements will carry at least fortnightly deadline by which time all bids for particular properties must be received - before midnight each Tuesday. The advert will be published on the same day each bidding cycle starting one minute past midnight on Wednesday morning.

29. Property descriptions.

Properties advertised will carry (where possible) a photograph of the property location and a full description which will include:

- Type of property and eligible Applicants i.e. any restrictions such as age, family size or composition.
- Number of bedrooms and eligible household size appropriate (taking into account issues such as community sustainment or local lettings plans).
- Location of property.
- Any adaptations (e.g. disabled facilities such as stair lift etc.) and if this places a restriction on those who may apply.
- Services provided (e.g. support, caretaker, cleaning etc)
- Heating type.
- Rent/service charges.
- Local connection requirement.
- Additional features and marketing information. Housing Bands that will be given priority.

30. Rural settlements.

Additional local connection criteria will apply for properties in rural villages where there are particular shortages of housing e.g. villages with populations under 3000 or sites with planning conditions (Section 106 agreements and rural exception sites) attached to them. In these cases, priority will be given to Applicants who are unable to live in their community due to the lack of affordable housing, who have a local connection to the parish or surrounding parishes by means of living in the parish, working in the parish or having immediate family connections to the parish. Where this applies the details will be explained in the property advertisement.

31. Local Letting Plans.

West Oxfordshire District Council is committed to creating balanced communities. For new developments and in areas where there are known problems, such as anti-social behaviour or abandoned properties, a sensitive let may be applied. The plan will take into account the needs of the current and new residents and the make-up of the block, street or cluster of streets, to ensure a responsible letting is made.

32. Short listing for the successful applicant

- a) Once the advert deadline has passed, a shortlist will be produced for each advertised property showing all the Applicants who have bid. For each property advertised, the successful applicant will generally be the applicant who has the highest band and the oldest effective date that is eligible to bid (i.e. who best meets the criteria in the advert and the policy).
- b) The system produces the shortlist by the following sort criteria;
 - I. Local ward/parish connection (if specified in the advert).
 - II. Preferred band (if specified in the advert).
 - III. Band start date.
 - IV. Effective date.
 - V. Application date.
- c) Each Social Housing Landlord is responsible for checking to ensure there has been no change of circumstances including eligibility for social housing to the housing need assessment of the applicant since originally verified. This is to ensure that social housing is not allocated incorrectly to Applicants who no longer match the criteria.
- d) Each applicant will be given the opportunity to view the property before signing for a tenancy.
- e) A Social Housing Landlord may choose to invite the top three Applicants on the shortlist to view the property at the same time in case it is refused by the highest placed applicant.
- f) Should an applicant be at the top of the shortlist for more than one property (and not subject to a by-pass), one of the Social Housing Landlords of the properties will contact the applicant as quickly as possible to ask them to decide which property they wish to be considered for. Once they have made their decision, their other bids will become invalid. In this circumstance, viewing of any of the properties before a decision is taken is unlikely to be available and will be at the Social Housing Landlord's discretion.

- g) If an applicant is direct matched for a property, any other bids they have made will become invalid.

33. By-passing the top of the shortlist

- a) A by-pass is where an applicant has bid for a property and meets the advertised criteria but is not offered the tenancy.
- b) The appropriate Social Housing Landlord will inform the household of the by-pass and of any steps needed to prevent further by-passes for the same reason.
- c) There may be a number of reasons for by-passes such as:-
- Family composition unsuitable.
 - Rent or other debt outstanding.
 - Unsuitable for Older Persons accommodation.
 - An Applicant has not responded to contact to view the property.
 - The Applicant has had a change in circumstances since verification.
 - Unsatisfactory current property inspection.
 - Pets not allowed.
 - Anti-social behaviour.
 - Mortgage ability.
 - Unsuitable for property.
 - Support package not in place.
 - Making best use of available housing stock.
- d) Applicants will be required to match the requirements of this policy and match the criteria of the individual property as detailed in the advert. The advert includes details of both the type of applicant that is eligible for the property and any further restrictions.
- e) West Oxfordshire District Council's partners reserve the right to prevent an offer going ahead where the offer is considered not suitable for the Applicant. This could be on the grounds of public safety, risk or sustainability of the tenancy.
- f) Where an offer is being made to a current tenant of a Social Housing Landlord it is made subject to the satisfactory conduct of the present tenancy and approval of that Social Housing Landlord (which may include a home inspection).
- g) If there is an occasion where two or more Applicants have the same band, effective date and application date, the Social Housing Landlord will make a decision which applicant best meets the aims and objectives of West Oxfordshire District Council.

34. Withdrawal of property.

- a) An offer of a tenancy may be withdrawn at any stage up to the signing of the tenancy agreement.
- b) This may happen in certain circumstances, such as the tenant of that particular property has failed to vacate the property or the property has been incorrectly labelled on the advert.
- c) If this happens, the Social Housing Landlord will inform the successful applicant that

the property is no longer available. If the property is not ready for occupation following a successful bid and the applicant is likely to wait some considerable time before being able to sign the tenancy agreement, the Social Housing Landlord will inform the applicant and give them the option to withdraw their bid so they can bid for any other suitable properties. If the property was mis-labelled on the advert it will be re-advertised.

35. Refusals

- a) Applicants are expected to take reasonable care when bidding for a property to ensure it meets their needs. If however an applicant decides to refuse an offer of accommodation, the property will be offered to the next suitable applicant on the shortlist. An application will be reviewed if an applicant refuses 3 offers of suitable accommodation. This could lead to the applicant being suspended for a minimum of 6 months or being placed in a lower band.
- b) If an applicant in a time limited band refuses an offer of accommodation the application will be reviewed and may be suspended for a minimum of 6 months or placed in a lower band.

36. Refusals by Applicants to whom the full homeless duty is owed.

- a) WODC will normally expect an applicant to whom it has accepted a full homeless duty to bid for a wide range of suitable properties within the one month time limit in the Gold Band.
- b) At the same time WODC may be looking to discharge the homeless duty into an affordable and suitable private sector tenancy. If one is identified, the West Oxfordshire District Council application will be reviewed and any homeless banding priority awarded will be removed whether or not the applicant accepts the private sector property found which will still be subject to the statutory review process.
- c) If a homeless applicant has not been actively bidding for all suitable properties or a suitable private sector property is not available at the end of the one month time limit, WODC will secure an offer of suitable, affordable settled accommodation for the household subject to availability.
- d) If a homeless applicant refuses an offer of suitable settled accommodation, WODC is likely to decide that its duty under the Homeless Legislation is discharged, subject to the statutory review process.
- e) Homeless Applicants have the right to request a review of certain decisions made by WODC in respect of their homeless application. This includes the decision to bring to an end the full homeless duty by making a suitable offer of settled accommodation.
- f) If an applicant wishes to request a review of the reasonableness of an offer or the suitability of the property, this should be submitted in writing to WODC within 21 days of the offer. The applicant has this right whether or not they refuse or accept the offer of accommodation. If the review finds in favour of the homeless applicant, alternative suitable, affordable and settled accommodation will be offered. However if the suitability of the offer is upheld, the homeless duty is ended and the banding will be reviewed and the applicant may be moved to a lower band. **Applicants are therefore advised to accept an offer, occupy the property and then appeal under these grounds.**

37. Direct matching of properties.

A direct match is a property which is not available through West Oxfordshire District Council. All the partner social housing landlords are committed to advertising as many of their vacant properties as possible through West Oxfordshire District Council scheme. There will be occasions when certain properties will not be advertised and the reasons for these exclusions will be monitored. Some examples are: -

- a. Over-riding social reason to move the household for safety reasons, as recommended by the Police, partner organisations, or as agreed through multi-agency need and risk assessment panels.
- b. Those let to discharge statutory duties to Homeless applicants in certain circumstances.
- c. Properties required for existing tenants whose properties are subject to major works requiring them to vacate their own properties (either on a temporary or permanent basis).
- d. Extra-care vacancies and any supported accommodation where there is an applicant with a Care package that needs a specific property.
- e. Applicants who have succeeded to a tenancy or, in certain circumstances such as following the death of a family member, left in occupation but who need to move to alternative accommodation.
- f. Where a property has been adapted and meets the specific needs of a client. Applications subject to the Rent (Agriculture) Act 1976.

38. Feedback/Recent lets.

- a. Recent Lets on the web page gives details of the properties previously let once the new tenancy has actually been set up. This will be some weeks after the property was advertised but can help applicants see how long they may have to wait for the size of property they want in the locations of choice. Applicant's personal details will not be included. The feedback given will include:
 - I. Property size and type.
 - II. Property location.
 - III. Number of Applicants who applied for each property.
 - IV. Band of successful applicant.
 - V. Effective date/ Band start date of successful applicant.
- b. Using this information, Applicants will be able to see where properties are more likely to become available and where they may have the best chances of making a successful bid in order to help them make an informed evaluation of their housing options.

39. Review / appeal procedure.

- a) All applicants have the right to request a review of any West Oxfordshire District Council decisions. Reviews must be submitted in writing to WODC within 14 days of the date on the notification. The appeal should include the reason why the applicant believes the decision is incorrect, together with any additional information.
- b) Stage One – Internal Review
 - a. If the applicant does not agree with the housing need assessment awarded, and believes this is not in line with the West Oxfordshire District Council policy, a Senior Housing Officer dealing with their application will

review the decision. Additional information may be requested, the applicant maybe invited to attend an interview or a home visit carried out. The applicant will be informed of the Senior Housing Officer’s decision and advised of their right to request the West Oxfordshire District Council Appeal Panel to carry out a review.

c) Stage Two – West Oxfordshire District Council Appeal Panel

Where an applicant is still not satisfied that their housing need assessment is correct, and in accordance with the policy, a further review may be requested and undertaken by the West Oxfordshire District Council Appeal Panel. The applicant must submit a request for an appeal in writing and send to the Housing Options Team within 14 days of the review notification letter. WODC will acknowledge receipt of the request for an appeal within 14 days and provide the applicant with contact details of the officer dealing with the request and the time it will take to reply to the applicant. If the review cannot be completed within 56 days, the applicant will be informed and the timescales for the review set out.

The panel will consider the facts surrounding the case and the applicant’s request should specify whether there are additional facts the Panel should take into consideration or whether the applicant feels that the original facts submitted with their original application have not been fully taken into account. Additional evidence, such as additional medical reports should also be submitted.

The Panel will consider the review on the papers submitted by the applicant and the housing officer in the case. The applicant does not need to attend this review hearing but occasionally the Panel may require additional and may ask the applicant to personally attend a further review Hearing. The applicant can bring a representative.

Once the appeal has been determined, or if the Panel require the applicant to attend a further Hearing, the West Oxfordshire District Council will write to the applicant giving full details within 14 days or as soon as reasonably practicable thereafter.

d) Stage Three – WODC Complaints Procedure

a. If the applicant is not satisfied with the process that has been followed by the West Oxfordshire District Council Appeal panel, they may make a complaint through the WODC complaints procedure. It must be emphasised that this will not change the West Oxfordshire District Council Panel decision on the housing need assessment in line with the West Oxfordshire District Council policy.

e) The complaint must be made in writing within 14 days of the date of the written notification of the decision of the West Oxfordshire District Council Appeal Panel.

f) If the applicant is still dissatisfied, they may complain directly to the Local Government Ombudsman. The Oaks, 2 Westwood Way, Westwood Business Park, Coventry. CV4 8JB. Telephone 024 7682 0000.

40. Access to personal Information.

Applicants are entitled under the Data Protection Act (1998) to request details of their personal data held by WODC. A charge will be made for providing this information.

41. Use of statistical information.

The information supplied by Applicants on their housing application may also be used for housing management and research purposes within legal guidelines (such as identifying what size and where new housing is required). No individual will be identified in collating such information.

42. Policy monitoring and review

- a) The Housing Operations Manager will run regular reports to monitor performance of the scheme in meeting the aims of the policy.
- b) West Oxfordshire District Council's policy will be regularly reviewed to ensure that it takes into account change in demand and need within the District, that it continues to meet its aims and objectives and that it complies with any legislative changes.