

CABINET MEETING – 5 OCTOBER 2011 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY SHEET – PART I	
Title of Report:	Access to Housing Project – Allocations Scheme
Author(s):	Executive Director of Health, Housing and Adult Services
Purpose of Report:	To seek approval for a new Allocations' Scheme, to determine how properties are allocated across the City.
Description of Decision:	<p>Cabinet is recommended to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Approve the new Allocations' Scheme for the city. To be implemented early 2012 - date yet to be confirmed. 2 Agree that a full re-registration process be progressed for all applicants in line with the new Allocations Scheme to assess applicants' needs in accordance with the scheme. 3 Agree that Council's existing housing register be closed, except for those customers who have an urgent housing need. For example, statutory homeless cases and those with an urgent medical need. This will need to start 3 months prior to the go live date to enable a re-registration exercise to be carried out and completed. 4 Agree that Council nominations should continue to be made from the existing housing register until the new Allocations' Scheme comes into effect. 5 To agree that the Sunderland scheme is part of a sub-regional approach across Tyne and Wear.
	Is the decision consistent with the Budget/Policy Framework? Yes
	If not, Council approval is required to change the Budget/Policy Framework

Suggested reason(s) for Decision:

- To enable customers to have a single point of entry to access housing within the City and across the sub region by virtue of a common application form and website.
- To have an Allocations' Scheme based on housing need making it fairer, open and transparent for customers to use and understand.
- Create efficiencies by removing the need for the Council to provide nominations in many cases. The new scheme will allow all Registered Providers (RPs) to advertise their properties directly on the system which will be monitored by the Council to ensure compliance for nominations and that the policy is meeting the needs of those living within the City.
- To ensure better accessibility for customers as they can manage their applications themselves as well as express interest in properties online, via automated telephone service and texting. They will also be able to do this in person, by attending offices of the Council, or the offices of any of the partners in the scheme. This should release staff resources to assist vulnerable customers navigating the scheme.
- To provide a clearer picture of housing need within the City as applicants will be registered in one place with no duplicate applications on multiple RPs lists.
- To help those who have to move across boundaries to do so.

Alternative options to be considered and recommended to be rejected:

To continue with the existing scheme, however the change proposed provides the opportunity to improve allocating available housing to those most in need and introduces a consistent single approach for customers to apply for housing.

Is this a "Key Decision" as defined in the Constitution? Yes

Is it included in the Forward Plan? Yes

Relevant Scrutiny Committee:
Sustainable Communities

**REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF HEALTH, HOUSING AND
ADULT SERVICES**

ACCESS TO HOUSING PROJECT – ALLOCATIONS SCHEME

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To recommend a new Allocations' Scheme to determine how properties are allocated within the City.

2. DESCRIPTION OF DECISION

- 2.1 Approve the new Allocations' Scheme for the city. To be implemented early 2012 - date yet to be confirmed.
- 2.2 Agree that a full re-registration process be commenced for all applicants in line with the new Allocations Scheme to assess applicants' needs in accordance with the new scheme.
- 2.3 Agree that the Council's existing Housing Register be closed, except for those customers who have an urgent housing need. For example, statutory homeless cases or those with an urgent medical need. This will need to start 3 months prior to the go live date to enable a re-registration exercise to be carried out and completed.
- 2.4 Agree that Council nominations should continue to be made from the existing housing register until the new Allocations' Scheme comes into effect.
- 2.5 To agree that the Sunderland scheme is part of a sub regional approach across Tyne and Wear.

3. INTRODUCTION / BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Council is required by the Housing Act 1996 to have an Allocations' Scheme for determining priorities and for determining the procedures to be followed in allocating housing accommodation. Every allocation of housing made by or on behalf of the Council must be in accordance with the scheme.
- 3.2 The Council has nomination rights with all Registered Providers (RPs) who operate within the City. If the Council nominates a prospective tenant to a RP and they then let the person a property, that is regarded as an allocation for the purposes of the 1996 Act.

- 3.3 The Council's current Allocations' Scheme was agreed by Cabinet in April 2005. Changes to the existing scheme have been agreed by Cabinet previously on the 11 July 2007 and 5 December 2007.

4. CURRENT POSITION

- 4.1 The Council's Allocations' Scheme has been in use since 2005 and it operates by awarding points to applicants to reflect their level of housing need taking into account their personal circumstances. The more points an applicant is awarded the higher their needs as determined within the policy, in accordance with the Council's priorities and legislative requirements.
- 4.2 Once an applicant has been placed on the housing register and points have been awarded, depending on their need the Council looks for suitable properties to meet this need. This is done by the RPs who operate within the City providing a percentage of their housing stock to the Council. This is referred to as nomination rights but is still regarded as an Allocation in law.
- 4.3 The Council then chooses the person with the highest points, ensuring the highest level of need being put forward for the vacancy. Those applicants who have identical point levels are prioritised taking into account which applicant has waited the longest.
- 4.4 Prioritised applicants are offered the first available property regardless of location, effectively limiting choice of where people want to live.
- 4.5 Guidance released by the Department for Communities and Local Government (Fair and flexible: statutory guidance on social housing allocations for local authorities in England – Dec 2009) suggests the current approach for allocating homes is not considered to be good practice.
- 4.6 Access to housing in Sunderland is further complicated as many of the RPs hold their own waiting list for housing. They also have different mechanisms for letting properties which can vary from point systems to banding systems to waiting times.
- 4.7 As a result applicants wishing to maximise their chances of being housed in Sunderland have to complete many application forms for the RPs, all collating similar details.
- 4.8 This disparate approach to accessing housing makes it difficult for customers to navigate the system, understand where they are placed on lists and causes confusion and frustration.
- 4.9 In order to overcome the issues set out above the Council has been working with RPs to develop a new Allocations' Scheme for the city that allocates properties on a need basis whilst providing the customer with some ability to exercise choice in where they would like to live.

- 4.10 The Council has also been working in partnership with the Tyne and Wear local authorities to look at creating an efficient and effective sub regional partnership using an improved accessible and choice driven approach.
- 4.11 The Tyne and Wear Partnership was successful in securing a grant of £148,000 to implement the Scheme.
- 4.12 The partnership is working with all social landlords who operate in the city, and they are all signed up to the new scheme. Gentoo, Home Group, and Isos will go live when the scheme is introduced, with others looking to go live at a later date.
- 4.13 It is considered good practice to offer mobility to applicants, and not be restricted by Local Authority boundaries particularly to access opportunities such as employment and training. Whilst evidence from other sub regional schemes suggest not many customers move across boundaries the scheme will provide flexibility in this regard.
- 4.14 All customers will be required to re-register for the new Scheme as applicants will need to be assessed under the new policy.
- 4.15 To ensure the consistent, single access approach Sunderland's Housing Register will no longer exist and applicants will be applying to the new scheme which will be badged the Sunderland Scheme. We are working with the Communications Team to produce literature in an easy to read and understandable format which will explain fully how the new scheme will operate.
- 4.16 As a result of the re-registration exercise it is proposed that the Council's existing housing register is closed to all non urgent housing applicants 3 months prior to going live. This will allow a thorough review of all existing applicants and will ensure that when the system commences in early 2012 it has the most accurate and up to date information available.
- 4.17 All non-urgent applicants will be signposted to the new scheme to register their details.
- 4.18 During the intervening period all allocation of properties will be carried out from the Council's existing waiting list on the basis of the old Allocations' Scheme until the go live date for the new system.
- 4.19 It is intended that an early review of the Allocations Scheme take place 6 months after the go live date to enable the Council to ascertain its effect and make any necessary changes.

5. REASONS FOR THE DECISION

- 5.1 To enable customers to have a single point of entry to access housing within the City and across the sub-region by virtue of a common application form and website.
- 5.2 To have an Allocations' Scheme based on housing need making it fairer, open and transparent for customers to use and understand.
- 5.3 Create efficiencies by removing the need for the Council to provide nominations in many cases. The new scheme will allow all Registered Providers (RPs) to advertise their properties directly on the system which will be monitored by the Council to ensure compliance for nominations and that the policy is meeting the needs of those living within the City.
- 5.4 To ensure better accessibility for customers as they can manage their applications themselves where appropriate as well as express interests in properties online, via automated telephone service and texting. They will also be able to do this in person, by attending offices of the Council, or the offices of any of the partners in the scheme. This should release staff resources to assist vulnerable customers navigating the scheme.
- 5.5 To provide a clearer picture of housing need within the City as applicants will be registered in one place with no duplicate applications on multiple RPs lists.
- 5.6 To help those who have to move across boundaries to do so.

6. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 6.1 Should the Council decide not to agree the Allocations Scheme;
 - A large proportion of accommodation would continue not be allocated based on housing need
 - It would restrict improvements for customers as the process would still contain duplication and waste.
 - The status quo would not improve the customers experience, or extend choice.
 - Customers would have no real time information about how where they are placed on the lists to enable them to make informed decisions about what their realistic housing options are.

7. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS / CONSULTATIONS

- 7.1 Financial Implications / Sunderland Way of Working

The introduction of this Scheme will bring about efficiencies for the Council due to shared financial costs across the Tyne and Wear sub regional partners for IT systems and processes. It will also help generate income from partner landlords using the system as they will be charged to advertise their properties.

7.2 Risk Analysis

The project has its own risk register in place which has been used to mitigate and minimise any potential or identified risks.

7.3 Employee Implications

Council staff and those of other agencies have been involved in the consultation processes and comments have been taken on board and incorporated as appropriate

7.4 Legal Implications

The Head of Law and Governance has been consulted and her comments are incorporated in the Allocations' Scheme and this report.

7.5 Policy Implications

The Council must have an Allocations' Scheme in law which stipulates how social housing is allocated.

7.6 Health & Safety Considerations

Not Applicable

7.7 Property Implications

Not applicable

7.8 Implications for Other Services

To enable the scheme to work with the full Sunderland Way of Working model discussions are ongoing with the CSN in relation to working processes and practices, as well as identifying staff, agencies and partners who require training on the new scheme.

7.9 The Public

Numerous consultation events have taken place at various stages using different mediums. Comments and changes have been made to the policy as appropriate whilst also meeting legislative requirements

7.10 Compatibility with European Convention on Human Rights

The Head of Law and Governance has been consulted and her comments are incorporated in the Allocations' Scheme and this report.

7.11 Reduction of Crime and Disorder – Community Cohesion /Social Inclusion

The proposals in this report and the changes to the scheme should allow for greater social inclusion as those people in the greatest housing need will be prioritised.

7.12 Equalities

The Council has completed a full Equalities Impact Assessment on the Scheme.

7.13 Project Management Methodology

The Council's PRINCE2 methodology has been used.

7.14 Children's Services

The Scheme is in line with all legislative requirements.

7.15 Procurement

The Council's Procurement Team have been fully involved and rules complied with finding a suitable IT provider.

7.16 Sustainability

As this is a new Scheme ongoing monitoring and outcomes will be analysed along with comments from customers to form part of a 6 monthly review of the scheme.

8. GLOSSARY

Registered Providers (RPs) -previously known as Social Landlords or Housing Associations.

Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) -The Government Department who the Council are responsible to for such a scheme.

Tenant Services Authority (TSA) – The department who Registered Providers are responsible to.

9. LIST OF APPENDICES

9.1 'The Allocations Scheme' for Sunderland'

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

10.1 Housing Act 2006 as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002

10.2 Code of Guidance for Allocations

10.3 Fair and Flexible Consultation and other document responses