

ITEM 9A

CABINET

30 JANUARY 2013

Overview and Scrutiny

Housing Allocations and Lettings Review Group

Report

<http://cmis.milton-keynes.gov.uk/CmisWebPublic/CommitteeDetails.aspx?committeeID=2407>

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 At its meeting held on 26 July 2012, the Housing and Communities Select Committee requested a review of Milton Keynes Council's (the Council) Housing Allocations Policy, incorporating the Homelessness Strategy and a review of Lettings. The Housing and Communities Select Committee felt it was important to conduct a Review at this time in order for their recommendations to be presented to Cabinet when it considered the outcome of a review of the Council's Housing Options and Allocations Scheme and Homeless Strategy on 19 December 2012. The Housing Allocations Scheme Consultation took place between September and November 2012 to seek the views of the public on the proposed changes.

The Review Group agreed a Work Plan and the Terms of Reference, outlined below, at its first meeting in September, when Councillor Coventry was elected as its Chair.

2. Terms of Reference

- 2.1
1. To identify the role and purpose of social housing in Milton Keynes.
 2. To identify the current position on housing allocations and homelessness.
 3. To assist in the development of a clear and transparent policy.
 4. To consider the use of private rented accommodation to discharge the Council's homelessness duty including the Localism power.
 5. To ensure the criteria for the allocation of housing is clear and easy to understand, including a consideration of different ways of offering choice.
 6. To assist with the development of Allocations Policy options that are open and transparent to be presented to Cabinet for consideration.
 7. To develop a formal response to the Housing Allocations Policy consultation on behalf of the Housing and Communities Select Committee.
 8. To assist with the development of a revised Homelessness Strategy to be presented to Cabinet for consideration.
 9. To consider types of tenure to be offered.
 10. To look at how other Councils and organisations operate their procedures.
 11. To call witnesses from a range of backgrounds.
 12. To take account of legislative changes.

3. Report

- 3.1 The role and purpose of social housing is generally agreed to be to provide affordable accommodation.
- 3.2 The Review Group first held a workshop with Housing Officers to gain insight to the operations issues of implementing the current Housing Allocations Scheme. The Group wanted to seek the opinions of Officers as to how the current policy worked and areas for potential improvement.
- 3.3 The local connection timeframe and how this should be measured was of concern. It was felt that clarity was needed in the policy as to what this meant and that it should be more than the six months currently stated. It was viewed that residents should live in Milton Keynes for a significant number of years before being considered eligible for housing. It was also considered that a timeframe of somewhere between two and five years was more appropriate.
- 3.4 The supply of properties across Milton Keynes was of concern and it was viewed that there was a need to increase the amount of social housing available. The properties which are in high demand are 2-bed houses; however, recently there had also been an increase in demand for 3-bed houses. It was the general view that the Council needs to build in the region of 500 new homes each year for the next five years in order to fulfil the demand for social rented housing.
- 3.5 Officers felt that if the option to discharge the duty to the homeless via the private sector was approved it would give them more flexibility and choice in what they could offer people. The option of having a bidding scheme for Milton Keynes was felt to be a highly administrative process for officers and would require more resources. Officers believed that to have a waiting list gave people false hope and managing the expectations of people was very difficult. The Group viewed that by being transparent, having effective communications methods and being realistic with people would assist with managing expectations.
- 3.6 The Group agreed that the Housing Options and Allocations Scheme should include details on how people with different housing needs, in particular people with disabilities, were catered for and how housing was adapted to meet those needs.
- 3.7 The Review Group looked at the option for the Council to discharge its duty to the homeless via the private sector in more detail.
- 3.8 The Group considered that the main issues for tenants were:
 1. A 12 month tenancy for people and therefore having to move regularly gave no security.
 2. Children's education will suffer if there is a requirement to move schools on a regular basis.
 3. Registering with health providers when moving regularly.
 4. Finding a deposit/advance rent every time someone moved home. In some instances tenants had to outlay a second deposit because their first deposit has not been returned by the previous landlord.

5. The administration fee incurred, even if not successful in gaining a particular property causing financial stress.
6. The lack of long term security around a private tenancy.
7. Providing a guarantor for rents for some vulnerable residents, particularly those who were new to the area, had no family, or had been victims of domestic violence.
8. Lack of support for families in Bed and Breakfast (B&B) accommodation who have children or have disabilities.

3.9 Some Members of the Review Group felt that it was important to enable people to sustain their tenancy for longer than 12 months, regardless of the source of the tenancy.

3.10 The view of the Group was that more housing of all tenure types was needed in Milton Keynes which was fit for purpose. It was the view of the Group that unless a substantial programme of building homes to rent was established in Milton Keynes that there would never be enough homes for residents to rent. The Group believed that building Council homes was the best way to achieve this, though looking at alternatives to Council Housing should not be excluded. The Group recognised that there was a place for private landlords to be used however issues around maintenance of their properties needed to be addressed. It was considered that for some tenants they were unable to ask for properties to be repaired for fear of being a troublesome tenant and their tenancy being cut short. The Review Group suggested that strengthening the relationship between the Council and the landlords in Milton Keynes would assist with this issue and it was considered that the Landlord Accreditation Scheme was best placed to assist with this initially. However, it was recognised that there is no legal requirement to sign up to the scheme.

3.11 The Group believed that as well as the option of using the private sector, it was important to address how to prevent homelessness in Milton Keynes.

3.12 Workshops were held with a cross section of stakeholders, that included existing tenants, people who would soon be homeless and representatives from housing associations amongst others.

3.13 The key points from current tenants were:

1. At times communications seemed disjointed with information not explained clearly particularly regarding the length of time to wait for housing and out of town placements. When calling the Council offices the experience was that customers were on hold with officers/caseworkers for long periods. Emails were not responded to and tenants found it best to come in person for assistance.
2. There was no security long term with private landlords and the number of B&Bs in Milton Keynes was too low. It needed to be clear as to why people housed in B&Bs in Bedford and other areas were not brought back to Milton Keynes when a placement became available.
3. The experience of B&Bs was poor with a number of issues including smoke alarms not sounding, drugs users and disruptive neighbours. It was considered not to be a good environment, particular for those with children. Tenants felt vulnerable and there was no assistance offered to help meet travel costs for medical appointments in Milton Keynes for dependants.
4. To discharge the homeless duty to the private sector could be part of the solution but it would depend on the level of rent, length of tenure and the process for achieving this. Private renting did not provide the security needed for the long term. The relationship with the landlords would need to be managed effectively. The issue of a month's rent and/or a deposit in advance and the administration fee needed to be

addressed as not all people could afford these costs.

- 3.14 The Group heard from an Officer from a Children's Centre who worked with families with children up to the age of five. He had found that there was an increasing number of families in B&B accommodation before the summer holidays. He found there was a significant impact on children and their education and at times there were many weeks when they were not in school. In the areas that he worked there had been an increase in private landlords selling properties and making tenants homeless, so ending up in B&Bs. At times this meant vulnerable people were placed out of town and away from their support networks, for example, drug rehabilitation networks. There were also occasions when social services had to step in and remove children.
- 3.15 The Group recognised that the use of the private sector was an option, but there was always the concern for tenants that the landlord would sell the property or not renew the tenancy at the end of the agreed term. For those tenants with children, it was felt this was an unstable environment. There was the financial concern for tenants, in particular those landlords who would not take people on benefits and those who wanted a guarantor for the rent (in some cases this had to be someone earning £30,000+) and the maintenance issues of properties.
- 3.16 The Review Group heard from people who had recently applied for housing for themselves, on behalf of family members or people they support.
- 3.17 The key issues that were raised were:
1. Communication:
 - a) Conflicting information was often received from housing officers;
 - b) Emails needed to be acknowledged in a timely, consistent and effective manner;
 - c) More training was needed for Council officers to ensure a consistent approach;
 - d) There was a lack of understanding and compassion to people's situations;
 - e) The current policy was only clear once someone had explained the process.
 2. Difficulties for certain groups of people, e.g. people who lived on boats, to gain access to services and housing.
 3. Family circumstances, medical and existing support networks were not recognised – the Council needed to look at the wider situation. There seemed to be a lack of understanding and compassion to people's situations and it was felt that a bidding system would give them more control of their own situation. There were concerns regarding the high administration fee and down payment associated with private renting.
 4. Experience of private rented accommodation did not fit needs due to short tenancies and having a family. Education was affected as well as emotional stability.
 5. The lack of B&Bs in the area did not help people in difficult times as this often involved people being moved away from Milton Keynes. Therefore more social housing was needed. If more private landlords were used, issues around repairs needed to be addressed as well as longer tenancies.
 6. A 360 degree approach would be beneficial – where each situation was looked at in terms of personal needs, employment, schooling needs and local connections.

- 3.18 The Group heard from housing organisations and support groups.
- 3.19 The key points were:
1. On some occasions the best option available to many people was to make themselves homeless in order to get a placement in a B&B and then get housed.
 2. It was felt that Milton Keynes did not have the right type of housing for the current needs of tenants. Building new homes was an option so increasing the supply of social housing in the area. The possibility of building studio apartments may be one solution, however the greatest demand was for 2-bed properties.
 3. Better use should be made of the housing stock by moving people into more suitable accommodation which would free up some types of property.
 4. Discharging the duty to the homeless via the private sector may help with some issues, but safeguards needed to be in place for vulnerable people.
 5. Perception of choice and a degree of control for tenants was important and expectations needed to be managed. Tenants' existing support networks, both professional and personal, needed to be taken into account, including that not all tenants had a support network and support was often needed from agencies when placing tenants in B&B accommodation. There were issues for young families, particular issues of schooling. It was felt providers had a responsibility to manage expectations and provide effective communication.
 6. Large deposits required by landlords was an issue for many people, levels of rent needed to be affordable and sustainable tenancies were needed. It was thought that providing incentives to people to downsize may help, but the management of this would need to be looked at in detail.
 7. The Council needed better relationships with tenants and should deal with difficult landlords to help raise standards across the board.
 8. It was felt that the bond scheme was not effective as landlords did not accept the scheme and better promotion of the Home Swap scheme was needed. Better promotion for landlords of the benefits of having the Council as the tenant was needed e.g. the guaranteeing of rent. The local connection of 6 months was too short.
- 3.20 The issue of the changes as part of the Welfare Reform Act came up as a concern for all groups, particularly the effects this would have on housing benefit and the introduction of the Universal Tax Credit.
- 3.21 The majority of witnesses also felt that the allocation and availability of B&Bs in Milton Keynes needed to be addressed. The process for the allocation of places for families in B&Bs was unclear and the criteria needed to be clearly set out, with particular attention to how and when families could return to Milton Keynes and reasoning behind this.
- 3.22 The Group considered the document detailing the comments, complaints and compliments received by the Housing Service over the past six months. The majority of enquiries received related to people in B&Bs who wished to get housed quicker. A number of enquirers also voiced concerns that they were not being given priority. There were also a number of comments received regarding the local connection and how people who had a connection to Milton Keynes should get housing priority. Housing accounted for the highest level of Members of Parliament and Councillor enquiries.
- 3.23 This information was found to enhance the comments received through the workshops held in October.

- 3.24 It was agreed at this point that in light of the work that was being undertaken, the final report would act as a formal response to the current consultation.
- 3.25 As part of the Review, the Group looked at allocations schemes from other local authorities to allow a comparison of schemes and to gain a wider picture. Throughout the Review, information was gathered from a variety of local authorities to see how the different allocations schemes work.

Review Group visit to Swindon,

- 3.26 In November some Members of the Group visited Swindon Council which currently operates a choice-based letting policy. Officers from Swindon presented their policy and explained the information that was available to the public online. Swindon Council has a comprehensive website with details of what is available in the area to assist tenants with their housing needs, as well as links to support groups. Swindon Council has a website which allows people to bid for properties on a weekly basis. One bid per week is permitted, however the system allows bids to be moved from one property to another up until the end of each cycle of bidding. Currently almost 99% of bids are placed on line. Residents are encouraged to explore the online information first and complete the forms via the website before contacting Swindon Council. Computers are available in the Council's offices for people to use and the information is sent to all libraries for people to access.
- 3.27 Swindon Council introduced the system nearly four years ago and feedback has been positive. Officers from Swindon Council believed that people have a choice and a degree of control. It improves transparency and allows people to be kept informed of their situation as well as allowing people to update their information via the website.
- 3.28 Swindon uses private landlords and carries out six-weekly checks to the property/tenants and has a good relationship with the landlords and guarantees the rent for three years. This takes the pressure off tenants to find the one month's deposit and any administration fee sometimes associated with a new tenancy.
- 3.29 Swindon Council uses B&Bs, but generally only for 3-5 nights and then people move into hostels. The Review Group recognised that the online application system had reduced the amount of data entry done by housing officers which meant that officers had more time to assist tenants with their individual situations.
- 3.30 In line with the online application process, Swindon Council had introduced, as part of the bidding system, a newsletter containing the properties available in each bidding cycle. The newsletter requires the recruitment of additional members of staff to produce the newsletter which takes two full days work each cycle due to the number of properties available in the area.

The Review Group did not consider this to be of benefit to Milton Keynes as the borough did not have the volume of properties to make this viable. This statement was not supported by the Labour Group

- 3.31 The general conclusion amongst those present from Milton Keynes, both Members and Officers, was that the bidding system, as introduced at Swindon, was cumbersome, required recruitment of additional housing staff and new computer software would be necessary if Milton Keynes Council was to initiate such a bidding system. This would be expensive and time-consuming to introduce. There was also the recognition that at This statement was not supported by the Labour Group

least two days of each week would be needed by at least two members of staff merely to input all the data onto the system.

Presentation by the Head of Housing, Luton Borough Council

- 3.32 The Review Group invited a representative from Luton Borough Council to attend its meeting at the end of November. Luton operates a consortium (working in conjunction with housing providers) and a choice based letting scheme. They also have a banding scheme and a waiting register.
- 3.33 The representative from Luton held the view that having a bidding system managed people's expectations. Luton worked with Waltham Forest to develop the online system and working in a cross-border partnership was attractive to applicants. Luton had experimented with text and phone bidding but found that for the majority, online bidding was the preferred method. There was the option to appoint a proxy bid as well as auto-bidding within the system. Luton operates on a fortnightly cycle for bidding, with the ability to place 3 bids per cycle.
- 3.34 There were issues of migration from London due to the perceived problems with the new Welfare Reform Act and therefore a stronger local connection may be needed. Local lettings plans are an option if certain areas needed it. Luton are also in the process of proposing more onerous exclusions for certain types of behaviour. Luton Borough Council is also clear that if applicants have sufficient income to support themselves they are not allowed to go on the register.
- 3.35 If Milton Keynes Council was to introduce an online system, the Luton representative stated that the following points were highlighted as important and should be taken into account:
1. Have the application form online;
 2. Have a version of the interview online so that even if an applicant visited council offices the Housing Officer would go through the same process;
 3. Ensure the system links up with other systems where appropriate;
 4. That the system tells an applicant which band they fit in;
 5. That the system provides information as to why an applicant was not successful and directs them to sources of help;
 6. Explanation of how housing is allocated;
 7. That the system has the ability to scan documents to reduce office space take up with paper work;
 8. That the system has the ability to update instantly unlike some systems that do it overnight.
- 3.36 Once Luton has placed an applicant in a B&B they have six weeks to submit a bid and if they do not engage with the system that the system automatically bid for them on the next suitable property for their needs. If an applicant does not take the property, Luton Borough Council would end its duty. Verification takes place at the end of the bidding process.

Towards the end of the meeting, the representative from Luton made the statement that Milton Keynes does not need a bidding system. There was disagreement amongst the Review Group Members as to the context in which this statement was made.

Some Members believed that it was as a response to learning the numbers that Milton Keynes has in B&B. Other Members took the view that it was in comparison to the numbers in band 1 to the numbers in total on Luton's waiting list.

- 3.37 The Group decided that at this point there was a great deal of evidence received and that to

have a full debate on what the nature of their recommendations on the Housing Options and Allocation Scheme would be, they needed more time. The Group also required more time to consider the Homeless Strategy that would also be submitted to Cabinet. Members wished to discuss with their Groups before coming back to the Review Group to make final recommendations. It was viewed that the deadline of 5 December was too restrictive and would not be met. It was agreed that the Chair would discuss with the Cabinet Member if the item could be deferred to the January 2013 meeting this would allow the Review Group to make full and effective recommendations to assist Cabinet in their decision making.

4. Conclusions

NOTE: Conclusions and recommendations where all are in agreement are highlight in bold

<u>Labour Submissions</u>	Lib Dems Agree	Cons Agree
4.1 It has been clear from the evidence gathered during this process that the Council needs the ability to be able to distinguish the difference between housing need and housing want. Many residents come to the Council at the earliest opportunity expecting that they will be housed fairly quickly. Applicants in the majority of cases do not want to be put into B&B accommodation, especially outside of Milton Keynes, and did not expect to be outside of Milton Keynes for a long period of time, which is often the case. Applicants who are put into B&B accommodation suffer many difficulties including children having to change schools; losing their jobs because of transport difficulties and travelling logistics, and having to change GPs especially if a member of their family has health or disability issues. Many of these families also lose the support of family and friends whilst outside of Milton Keynes, and this often causes problems with caring for dependants of any age.	Yes	
4.2 B&B accommodation outside of Milton Keynes was considered by most witnesses to be something that the Council should try and avoid at all costs. It is not convenient, causes much distress and is expensive for the Housing department to administer and pay for. It often causes as many problems and sometimes more problems than it actually solves. Many local authorities now lease private rented properties mostly within their boundaries, to use as emergency temporary accommodation instead of using B&Bs. This keeps families within their own council area, and often does away with the need for children to change schools or families to change GPs. It is cheaper and allows for Councils to build up relationships with landlords within the private rented sector potentially freeing up more private rented properties over time as the relationship develops.	Yes	
4.3 It was clear from the evidence gathered that though many applicants could see some benefit in using the private rented sector for the Council to discharge its homeless duty, there are a lot of issues that need to be resolved before applicants could accept this as a positive and viable alternative to social housing. This includes repairs, condition of property, length of tenure,	Yes	

deposits and administration fees.

		Lib Dems Agree	Cons Agree
4.4	The evidence gathered also pointed to residents wanting a stronger local connection so housing in Milton Keynes is provided to Milton Keynes residents, so as children of parents living in Milton Keynes can have a chance of staying within the borough thus getting the often much needed family and friend support that is often needed.	Yes	
4.5	There was very little support for the new 'Affordable Rents Product' that the Government has introduced as a funding stream for Housing Providers for new build and 'conversion' of existing tenancies. It was felt that this could provide an alternative for some families who could afford this option. However, any allocation scheme introduced would need to be flexible enough to take this factor into account, and the present system fails to do this. There was also little support for short term tenancies in social housing, though it was felt that incentives to encourage tenants to downsize or to look at alternative types of housing such as shared ownership should be looked at to enable more properties to be freed up.	Yes	
4.6	Many applicants did not understand the present banding system as it stands and felt that a simpler, easier to understand and transparent system of banding was needed. A lot of officer time is presently taken up carrying out housing options interviews, when it is clear from the start that they may not fall into the categories that will get them into the priority groups for being housed by the Council. An online scheme such as at Swindon and Luton could save many officer hours and could provide applicants with a clear understanding as to what their realistic options are. Additionally with verification of their circumstances at a much later stage could again save many wasted officer hours on verification at the beginning, often with those circumstances needing to be verified again at a later stage as applicants circumstances change.	Yes	
4.7	Luton Borough Council is working with some of its bordering authorities in a housing partnership. This allows for a small percentage of their homes to be made available to neighbouring authorities for their housing applicants to bid for and for Luton based applicants to be able to bid for properties in their neighbouring authorities.	No	

However it was the conclusion of some Members of the Review Group (Liberal Democrats) to reject this method as they believe there is no benefit to the residents of Milton Keynes and there may be an influx of people from outside the borough who may wish to take houses which should be made available for the residents of Milton Keynes.

It was viewed by other members of the Review Group (Labour) however that this allows for even more mobility options for tenants, and allows some scope for moving out of area if circumstances change such as a job move. It was felt that this may provide some

benefits to the residents of Milton Keynes if a similar scheme was to be introduced here.

		Lib Dems Agree	Cons Agree
4.8	There was some support for the exclusion of some applicants from being able to apply for Social Housing. This included conviction by a court of domestic violence; failure to pay rent in a previous tenancy and still owing money to a prior landlord; being evicted from a previous tenancy for anti-social behaviour, including drug dealing, violence and noise.	No	Yes
4.9	It was also highlighted in the evidence gathered that the easiest way to get into social housing was to become homeless. This encouraged many applicants to become homeless such as parents writing letters saying that the relationship with their child had broken down or that they could no longer live with them, this put an additional burden on the Council in providing bed and breakfast accommodation. Additionally, a number of witnesses stated that the Home Swappers Scheme did not always make it easy to move from one social rented property to another especially if presently living in a so called undesirable area or property, even if the circumstances of the tenant had drastically changed, such as having more children or being in under-occupied properties. This is now even more critical with the changes in Housing and Council Tax benefit coming in 2013. Some councils are allocating a percentage of their properties to tenants who wish to move or need to move location, whereas in Milton Keynes virtually all properties are going to the homeless. The ability of present tenants to have more mobility within the housing sector does not take away properties from the homeless as it still frees up a vacant property, though maybe in a different location or an alternative size.	Yes	
4.10	A number of witnesses felt that the present allocations system did not give them real choice as to the type of property, or location that they would or could accept. It was believed that a bidding system of some kind may improve this situation, and of course, with the new affordable rents scheme coming in the level of rent they could afford was also a critical factor and again whatever system was introduced could and should take this into account when properties were being allocated.	Yes	
4.11	There was also some concern expressed by witnesses that spare bedrooms could not be allocated, especially when they were having custody of their children at weekends, or at times had to move in with relatives for care purposes. Additionally it was also mentioned that the potential for small business start up could mean another room was needed, and that this could eventually lead in this case to the residents becoming more self supporting, and eventually being able to move out of social housing completely. This may be more of a pipedream at the moment with the critical shortage of social housing Milton Keynes is currently experiencing, but could be worth looking at in the future if the supply problem eases.	Yes	

		Lib Dems Agree	Cons Agree
4.12	There are also issues over the expansion of Milton Keynes in the future. At present it would be difficult to allow companies existing or new to Milton Keynes the opportunity of an allocation of social housing to assist their current employees in moving to the area, but again if the supply of social housing increases, then this should be an option that could and should be looked at.	Yes	
	<u>Liberal Democrat Submission</u>	Lab Agree	Cons Agree
4.1	The Allocations and Lettings policy currently utilised by the Council needs change and enhancement to make it, in the eyes of residents and others who have experience of the system, more understandable, open and transparent. The information received from the many witnesses demonstrates that, for the vast majority, it is not a change of system that is required, but rather a more coherent, user-friendly approach. Whilst some witnesses made mention of their preference for a bidding system, this was always in the context of greater clarity and understanding. In other words, it is not a new system that is required at the Council, but, more accurately, whatever system and policies are in place need to be more easily understood, and users want to be satisfied that their questions and concerns are fully met and answered. It is the Liberal Democrat contention, therefore, given the above, and coupled with the experience of those who visited Swindon, plus the statement made by the Head of Housing at Luton, that a bidding system would not be suitable in Milton Keynes - and would be a retrograde step. A better way forward would be to overhaul and enhance the current Allocations system.	No	Yes, see proposed amendment to 4.1
	<u>Conservative Amendment to 4.1:</u>	Lab Agree	Lib Dems Agree
	Allocation and lettings to cover all groups within the housing lists by allocation on a percentage scale.	No	No
	Example: A - 80% B – 10% C – 6% D – 4%		
	Not as at present where only Band A and possibility of Band B and none whatsoever for Bands C & D.		
4.2	Almost every witness, members of the Review Group and Officers arrived at the same conclusion – that the only way to solve the lack of homes available to those who approach the Council, was for this Council to increase dramatically its own housing stock. Over and over again, witnesses, from a wide variety of backgrounds, recognized the need for the Council to develop a programme of house-building that met the	Lab Agree Yes	Cons Agree Yes

requirements of those applying to be allocated a Council home in Milton Keynes.

		Lab Agree	Cons Agree
4.3	<p>Many of the witnesses understood the requirement of the Council to discharge its duty to the homeless by use of the private sector. The majority, however, of those that commented made it clear that there were questions and concerns that needed to be addressed if the Council decided to use this option. The need to put a variety of safeguards in place was clearly enunciated. The concerns expressed ranged from:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. the robustness of any vetting system of both the landlord and the property; 2. the introduction of a scheme by which the Council helps would-be tenants overcome the difficulty with finding the initial deposit and rent; and 3. the length of the tenancy. <p>It should be noted that the above is far from an exhaustive list!</p>	No	Yes
4.4	<p>There was much discussion about what period of time qualified as a 'local connection'. Various times were suggested – but the overall opinion was that the current six-months was insufficient. It is the Liberal Democrat position that, if a new local connection time is introduced by the Cabinet, it should not exceed two years.</p>	No 5 year period preferred	No 5 year period preferred
4.5	<p>Much was made of the apparent inability of the Council to respond in a timely manner to enquiries about housing allocations and related matters. The general view expressed was that e-mails, in particular, were slow in being replied to and that responses, when eventually received, were often interspersed with jargon and not given to great clarity!</p>	Yes	Yes

5. Recommendations

Labour recommendations

		Lib Dems Agree	Cons Agree
5.1	<p>That an online application scheme should be developed or bought to be the main access point for new applicants and existing tenants to the scheme. The online application would reduce the amount of time an officer spent on housing options interview so that those most in need got the level of support required.</p> <p>The online applications should:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Allow applicants to update their circumstances. 2. Allow those in housing need to progress their application online. 	Yes	Yes

3. Provide signposting to alternative sources of information and advice if they were unsuccessful in an application for social housing to enable them to solve their own housing requirements.

Computers would need to be provided in Council offices and strategic locations to enable all applicants' ease of access. Assistance in these locations would be needed to provide IT support to those in need

		Lib Dems Agree	Cons Agree
5.2	For those in Housing need an online bidding system should be introduced to allow for choice of tenure, rent payable, and location. This would be based on the time that applicants have been in the housing need banding. This bidding should be on a monthly cycle with applicants able to make up to two bids in each cycle. Any applicant in bed and breakfast or temporary accommodation not bidding for suitable properties in any 2 month period should have bidding done for them. If successful in their bidding and refusal of property happens then the discharge of duty by the Council ends and the applicant is removed from the list.	No	No
5.3	That 50% of all homes becoming vacant should be allocated to those tenants wanting or needing to move home. These should be allocated on a bidding basis with the time on the transfer list determining the highest priority. This should be on a monthly cycle (alternating on a 15/16 day cycle with 5.2. This allows for a variety of properties to be bid for by each of the groups in 5.2 and 5.3 without officers having to decide which properties go into each pool). Any Tenant persistently wanting to move home or considered to be misusing the scheme should not be allowed a move for a 5 year period commencing with the date of their last move.	No	No
5.4	That a banding scheme be used for determining those from housing need from housing want be introduced, though a simpler and more transparent banding scheme than the one presently used.	Yes	No
5.5	That the Cabinet look at what realistic and practical help can be offered to those in Housing want. This would include looking at: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Help with deposits; 2. Lists of local letting agents and private landlords,; 3. Potential rent guarantors; 4. What help or advice can be given with administration fees. 	Yes	Yes
5.6	The qualification period for all applicants in housing need should be as follows. All applicants must have one or more of the following statements:		

	1. Have lived in Milton Keynes for at least a 10 year consecutive period at some time in their lives.	No	Yes
	2. Have lived and/or worked or attended school or College or University in Milton Keynes for the whole of the last 5 years.	No	Yes
	3. Have significant need to move to Milton Keynes for either care to be provided for or to provide care for a close relative or Partner.	Yes	Yes
	4. Those in need of protection from domestic violence or other significant need such as witness protection scheme.	Yes	Yes
		Lib Dems Agree	Cons Agree
	5. Those owning their own homes or living in private rented accommodation that is unsuitable for their needs and their present home is unable to be adapted or insufficient funds are available from the sale of the property to allow them to move into a suitably adapted property	No	Yes
5.7	That the Cabinet be requested to look at some cross boundary work with adjacent councils to see if a housing partnership can be set up to help with tenant mobility between areas.	No	
5.8	That residents who are or have or are about to become intentionally homeless, be barred from applying for social housing for a period of 5 years. However in rent arrears cases this would need to be looked at on an individual basis as there may be extenuating circumstances, such as disputes with Housing Benefits, learning difficulties, mental health problems or issues of vulnerability and inability to sustain a tenancy without help from one or more professional agency.	No	No
5.9	That the housing department looks at leasing private rented homes to alleviate the use of bed and breakfast accommodation outside of Milton Keynes.	Yes	Yes
5.10	That the Cabinet investigates more options for keeping people in their present homes, such as buyback and renting to the occupants; working with social services to prevent the breakup of relationships between parents and children/single parents.	Yes	Yes
5.11	That the Cabinet investigates ways to incentivise tenants to downsize in properties that are under occupied. Not all tenants under occupying are on benefits, so the benefit changes will not adversely affect them.	Yes	Yes
	<u>Liberal Democrat Recommendations</u>	Lab Agree	Cons Agree
5.1	<u>Allocations and Lettings Policy</u> The Cabinet should not abandon the current Allocations and	No	Yes, see proposed

Lettings Policy in favour of a bidding system. The Cabinet should retain the current system but recognize that it needs modification and enhancement. The Cabinet should, therefore, seek to introduce changes to the current Allocation and Lettings Policy to make it more understandable, open and transparent. The Cabinet must address concerns with regard to the users of the system that a more coherent, user-friendly approach should be introduced that leaves users assured that their questions and concerns are fully met and answered.

amendment
to 5.1

		Lab Agree	Lib Dems Agree
	<u>Conservative Amendment to 5.1</u>	No	Yes
	Clarity over the criteria by which tenants would be under to pay back a deposit to the Council		
		Lab Agree	Cons Agree
5.2	<u>Home-building programme</u>	Yes	Yes
	The Cabinet, with immediate effect, should develop a fully costed, time-tabled programme that demonstrates an ability to provide at least 500 new Council houses each year for the next five years. The Cabinet also agrees that this programme should be clear, detailed and made available to Overview and Scrutiny before the end of September 2013.		
		Lab Agree	Cons Agree
5.3	<u>Discharge of duty to the Homeless by use of the Private Sector</u>	Yes	No
	The Cabinet should exercise the Council's use of the private sector to discharge its duty to the homeless. The Cabinet must, however, recognize that many applicants, indeed the majority, have grave misgivings about being consigned to homes owned by private landlords. The Cabinet, therefore, should introduce, before the end of 2013, an enhanced vetting system for both private landlords and their properties. The changes envisaged must include:		
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. the robustness of any vetting system of both the landlord and the property; 2. the introduction of a scheme by which the Council helps would-be tenants overcome the difficulty with finding the initial deposit and rent; 3. a substantial increase in the length of the tenancy; 4. all landlords used by the Council must be members of the Council's Accreditation scheme. Furthermore, the Cabinet should explore every means by which to make the Accreditation scheme mandatory. 		
5.4	<u>Local Connection timeframe</u>	No	No

Should the Cabinet decide to introduce a new local connection timeframe, to replace the current six-months, it ought not to exceed two years.

	Lab Agree	Cons Agree
5.5	Yes	Yes
<u>Clarity and timeliness of correspondence</u>		
The Cabinet must undertake a thorough review of the methods and manner in which correspondence of all types is administered. Any review should explore the apparent inability of the Council to respond in a timely manner to enquiries about housing allocations and related matters. In particular, e-mails are perceived to be slow in being replied to and responses, when eventually received, are often interspersed with jargon and not given to great clarity!		
5.6	Yes	Yes
<u>The '360 degree' approach</u>		
The Cabinet must, as a matter of some urgency, address the concerns raised with regard to the perceived limited view taken of applicants and their requirements other than for housing. For example, no consideration is currently given to those single persons occupying homes with two bedrooms, where the second bedroom is used several days a week by the individual's carer. Some tenants have been told that they should downsize to a single bedroom – thus making it impossible for their carer to then stay with them overnight! The Cabinet needs to take a more holistic approach, which recognizes, and takes account of, ALL the welfare needs of an applicant or tenant, in conjunction with their housing situation. A further example is where tenants have part-time custody of their children		
5.7	Yes	Yes
<u>Online Application Scheme</u>		
The Cabinet should have, before the end of 2013, developed an Online Application Scheme, available to new applicants and existing tenants.. An online application scheme will reduce Officer time in the conducting of housing option interviews and allow them to increase the time available for supporting those who most need it.		
Any Online Application Scheme thus introduced should:		
1. allow applicants to update their circumstances;		
2. permit applicants to progress their application;		
3. provide links and signposting to alternative sources of information;		
4. proffer advice and help to unsuccessful applicants about the best way(s) in which their housing requirements might be satisfied;		
5. Contain links to other relevant sites, such as Job Centres and Health Centres etc;		
6. Include computers being installed in Council offices and strategic locations, such as libraries and surgeries, to		

ensure ease of access to all applicants.

		Lab Agree	Cons Agree
5.8	<u>Help where help is needed</u> The Cabinet should address the issues over realistic and practical help that can be offered to those in housing want. Such issues include: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. a deposit / initial rent aid scheme;2. listings, both on line and hard copy, of local letting agents, private landlords and registered social landlords;3. help or advice with regard to administration fees charged by letting agents, including recovery of the same when a home becomes unavailable;4. a universal and effective home bond scheme.	Yes	No – believe it should be offered to those in housing need not want
5.9	<u>Partnership working</u> The Cabinet should give serious consideration to the possibilities inherent in cross-boundary partnerships with adjacent councils. It is the belief of the Review Group that this may be an advantage with tenant mobility between areas, particularly those who live outside of Milton Keynes but plan to work within the borough.	No	Yes
5.10	<u>Council Use of Private homes for rent</u> The Cabinet should be encouraged to explore the use of renting or leasing private homes. This would lead to a reduction in: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The numbers of those in bed and breakfast accommodation outside of Milton Keynes;2. The numbers of homelessness;3. Those whom the Council, quite literally, has to ‘turn away’, for a lack of suitable homes to offer applicants.	Yes	Yes

6. Officer and Witnesses Observations

- 6.1 Having six members, rather than the norm of 3, was an extra challenge to the process. The Cabinet date was rather restrictive and the Review did feel rushed at times. There were occasions when requested information was not able to be produced on time which meant items were tabled at meetings and Members had to go away to review and the item be brought back to the next meeting. This impacted on the limited time available.

NOTE: The Elected Members of the Review Group were unanimous in their agreement that, notwithstanding the Officer observation, having six members, rather than just three, was to be welcomed. Two Members from each Political Group enabled Elected Members to have at least one Member present at each meeting of the Review Group.

The Review did get excellent feedback from witnesses and the workshops held were of high value in getting frontline evidence from service users.

Some witnesses views that the times and location were accessible however for young families to attend it may have been difficult to take time to travel into Central Milton Keynes. There was the suggestion that if the subject was appropriate, meetings could be held within communities to encourage attendance, engage with the public in a comfortable environment and gain insight into what public perception was. It was viewed that the information was clear and really well documented. The workshops were well organised and gave all sectors the opportunity to participate. It was not just about professionals and their views but was very real, so because of that it was felt that true and fair recommendations could be made. Some witnesses discussed the meetings of the Review; some professionals knew about the Review but generally the public either do not know or feel that the meetings will not change anything or they think they would be out of their depth. Witnesses felt that Members and officers encourage the participation of witnesses who attend the meetings.

7. Background papers

7.1 Housing Options and Allocations Scheme Review – formal consultation

<http://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/mkccconsultationdetails/?ConsultationID=210>

Housing Allocation Scheme

<http://www.miltonkeynes.gov.uk/housing-needs/displayarticle.asp?DocID=28742&ArchiveNumber>

Full details of the meetings of the Housing Allocations and Lettings Review Group

<http://cmis.milton-keynes.gov.uk/CmisWebPublic/CommitteeDetails.aspx?committeeID=2440>

Cabinet Papers (including the draft Housing Options and Allocations Scheme)

<http://cmis.milton-keynes.gov.uk/CmisWebPublic/Meeting.aspx?meetingID=9986>

Welfare Reform and Universal Tax Credit

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/policy/welfare-reform/legislation-and-key-documents/welfare-reform-act-2012/>

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/policy/welfare-reform/universal-credit/>

8. Acknowledgements

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