

Recommendations of the Housing Allocations Task and Finish Group - September 2015

The TFG makes the following recommendations:

1. During the Group's investigation stage, it noted that of the nine local authorities who provided copies of their Housing Allocations Policy, eight use a choice-based letting system. The only exception is Milton Keynes Council. Therefore, **the Cabinet should immediately investigate the cessation of the current Housing Allocation Scheme, the rejection of the proposed new Housing Allocation Scheme and the introduction of a choice-based letting scheme.**
2. Having compared the Housing Allocation Policy for a variety of neighbouring local authorities, **the Council should seek to introduce the best, cost-effective, choice-based letting scheme distilled from the letting schemes of those authorities.**
3. The Group recommends **a greater link between officers dealing with Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) and officers that deal with homelessness. Arrangements between these two areas of the Council need to be much more flexible.**
4. In the view of the TFG, **the Cabinet should consider the feasibility of making more homes available by removing designation of specialist use from certain properties.** Part of the problem with the supply of accommodation is the lack of flexibility within the system. The Group is concerned that **there must be flexibility with sensitivity, however, so that the accommodation remains appropriate to households in proximity, for example within a housing scheme. The use, therefore, of specialist accommodation should not become a 'free for all'.**
5. **When homes are adapted for specialist use, they should remain available for all to use, and not just those who need the adaptations. The Group recognises, however, that for example those with disabilities would have the priority on homes that were adapted for specialist use.**
6. **The Cabinet should explore new sources of temporary accommodation. One solution could be imaginative and innovative conversion of Council buildings that may not have been designed as homes originally, for example office or retail buildings and schools.** This would enable families to be kept together and local to Milton Keynes, helping them and radically reducing the costs to the Council of temporary accommodation outside its area, including travel to school and the other indirect costs.
7. **The analysis should be considered by Cabinet before the end of 2015, so that any proposed changes can be introduced at the beginning of the new Council year.**

8. **The Cabinet should refrain from making any changes to the current system until it has reviewed the possibility of adopting a choice-based letting system.**
9. **To manage the expectations of each applicant, if a choice-based letting scheme is adopted, they should receive a clear explanation beforehand on how the system operates and for which properties they would be eligible, and on the point of bidding, whether or not they are eligible for that specific property. The explanation should be provided in written form and also included in the computer-based instructions as each person applies.**
10. **A single point of contact should be provided for all applicants and private landlords. It should be the responsibility of this named point of contact to deal with any queries. If for any reason the single point of contact is not going to be available (for example, because they are on leave), arrangements should be made for a substitute while they are away, and all clients should be provided with contact details. Both the service user HW and the private landlord JC said that they needed a single point of contact at the Council, and this would benefit their relationships with officers at the Council.**
11. **Homeless people should be contacted at least once a week by the named individual who is their single point of contact.**
12. **The initial contact between the named individual who is the single point of contact and the homeless person needs to include a detailed written sheet with all the information they will need. This may require sensitivity to any needs such as translation, low reading ability or large print.**
13. **The Cabinet should examine all means by which Homes in Partnership can be enhanced. The proposition should be improved for example by including a golden handshake and guaranteeing repairs, gas certificates etc. The Homes in Partnership Scheme should also be improved by making support of the tenant an integral part of it.**
14. **In line with officer thinking, the Council should seriously consider becoming a letting agent in its own right, both of its own properties and those managed for others. It could thus attract smaller landlords by advertising that it would make it easier and simpler for them to operate their business.**
15. **In the event that the Council became a letting agency, the regeneration companies used by the Council could be invited to tender for maintenance contracts, offering an economy of scale.**
16. **As the level of LHA is based on a formula that disadvantages Milton Keynes as a growing conurbation, the Chief Executive should write to the two Milton Keynes Members of Parliament, explaining that Milton Keynes is**

a special case and requesting that they pursue the need for Milton Keynes to be considered as such.

17. **In order to increase supply of accommodation, the Council should revisit how to bring empty, privately-owned property back into use. This should include consideration of compulsory purchase.**
18. **In view of the ongoing increase in acceptance by the Council of a duty to house applicants, and as part of the review of the Housing Allocations Scheme, the Cabinet should review the qualifying criteria for acceptance of that duty, for example how long applicants need to have lived in Milton Keynes.**
19. **Milton Keynes Development Partnership (MKDP) should be permitted to allow affordable homes to be built on its land without the requirement to seek best value. This would result in a saving to the actual cost of house building and contribute towards the relieving of pressure on the use of temporary accommodation. The Cabinet should also use its relationship with MKDP as an opportunity to build affordable housing in partnership with registered social landlords (housing associations).**
20. **In line with the recommendation above on Milton Keynes Development Partnership, the Council should review the stipulated percentage of affordable housing to allow a minimum of 30% affordable housing on Council land, which would enable Milton Keynes Council to determine a higher percentage on the land it currently owns through Milton Keynes Development Partnership.**
21. **The TFG also suggests that the current requirement for 30% affordable housing in developments be reviewed.**
22. **In the short term, measures should be taken to ensure that the current requirement for 30% affordable housing in developments is adhered to.**
23. **The Council should be at the forefront of identifying land to build hostels and identify larger properties that could be adapted to become hostels.**
24. **The Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) needs to reflect accurately the genuine needs of the area according to current Council policy.** Accurate reflection of the figures in the SHMA, taking into account changes in policy, may show a change in levels of expected tenures and sizes.
25. **The Group recommends re-numbering, if re-categorisation of bands does take place, to avoid the confusing Band 1A.**
26. **The TFG would hope that Cabinet would consult with the TFG when it makes its decision and would be happy to reconvene to consider any proposals.**