

Background and scope

This document serves a specific purpose and will consider the stated aims and objectives of the common allocation scheme for Buckinghamshire Districts (Bucks Home Choice). It will consider whether these aims and objectives are being achieved and their ongoing relevance. It is not a review of the policy framework for housing allocations.

The stated objectives of Bucks Home Choice are set out below:

- To meet the District Councils' statutory requirements and ensure that priority for housing is given to those with the highest level of housing need.
- To give applicants as much choice as possible having regard to the statutory requirements and the availability of housing stock.
- To provide a common framework for allocations of affordable housing within the Partnership.
- To facilitate a degree of mobility within the Partnership.
- To help and encourage sustainable communities.
- To make the best possible use of all available housing stock.
- To allocate housing resources in a way that is as fair as possible.
- To make the process of allocating tenancies as open and transparent as possible.

Where possible and appropriate, allocations data will be used to inform and assess performance against objectives and is appended to this document. Statutory guidance for housing allocations also strongly encourages that a wide range of allocations data is published.

Executive Summary

1. The objectives of the Bucks Home Choice Allocations Scheme remain relevant and are overall, being achieved.
2. The allocations data for the year 2015-16 is provided in Appendix 1

Assessment of stated aims and objectives

Each of the above objectives will be addressed below, except where there are similar themes and it makes logical sense to consider objectives together.

To meet the District Councils' statutory requirements and ensure that priority for housing is given to those with the highest level of housing need.

The Housing Act 1996 sets out that local housing authorities must give 'reasonable preference' to certain groups of people. This in effect means that applicants in reasonable preference groups have a 'head start' over others. There is however broad discretion as to how applicants within reasonable preference categories are prioritised.

The Bucks Home Choice allocation scheme sets out in detail, priority Bands for those who qualify. There are four priority Bands (A-D), with 'A' being the highest and most urgent and 'D' the lowest priority.

These bands relate to reasonable preference categories. All qualifying Bands (A-D) are considered to reflect applicants falling into reasonable preference, with the exception of those Band 'D' applicants who qualify as an exception for aged person's accommodation.

The allocations scheme also sets out qualification criteria, for those who can join the scheme. Applicants who have no demonstrable need for affordable rented accommodation do not qualify and therefore are not allocated a priority band to express interest in available accommodation.

Overall, it is therefore fair to say that the District Councils' statutory objectives are being achieved. This is because only those in reasonable preference categories can express interest in accommodation, and clearly have a head start over those who are not, because they are unable to participate.

It is less straightforward to make an assessment of whether those in the highest level of need are rehoused most urgently. This is because of the choice afforded to applicants about the type and location of property they can express interest in. For example, an applicant might be placed in Band A because of an urgent need, but may have a specific wish or need to live in a particular area. Other applicants might have a high medical priority, but require a specific type of accommodation (ground floor or disabled adapted). This might mean that the applicant has to wait longer for accommodation than a lower priority applicant.

Overall, we can see from Figure 10 (below) that Band A applicants wait the shortest amount of time (43 days). However, Band B applicants, wait longer on average (543 days) than Band C applicants (426 days). This is perhaps unsurprising when we consider that the majority of Band B applicants are high priority medical cases and may require specific accommodation.

To give applicants as much choice as possible having regard to the statutory requirements and the availability of housing stock.

To make the best possible use of all available housing stock.

Bucks Home Choice is a Choice Based Letting (CBL) scheme. Available properties are advertised each week and applicants express interest in the accommodation/areas that they prefer. There is however, not total freedom as applicants can only bid for the size of property (number of bedrooms) that matches their household size. This is achieved by using the bedroom standard, which is recommended in statutory guidance and also mirrors the approach set out in Housing Benefit Regulations.

There are some circumstances where growing families do not have the flexibility to move into a home that they might grow into, in the future. However, the scarcity of affordable rented accommodation across Bucks means that applicants can only be offered appropriate accommodation, which meets their needs at the time, rather than what might meet their needs in the future.

Some priority groups might also have less choice than others. Applicants owed a homeless duty by the local authority are expected to fully participate in the scheme (to express interest in the maximum number of suitable properties each week). Where a homeless applicant is not fully participating and there is pressure on temporary accommodation, the local housing authority can make a direct allocation to an applicant. Similarly, where a disabled applicant is in urgent need and there is a property which specifically meets their needs a direct allocation might be made. Figure 4 indicates that the number of direct allocations as a percentage of all

lettings represents only 14%. Therefore the overwhelming majority of applicants are able to express choice.

We are also able to consider the number of allocations where the size of the accommodation did not directly match the requirement of the household. Figure 6 indicates that of the 1489 lettings in 2015/16 only 52 (less than 4%) did not match the property size to the household size¹.

To provide a common framework for allocations of affordable housing within the Partnership.

Bucks Home Choice is a common allocations framework. This means that all partners allocate housing using the same allocations policy and CBL computer system. In addition, practitioners from each partner meet each month, to ensure a consistency of approach.

In addition to a common allocations policy, District Councils can apply Local Lettings Policies (LLPs), to deal with housing management issues, or allocate housing using alternative priorities, given other local circumstances. There are 10 local lettings policies currently in use across the Buckinghamshire Districts, broken down below. Details of all current LLPs in use are published on the Bucks Home Choice website and additional lettings criteria is clearly set out in property advertisements.

Local authority	Number of LLPs currently in force
Aylesbury Vale District Council	5
Chiltern District Council	3
South Bucks District Council	2
Wycombe District Council	0

An LLP should not dominate the overall allocation scheme. Although data is not collected on the number of lettings made in this way, there is no evidence that LLPs are used indiscriminately, or inappropriately. When creating or reviewing an LLP the relevant partner must be able to clearly set out the rationale and justification.

To facilitate a degree of mobility within the Partnership.

Arrangements for Bucks Home Choice changed significantly in 2012, in response to the Localism Act, which granted more flexibility to local authorities to design allocation schemes, according to local priorities. In particular, local authorities had the ability to qualify or disqualify certain classes of applicant. Supplementary guidance went on to encourage that local authorities apply a two year residence test, for qualification purposes.

Previously, applicants registered for Bucks Home Choice in one district had the flexibility to express interest in properties in another district within the Partnership. This changed in 2012, and applicants can now only express interest in accommodation located in a district where they have a strong local connection (because they have lived or worked there for 2 years).

¹ Figure 6 also indicates that in some instances, allocations to 3 and 4 bed properties did not match the requirements of the households. At present, some 3 beds are effectively let as 4 beds (where they have an extra downstairs reception room) and some 4 beds are let as large 3 beds (for example they have two 1-person bedrooms), so there is a degree of flexibility about how the matching process is administered. In addition, there are issues around how our CBL computer system calculates bedroom need for large families.

Notwithstanding this, there remains some flexibility. In particular, older person's accommodation is not restricted in this way. Additionally, where there is little or no demand for general needs accommodation locally, it may be advertised again, allowing applicants from the other Bucks Districts to express interest. Similarly, whether there are exceptional circumstances which give rise to a local connection to another district, then applicants are allowed more flexibility.

Figure 9 indicates 56 of the total lettings were made across district boundaries, representing 4% of all allocations. This indicates the aim of achieving some mobility is being achieved.

To help and encourage sustainable communities.

There is, in reality, very little easily accessible and understandable data about how sustainable a community is. Certain metrics such as anti-social behaviour, turnover of accommodation or socio economic data can be used, however, this has not been collected and interpreted across the Bucks districts in such a way that it could be utilised for this purpose.

There is a clear and logical argument that having choice about where you live means that you are more likely to settle and integrate into a community and less likely to move on. This was the driving force behind the introduction of CBL and there was a range of data supporting this hypothesis at the time.

In the context of Bucks Home Choice, the District Councils currently support and promote choice and are of the view that a CBL model is more likely to help and encourage sustainable communities than traditional alternatives, such as list based allocations schemes.

To allocate housing resources in a way that is as fair as possible.

To make the process of allocating tenancies as open and transparent as possible.

As set out above, the District Councils have agreed on a prioritisation mechanism that they believe offers the highest priority to those with the highest level of need and therefore represents the fairest approach. Each District has consulted and sought the relevant approvals from elected Councillors both prior to implementing CBL initially (2009) and again before making significant changes (2012).

The obvious advantage of the CBL model is that available properties are advertised, so applicants can see what is available and understand the realities of the supply of affordable housing. Applicants are provided with information about their priority and waiting time and can also see the relative priority of their bid in real time via the Bucks Home Choice website. More specific feedback (the priority band and application date of the successful applicant) is published when the tenancy commences.

As set out above, direct allocations were made in 14% of cases and all other allocations are made in a way which is transparent and can be scrutinised. Of the direct allocations, the majority were made to Band A (the most urgent cases) and Band C. This is most likely to have been in response to the need to free up temporary accommodation provided to homeless families placed in this band.

Appendix 1 – Allocations Data 2015-16

The data below represents all those allocations where the tenancy commenced or was recorded as having commenced during 2015/16. This means that the data may include information on accommodation advertised prior to 2015/16, where the lettings process was completed in this period.

1. Total lettings by District and bedroom size

	1 bed	2 bed	3 bed	4 bed	Total
Aylesbury Vale	258	313	142	21	734
Chiltern	127	93	19	0	239
South Bucks	43	38	19	2	102
Wycombe	240	118	54	2	414
Total	668	562	234	25	1489

2. Total lettings by District and applicant Priority Band

	Band A	Band B	Band C	Band D	Other	Total
Aylesbury Vale	2	125	424	181	2	734
Chiltern	1	35	128	75	0	239
South Bucks	0	30	56	16	0	102
Wycombe	71	123	88	130	2	414
Total	74	313	696	402	4	1489

3. Total lettings by District and property age restriction

	Aylesbury Vale	Chiltern	South Bucks	Wycombe	Total
None	585	168	75	205	1033
25 and over	7	0	0	0	7
30 and over	0	0	2	0	2
40 and over	0	1	6	0	7
50 and over	27	2	10	2	41
55 and over	31	68	9	23	131
60 and over	84	0	0	184	268
Total	734	239	102	414	1489

4. Total lettings by District and type (ordinary/direct)

	Let via BHC	Direct allocation	Total	Direct % of Total
Aylesbury Vale	691	43	734	6
Chiltern	229	10	239	4
South Bucks	69	33	102	32
Wycombe	296	118	414	29
Total	1285	204	1489	14

5. Direct allocations by Priority Band

	Band A	Band B	Band C	Band D	Other
Total	69	36	83	12	4

6. Total lettings by household size and property size²

	1 bed allocated	2 bed allocated	3 bed allocated	4 bed allocated
1 bed need	668	50	0	0
2 bed need	N/A	512	2	0
3 bed need	N/A	N/A	229	14
4 bed need	N/A	N/A	3	11

7. Total lettings by District and Ethnicity

	Aylesbury Vale	Chiltern	South Bucks	Wycombe	Total
A White - British	542	166	64	236	1008
B White - Irish	8	1	1	1	11
C White - Other	40	12	5	9	66
D Mixed - White and Black Caribbean	10	1	0	6	17
E Mixed - White and Black African	1	0	0	0	1
F Mixed - White and Asian	2	0	0	1	3
G Mixed - Other	3	0	1	1	5
H Asian or Asian British - Indian	4	3	1	1	9
J Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	53	12	0	35	100
K Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	2	14	0	1	17
L Asian or Asian British - Other	5	3	1	1	10
M Black or Black British - Caribbean	8	1	1	20	30
N Black or Black British - African	21	6	1	6	34
O Gypsy / Romany / Irish traveller	2	1	0	0	3
P Black or Black British - Other	2	1	0	0	3
S Other	7	5	1	6	19
Z Not Stated	24	26	26	90	166
Total	734	239	102	414	1489

² *Ibid.* 1

8. Total lettings by District and Nationality

	Aylesbury Vale	Chiltern	South Bucks	Wycombe	Total
Belgian	0	1	0	0	1
British	647	200	73	317	1237
Bulgarian	1	1	0	0	2
Dutch	1	0	0	0	1
French	0	1	0	1	2
German	1	0	0	1	2
Hungarian	1	0	0	0	1
Irish	5	0	0	0	5
Italian	1	2	1	0	4
Latvian	1	0	0	0	1
Polish	24	4	1	5	34
Portuguese	5	0	1	0	6
Romanian	3	2	1	0	6
Slovakian	0	0	0	1	1
Spanish	2	2	0	0	4
Other	29	6	1	7	43
Not stated	13	20	24	82	139
Total	734	239	102	414	1489

9. Total number of cross boundary allocations, by District

	Allocations to own applicants	Allocations to other district applicants	Total	% allocations to other district applicants
Aylesbury Vale	726	8	734	1
Chiltern	220	19	239	8
South Bucks	95	7	102	7
Wycombe	392	22	414	5
Total	1433	56	1489	4

10. Average waiting time (days) by District and Priority Band³

	Band A	Band B	Band C	Band D	Overall Average
Aylesbury Vale	172	553	291	770	399
Chiltern	420	560	394	413	424
South Bucks	N/A	562	350	542	442
Wycombe	34	493	810	468	474
Overall Average	43	543	426	570	470

³ Note that of the 1489 lets, 89 are direct lets without a member registration date (hence no pre-existing Bucks Home Choice application), so it would not have been possible to calculate the length of time these clients have waited to be rehoused. For the most part, these will be homeless cases, so an indicative waiting time of 33 days has been applied (as the target timescale to determine a homelessness application). This has resulted in more accurate waiting times.