Aberdeenshire
C O U N C I L **Infrastructure**

REPORT TO FORMARTINE AREA COMMITTEE – 10 DECEMBER 2019

HOUSING ALLOCATION POLICY REVIEW CONSULTATION

1 Reason for Report

1.1 The Housing allocation policy is currently being reviewed. Formartine Area Committee is being asked to consider, discuss and comment on the service report produced, and acknowledge further investigations, into a change to the current allocation process to a possible Choice Based Lettings (CBL) approach, noting that the Committee's views will be sought in respect of a future draft policy.

2 Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to:

2.1 Consider and discuss the Housing Allocation Policy Mini Public Report October 2019 at Appendix 1 regarding the housing allocation policy review and consultation responses to date;

2.2 Acknowledge that further investigation is to be undertaken by the Housing service into a Choice Based Lettings (CBL) approach;

2.3 Provide comments for the Communities Committee in February, 2020 in respect of the Report and possible change to a CBL approach; and

2.4 Acknowledge that following determination in principle of a new housing allocation approach by the Communities Committee, Formartine Area Committee's views will be sought as part of the consultation process in respect of the relative draft policy.

3 Purpose and Decision-Making Route

3.1 A report was taken to Communities Committee on 21 December 2017 asking for approval to undertake an allocation policy review. The review was due to take place in October 2018, however, was delayed due to the introduction of Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans (RRTP) and the Housing (Scotland) Act 2014.

3.2 A small working group has been established to oversee the review which includes officers and tenants. The consultation started in August 2019. A SurveyMonkey questionnaire was issued to a selection of waiting list applicants, current tenants and external partners asking for views on the current policy and proposed changes being considered by the Options and Homelessness Team.

3.3   Following the closure of the survey, results were examined from the 120 respondents. The results highlighted several key issues. These were the current prioritising and banding system, Choice Based Lettings and Transfer first.

3.4   Having identified the key issues, a series of mini public events were organised in conjunction with the Community Learning and Development (CLD) Team. These events were held in four locations across Aberdeenshire (Inverurie, Stonehaven, Fraserburgh and Peterhead). Each area held two sessions. Attendees at the sessions were a mix of applicants and tenants.

4   Discussion

4.1   A full report from the CLD team is appended to this report.
The first session in each area involved a summary of the current allocation policy. Staff in attendance explained the policy and survey feedback. Participants also undertook an exercise to better understand the banding process. At the end of the session, the results showed that participants felt that the current policy was complicated and difficult to understand. Discussion around the banding system also resulted in feedback to say that it was too complicated. Dialogue also took place on how these could be changed to reflect housing circumstances.

4.2   The second session focused on Choice Based Lettings (CBL) and Transfer First policies. These were areas that were identified as trends from the SurveyMonkey questionnaire. Examples of current systems were explored including Homehunt – which operates locally with Housing Associations and 'Key to Choice' which is Edinburgh City Council's CBL system.
Overall, responses were positive to a move to a CBL policy. More choice was a positive step for those in housing need and for creating sustainable communities. The allocation process was seen to be more positive as applicants would know how many people they were competing against, they wouldn't be penalised for refusing offers and there would still be an assessment of need to ensure best use of stock. Some felt that more rural vacancies may be filled if people were able to bid for them.

        Some concerns were raised regarding a change in system, mainly around the system being online. It is worth noting that the current and any future housing applications are/would be online, and support is put in place to assist those that do not have internet access or are not computer literate. The service has accepted this as an issue and would look at a system approach to ensure that this group would not be disadvantaged in the bidding process.

4.3   A Transfer First approach was also discussed. This would mean that each vacancy would first be offered, where suitable, to a current tenant with the resulting vacancy allocated to someone who required to be rehousing rapidly. This was seen as a positive measure to meet two housing needs using one vacancy by creating a chain effect.

4.4   Other issues were discussed throughout the course of the sessions. This included waiting time priority, number of offers, choice of house type and groups which should be given more priority. Feedback on these subjects will be considered within the draft allocation policy. Overall, the main issue being raised by participants is that they would like to see more choice, and this supports a change to CBL.

4.5   CBL's have been the centre of much discussion and research by the Chartered Institute of Housing, Shelter and the Scottish Government. They have explored the idea that traditional allocation processes do not allow for applicants to feel empowered to make their own choices and are often penalised for refusing an offer of housing.

4.6   The allocation of housing is now being seen more than just somewhere to live but having a wider impact on the community and sustainability. Through research, choice is key to making this work. It is key to any allocation policy that housing need is at the core, however choice should be part of this process.

4.7   CBL's are a popular scheme in England with a target that all social housing providers should have had one in operation by 2010. In Scotland, several landlords have now opted for this type of allocation system. Many are local authorities who include Highland Council, Edinburgh City Council, Renfrewshire Council and Angus Council. A number of Registered Social Landlords also operate a CBL system including Glasgow Housing Association, Grampian Housing Association, Sanctuary Housing and Castlehill Housing Association.

4.8   It is noted in the research mentioned above that care would need to be taken when using CBL systems when addressing homeless households to ensure a balance is struck between applicant choice and providing suitable accommodation to them within a reasonable timescale. During further investigations, the service would take due care and attention to ensure that this is studied, and a system applied that meets the needs of the applicant and the legal obligations of the Local Authority regarding homelessness. This would be done by assessing the policies of other Local Authorities on how they are managing this, homeless legislation and good practice.

4.9   In addition to the views of those who responded to the consultation, a change in policy is also supported by the Options and Homelessness team. The time taken to allocate properties is increasing in some areas, particularly where there is a surplus of certain types and sizes of properties (i.e. two bed properties in North Aberdeenshire). In some cases, allocations are being made to those with little housing need or to household who need smaller accommodation. A change to a CBL approach would ensure that all vacancies are allocated to those who wish to live in the area/property and would save Housing Officer time in allocation processes, giving them more time to provide housing advice and information. A reduction in refusals should be seen which would have a positive impact on void turnaround.

4.10 CBL would also reduce the length and time of the housing application process as there would be no requirement to collect the data which is currently being requested.

4.11 This committee is asked to comment on the attached report regarding a change in housing allocation policy for the Communities Committee, and acknowledge further investigation is to be undertaken by the service and that the Area Committee's views will be sought in respect of the draft policy relative to any change.

4.12 When comparing other CBL schemes in operation and considering how they might work in Aberdeenshire, the service will endeavor to consult fully whilst also ensuring that all relevant legislation and duties are met by any new policy and considering rural challenges.

4.13 This will delay the launch of a new allocation policy however it is felt it is important to fully consider a clearer policy that is easier to understand. A revised timetable will be reported to Communities Committee in February 2020 following feedback from area committees.
.
4.14 If a CBL approach is agreed work will be undertaken to develop a new draft policy. On completion of this, a further consultation process will be undertaken with service users, Area Committees and Communities Committee before final approval and implementation.

5   Council Priorities, Implications and Risk

5.1 This report helps deliver Council Priority 6 - Have the right mix of housing across all of Aberdeenshire.

5.2 This report helps deliver against Aberdeenshire's Local Housing Strategy and Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan.

5.3 The table below shows whether risks and implications apply if the recommendation(s) is(are) agreed.

Subject	Yes	No	N/A
Financial	x		
Staffing	x		
Equalities	x		
Fairer Scotland Duty	x		
Town Centre First	x		
Sustainability	x		
Children and Young People's Rights and Wellbeing	x		

5.4 An equality impact assessment is not required because committee is being asked to agree the investigation of this approach. An equalities impact assessment will be carried out and presented with a future report once the full detail and impacts of a prospective change of policy have been determined.

5.5 There are likely to be staffing and financial implications in the change in policy. These will also be explored, determined and presented with a future report.

5.6 The following Risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a Corporate Level; ACORP006 - reputation management (including social media), if the system is unsuccessful or doesn't embed well and ACORP007 - social risk (e.g. population changes, poverty & social inequality, demographic changes, crime, antisocial behaviour) if the communities created are unsustainable. *Corporate Risk Register).*

   The following Risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a Strategic Level; ISSR005 - Affordable Housing *Directorate Risk Registers.*

6 Scheme of Governance

6.1 The Head of Finance and Monitoring Officer within Business Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report and their comments are incorporated within the report and are satisfied that the report complies with the Scheme of Governance and relevant legislation.

6.2 The Committee is able to consider and take a decision on this item in terms of Sections B1.2 and 11.1 of the List of Committee Powers in Part 2A of the Scheme of Governance as it relates to the Committee's powers to consider, comment on and make recommendations to Services and any other appropriate Committee on any matter or policy which impacts its Area; and consider and comment on proposals to amend Council policy and/or develop policy in line with the Policy Development and Review Framework and make recommendations to the relevant Policy Committee.

Rob Simpson
Head of Housing

Report prepared by Allan Jones, Housing Manager (Options and Homelessness), Hannah McSherry, Service Development Officer (Options)
Date 18 November 2019

List of Appendices –

Appendix 1 - Community Learning and Development – Housing Allocation Policy Mini Public Report

APPENDIX 1

Housing Allocation Policy Mini Public Report

Aberdeenshire Community Learning and Development (CLD) Service

October 2019

Community Learning and Development
Changing Lives Strengthening Communities

Aberdeenshire
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Contents

Introduction

Background to the Engagement

In response to recent changes to the Scottish Government Housing strategy, Aberdeenshire Housing Service are in the process of reviewing the current Housing Allocation Policy. Under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2014 there is a legal obligation to produce a consultation report evidencing an inclusive engagement process. Accordingly, the Housing Service had endeavoured to engage widely through a survey monkey questionnaire to which around 120 responses were received. In order to ensure a broader approach, they requested support from Community Learning and Development to undertake an engagement exercise on the current Housing Allocation Policy across Aberdeenshire.

The remit was to engage with a wide geographic and demographic spread of people that had lived experience of applying for local authority housing. Following discussion, it was agreed that the Community Development team would hold a mini-public exercise consisting of four separate events covering Aberdeenshire – Inverurie Stonehaven, Peterhead and Fraserburgh. The online survey undertaken by the Housing Service had looked broadly at the existing allocation policy and the results of this indicated the themes that they wished explored in more depth including the Prioritising and Banding system, Choice Based letting and Transfer First. Feedback from the sessions would be used to inform the updated housing allocation policy.

Why the mini-public approach?

The mini-public concept is built on a belief in the ability of ordinary citizens to consider complex issues and make decisions based on an evaluation of the evidence. This is like the methodology of the jury system where randomly selected citizens listen to evidence, sometimes from experts, draw all the information together and then as a group discuss the findings and deliberate to make their considered judgment.

The principles of a mini-public is participatory democracy where participants are recruited to match the demographics of an area or have lived experience of a situation. The method is used to counter a common issue with public consultations where the 'usual suspects' respond. For this exercise, apart from recruiting a 50/50 gender mix and a spread of ages, the housing allocation banding matrix themes were used as a filter. The housing database was filtered to provide information on location; age; tenant or waiting list and the banding allocation. Prospective participant were asked if they had any specific needs or welfare issues, this acted as a guide to ensuring that at least one person from each band theme attended.

An incentive payment was offered to remove any barriers that people may have had to participating – evidence from previous experience using this approach has proven

successful in engaging with non-traditional participants across Aberdeenshire and Scotland.

Who was involved?

How we recruited the panel?

The Community Development (CD) team were provided with lists from the Housing Information Service covering the four Council areas, comprising of people who were on the waiting list or existing tenants. The plan was for Housing Officers to send out an information letter which was then followed up with a phone call from CD Workers to ask if they were interested in taking part. If so a confirmation email / letter was sent out and participants phoned the day before to remind them.

The aim was to have enough diversity of participants to include a range of those from the different Housing Allocation themes – this proved to be quite difficult, partly due to the following reasons

- The team had hoped to start recruitment week beginning 16th September but received the list two weeks later than expected so were unable to start phoning people until week beginning 30th September – two weeks before the first event which did not leave as much time to contact people

- In some cases, we found it difficult to get in touch with potential participants as some numbers were no longer in use / people not answering etc.

To recruit more participants, the Housing Service provided further lists of those on the current housing waiting list and existing tenants. In Stonehaven, Peterhead and Inverurie, staff went out to the housing areas to recruit participants through door knocking and groups CD staff are working with.

Table 1: Number of people contacted:

Contact method	Number	Approx number contacted	Comments
Housing list 1	100	100	All on list were sent an initial letter and Community Workers tried to follow up with phone call but in some cases unable to make contact
Housing list 2	70	70	As above
Housing list 3	200	50	Unfortunately, the time scale was too short to make contact

| Door knocking | - | 90 | This did result in another 3 participants in Stonehaven who attended and 6 potential in Inverurie who did not attend |
| Local recruitment | - | 8 | 2 people were recruited by local CD workers in Fraserburgh and 4 in Peterhead. |

Participant profiles

There was a positive reception from people that we spoke to about the mini-publics with some wishing to attend but unable to do so due to their schedule etc. A target of 60 was set with the expectation that there would be a 50% drop-off which is normal for such engagements.

We contacted all potential participants the day prior to the events to check they were still available with most confirming they would take part.

Table 2: Participants by recruitment and attendance

	Recruited	Attended
Stonehaven	17	8
Inverurie	19	6
Peterhead	14	8
Fraserburgh	10	4
Total	60	26

In total 26 people participated. There was a good representation of ages and the banding themes with twice the number of females represented to males. Due to the geography of Aberdeenshire having the sessions in four locations enabled people to attend locally, thus providing a balance of lived experiences.

Table 3: Participants by age

	Total	Stonehaven	Fraserburgh	Peterhead	Inverurie
20 - 24	4	0	1	3	0
25 – 55	11	2	2	5	2
55+	11	6	1	0	4
Total	26	8	4	8	6

Table 4: Participants by gender

Male	Female	Stonehaven		Fraserburgh		Peterhead		Inverurie	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
8	**18**	2	6	2	2	3	5	1	5

Table 5: Participants by housing need / situation

Housing need	
Theme	**Total Number**
Tied housing	1
Sheltered housing	2
Social welfare	3
Homeless	5
Unsuitable acc	3
Housing need	2
Unknown need	10

Existing housing situation	**Total Number**
Tenants	19
Waiting List	7

Table 6: Participants by gender

Male	Female	Stonehaven		Fraserburgh		Peterhead		Inverurie	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
8	**18**	2	6	2	2	3	5	1	5

Delivery of the mini public

The aim of the mini public is to have facilitated dialogue and deliberation sessions which enables participants to be given information on a topic and gain meaningful understanding of it. This can then be discussed with an informed conclusion reached. It is important for the participants to feel valued at these sessions, so we always provided refreshments, offered expense and ensured the atmosphere was informal and welcoming.

Four different groups of participants met across Aberdeenshire with each group meeting for two sessions. We held three during the evening and one as a half day event on a Saturday. The latter being held in Inverurie being the most accessible central location.

The sessions followed a standard delivery model in each of the areas allowing for differences in participants and facilitators. The first sessions focused on Prioritisation and Banding with the second looking at Choice Based Letting and Transfer First.

The results from each of the sessions have thus been combined as below. Many of the comments were consistent across all four areas.

Session 1 – Current Housing Allocation Policy

Introduction to Housing in Aberdeenshire

The first session included an introduction to the mini public process and the reason for undertaking the engagement. The participants were then given four questions with multiple choice answers regarding the level of housing stock in each area, followed by some facts and figures about the housing stock locally and across Aberdeenshire. This generated discussion with some of the participants expressing surprise at the low level of houses compared to the number of people on the waiting list. A direct connection was made to the sale of council houses in the past. Equally there was surprise and dismay at the number of Lets against the number on the waiting list which across Aberdeenshire is almost one in six.

Prioritising and Banding

This was followed by input from the Housing Officer on the current Housing Allocation Policy; feedback on the Survey they had previously undertaken and information on how they currently prioritise housing according to need.

In small groups the participants took part in two activities which enabled them to explore the themes and banding system further with regard to…

1. The Housing matrix and how it works

2. Using various personas discuss how they would place people on the matrix using the themes and bands.

Housing Matrix Activity

Explanation of Banding	Description
An applicant will be placed into a banding based on their housing need. Applicants will be assessed against a standard matrix to decide what band they will be placed in. An applicant can be awarded a number of need factors appropriate to their housing need. The greater the 'need' a housing applicant has, the more likelihood they have of being allocated housing. The Bands are rated from A-D and subsequently no award. If an applicant is assessed as being in the highest priority banding 'A', their application will be reviewed every three months.	The participants were given cards that related to the matrix and were asked where they would see that need on the matrix (banding system) between A-D and which theme they would fit into. For example – where would the prioritisation of someone who has 'no settled accommodation' fit within the matrix? (Band B – Lack of or insecure housing).

Personas Activity

What are Personas?

Personas are fictional characters, created in order to represent the different user types that might use a service, product, site, or brand in a similar way.
Creating personas will help participants understand users' needs, experiences, behaviours and goals. They can also help participants to step out of themselves.
It helps highlight that people have different needs and expectations.

There was a lot of discussion arising from this activity which was then followed by a question and answer session. Key questions and answers are recorded below.

What was included in the Personas?

The personas included various social/financial or physical need for the individual applying for a council house. There were six personas created, two focused on elderly individuals, two on middle aged families (one a single parent) and two young people.
The personas highlighted details such as homelessness, overcrowding /under-occupied homes, coming from out with the area (Aberdeenshire council), key workers, homeownership, disability and safety.
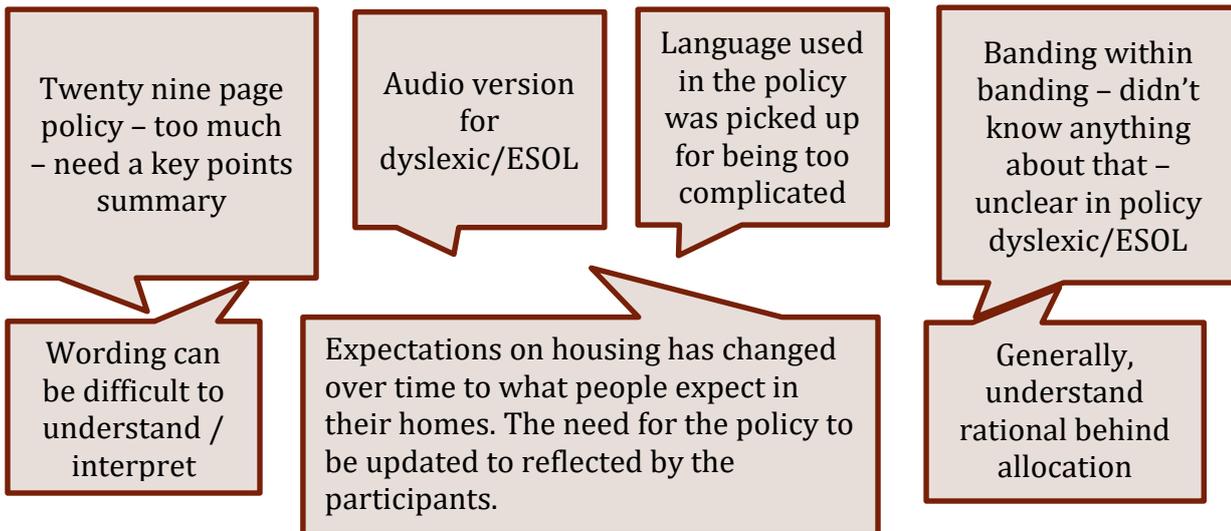
Question	Answer
Why are so many houses sitting empty?	*Council need to upgrade the housing stock; this is easier when the houses are unoccupied. They have been having problems getting appropriate contractors employed to carry out the appropriate insulation for the granite houses*
Are the Council building houses to reduce the number on the waiting list and available properties for let? –	*Council are working in partnership with housing associations as part of the developer obligations There have been lots of new builds in Peterhead recently to the point there are an excess of 2 bed properties not able to be allocated.*
How long are people on the list for?	*Cannot give an actual length of time as it depends on individuals circumstances/ need, therefore what band they are allocated and what housing is available. There are no additional points awarded for length time on the waiting list. Participants were asked if they agreed with this principle in the 2nd session*
Is there an average time for people to be on the waiting list?	*No, it can all be down to circumstance's and no time would be able to be given, some areas come up quicker than other due to need/want and demand.*
Why only online for applications?	*Applications can be made over the phone and at the office*
What age can you get a Council House?	*16*
Could drop boxes be inserted to ask the question/prompt the policy	*Questions are generated by computer software according to areas you have chosen to live, as*

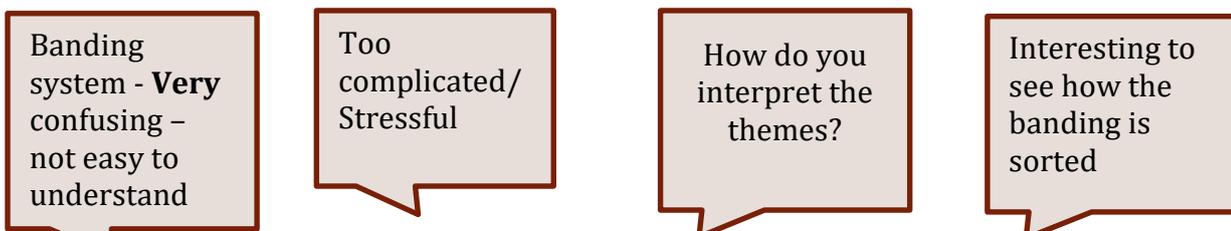|	
theme and banding to help filling in online?	*different housing associations may have properties in areas the council doesn't - they also have different policies, therefore need to ask different questions.*
What is the position for people that own a house who want to go into sheltered housing?	*Does not affect their application, it is dependent on the individual's need. Currently do not have to sell their house although most people do when awarded a council property.*
Length of time to get into house, from temp to permanent – liable for 2 rents & only 1 week to move, often get informed on a Friday so liable for 2 rents over the weekend.	*Council needs to making an income on the homes immediately the house is ready for LET.*

Summary of Feedback

Current Housing Allocation Policy
- The policy was generally felt to be complicated and difficult to understand.

Twenty nine page policy – too much – need a key points summary

Audio version for dyslexic/ESOL

Language used in the policy was picked up for being too complicated

Banding within banding – didn't know anything about that – unclear in policy dyslexic/ESOL

Wording can be difficult to understand / interpret

Expectations on housing has changed over time to what people expect in their homes. The need for the policy to be updated to reflected by the participants.

Generally, understand rational behind allocation

Prioritisation and banding
- There were many comments saying the banding system was too complicated, and it was not explained to applicants. After the activities participants did understand it better.

- Although in general the banding system was seen to be fair there were some comments regarding the current criteria for banding and suggestions how this could be changed.

Banding system - **Very** confusing – not easy to understand

Too complicated/ Stressful

How do you interpret the themes?

Interesting to see how the banding is sorted

Banding – **not** being told banding. Once application assessed informed by letter of banding and invited to speak to housing officers

Not being told criteria. More explanation required about banding.

Risk of violence / overcrowding / under occupied – why are these the same banding? Understand difference – being harmed = A

System is flawed against those that struggle to afford expensive private lets and can get into financial trouble as their homes are satisfactory.

Should relative financial need be a theme?

Add a category for if the property is unsuitable for the financial needs of the individual / family. And a get out clause of a partner/ joint tenant leaves /

Don't think it is fair to give someone a council house if they own a house

Application Process
- There was a mixture of positive and negative experience of applying for housing.

There has been a vast improvement in the housing experience compared to previous years – with staff/applications

Housing Officer contact positive

Everyone was really good and kind when I was applying for a house – good

Need for explanation – time to discuss reasons for not getting a house – not to be fobbed off

Joint housing application process with Housing Associations through Apply4homes could this be extended to joint housing list?

Got to go to Apply for homes – not everyone got internet, computer/literate can apply and change info – face to face/over phone at Buchan House, got to ask, not everyone can!
Got to keep passcode number for Homehunt – there is a room within Buchan House.

Housing stock

- There was overall concern about the lack of housing stock and lack of new builds although participants understood why.

Good standard of housing – for moving in painted etc – upgrades of

Rent to buy system could be implemented based on affordability and used as an incentive to pay more into future housing

It's sad that there's such a disparity between the number of lets available and the number on the Waiting List.

Rent to buy system could be implemented based on affordability and used as an incentive to pay more into future housing

Why don't Council rent 2 beds to 2 single people to share options and help reduce B&B allocations.?

Miscellaneous

A lot of discussion about ASBO issues not being addressed – new neighbours arriving with previous and new charges of murder and nothing gets done – tenancy services/police. Single dad- now moving into private LET for child's safety. Police – Council – viscous circle – tenancy services, private team and council tenants to keep diary – caretaker reports – Police to begiven a master fob/key.

Needs to be more information given to people in B&B about additional costs – to stagger info – end up in debt

Would an advice service specially for housing needs and understanding the process improve the service to a level where those that are desperate

The initial survey on the Council web site and Facebook should have been more widely available. Should there be a more universal way of canvassing opinion?

Session 2- Choice Based Letting and Transfer First

Choice Based Letting is an alternative method of allocating housing, often used by Housing Associations. It is an Internet based system where applicants can view property features including rents and additional costs. Having registered with the housing association the applicant may be given a priority banding – gold, silver or bronze dependent on needs. Some HA's also have separate priority for those moving from social housing (mover) and coming in new (starter). Available properties are listed on a website and on a hard copy list which may be published in the press. Applicants can see property details and choose to apply or 'bid' for a property via the website. There are different models of CBL however the main feature is that applicants have a choice to bid for a property that they want. However, if there are multiple applicants for one property the allocation reverts to a points or banding system where the tenant is prioritised on their need.
Examples of CBL:- Homehunt; Highland Council; and Key to Choice in Edinburgh

Transfer First is an additional filter to the application process which would give priority to existing tenants over new applicants. The principle is that loyal tenants would be given priority over someone with a similar housing need if they wished to move home.

The aim of the second session was to further explore the Allocation policy and also look at changes that the Housing Service are considering – Choice Based Letting (CBL) and Transfer First. Once again there was input from the Housing officer and at Inverurie, an Officer from Grampian Housing Association which gave the participants an overview of these models. We also looked at an example of 'Key to Choose' which is a CBL system used by Edinburgh City Council.

The personas from the previous session were revisited to look at how these different systems may affect applicants. There followed discussion looking at the positives and negatives of both systems which are summarised below. Participants were also asked to suggest possible improvements and solutions to issues raised.

Summary of Feedback

Choice Based Letting
- There was an overall feeling that Choice Based Letting would be positive but there would be support required for some applicants.

- The application process seen on Homehunt could be improved on.

Positives	Negatives
Choice	**Internet access**
- Gives applicant more choice in properties thus more in control - Can look at where you want to and therefore able to see property (photo / map) visit/speak to neighbours	- Not everyone has internet access - Support needed for those not computer literate - Bidding might be difficult - People not asking for support

- Can check if property suitable for needs ie; garden, adapted
- Opt for areas interested in and more likely to stay there
- Tenant would be happier

Application process
- Know how many bidding for house
- Can bid for as many properties you like
- Not suspended if refuse house
- Potential for all associations/LA's on one site for property which would mean one application – use Homehunt but improve system
- There would still be prioritising according to need
- Could be promoted through papers/online/in office
- Can still do mutual exchanges

Housing Stock
- Potential to clear stock i.e rural properties that otherwise not let

- Would need local contact with personal touch
- Online system would have to work and be set up properly
- Not everyone can afford internet
- Poor connections

Application process
- Not told if unsuccessful
- The numbers of people bidding
- Week – closing date is short
- To be in with a chance, have to bid in more areas
- Application can still be declined
- Housing need is still core principle for letting so will need to have priorities especially for homeless etc

Housing stock
- Could ghettoise streets/areas
- Low demand areas that don't get filled

Potential solutions
- The main issue was regarding access to an online system and therefore assistance / alternative methods should be easily available for some applicants.
- Potential to use existing Homehunt system but upgrade?

- Library hubs/housing office/HA's/ GP surgeries to help access computers and assistance to complete application. This could include open surgeries like existing Job Clubs.
- Opportunity to speak to someone face to face – someone to help go through the process with you
- Signposting for other support – job club/AL classes
- Train up care workers or similar who are already visiting vulnerable people to assist them
- Have a 'property register' that could be posted out to those with a disability or do not have IT access. Something in the application form to indicate this and the help they would need i.e if blind-
- Be good to have ads more frequently rather than fortnightly which is current Grampian housing practice.
- Specific section in Housing able to help someone who is homeless – officer that 'knows' the system so can give individual support.

- How would Aberdeenshire Council be able to cope rolling out new system / training / outreach to put system into place. Needs to work well.
  Look at using Homehunt and upgrade it as an option to cut costs?

Transfer First	
• There were few negatives identified for Transfer First with most thinking it would be an attractive system.	
Positives	**Negatives**
- Existing tenants could move first which could free up properties potentially for a homeless person - Transfer First 'chain – end of it an empty property for someone not already a council tenant - Sounds like it would make up good use of properties - If in Transfer System, then you should get more of a choice	- Could add to the time for those on the 'waiting list' to gain a property
Potential solutions – Transfer First	
- Possibility to combine Transfer First and CBL - Can include other landlords/HA's - Can include another landlord or Housing association	

There was then some further discussion about the existing Prioritisation model including a few specific areas that Housing had introduced in the online survey which they were particularly interested in getting feedback on.

Banding and Prioritising
Application Process - Complicated - Changes in circumstances not updated - Not knowing what to put in application - Some of the ethical judgements are unfair (about refugees etc) - Fair system - Hard to follow. Officers' interpretation of the explanations of the applicant's circumstances may differ. **Themes** - Finance should be a theme - Financial capacity should be considered - Single parents should be given a priority. **General** - Not fair that someone is living in Sheltered Housing and still retain old house

Should extra priority be awarded after a certain time on the waiting list?

- There was mixed opinion in answer to this, but the majority felt there should be some priority after being on the list for a length of time.

Yes	No
- If someone has been on the waiting list a long time (say 5 years) then they should be given extra consideration – send them a letter to check if situation is still the same (Housing do this but people don't know about it) - The time spent waiting has an effect on the physical and particularly the mental health of those waiting.	- No, should be based on priority needs ie. homeless rather than someone who has been on the list longer

Do you agree that for those who do not require rehousing rapidly, more than one offer of housing should be given?

- General feeling that people should be given more than one offer before being removed from the list for 6 months.

- Only one offer before the 6 month disbar is too severe. Perhaps 3 offers?   There was agreement that it does depend on circumstances e.g. someone without transport who is offered accommodation at considerable distance from a place where the applicant has compelling reasons for visiting regularly (sick relative/work etc).
- It was acknowledged that refusal wastes staff time.

Do you think there should be priority given to any groups of people? i.e for affordability or key workers?

- Mixed views.

Yes	No
- Would offer it to key workers as part of the banding, as an extra point but wouldn't immediately move them to the top of the list. - Public Sector Workers should be covered also – Bin men have lower wage than teachers and provide a public service, them and others like	- Key workers should be treated the same as everyone else - Affordability comes down to the person applying and their need/I don't think this should be considered.

them should be considered (Road workers, Janitors etc). - To ex forces - Health service only really – think that NHS employees should have some extra incentive for staying with or going into the sector in general. - Key workers only – if they need to get to work that should be brought up in the banding distance of travel. Possible if they currently live in a rural area. - Affordability should be addressed as a priority to many people are being caught in a trap.	

Do you think applicants should have more choice on what type of property they live in i.e. house, flat etc?	
Yes	**No**
- I think this is an ideal world scenario.	- Should be suitable for their needs. There should be no extra choice. - I don't believe that this would help this system - I think that people are just lucky to get a house at all especially if they are in the most need. -
- In a perfect world this could happen – given something adequate to suit their needs should be more than enough.	

Do you agree that those with a local connection should have a higher priority?
- I would consider them; it comes down to the individual and that would be more work given to the housing officers which may in turn slow down the process of moving folk in houses. - There should also be a part of the banding system that look at moving people based on childcare need, especially if that means they can gain sustained employment monitored by the job centre. - On the other hand, that same sort of banding should be considered for family that act as carers for elderly relatives taking away stain form the NHS. This could be other relatives also if this could be proved.
- **What would you consider a local connection?**
- Immediate family – parents and children. - Work. Local connection could relate to how far you must travel. - Needs priority as to what is local connection – important cases

Do you agree there should be an incentive for tenants to downsize or move from specialist housing if they no longer require it?

Yes	No
- Should be able to in an ideal situation. More choice over housing would be great however I can't see that as a reality. I can see more choices as in the applicant would not be blocked for not accepting a home if they are rejecting a move to downsize. - I think that those that are identified as having more rooms than needed should be moved to out in general, but it could be possible to send them notification offers, perhaps of new or newly renovated homes to boost the incentive and free up homes - Help with removal - Removals should come under it especially for those over at least retirement age possibly. If the person has a disability/depression etc this should also be considered due to the stress it may cause.	- They are lucky to even have a house so shouldn't have an incentive - I think it should be written in future that those that take homes that are deemed to be under occupied they should be moved out.

Do you think homeownership / affordability should be considered when prioritising applicants?
- There was generally a feeling that if applicants owned a home or could afford to pay privately, they should not generally be given high priority for housing although this may depend on individuals' circumstances.

- It should be a negative, depends on the circumstances again, which would again in turn use up valuable resources for the housing department.
- If it was a family/marriage breakdown this should be consider in order to leave the children in the family home. Otherwise I would have a system that would deter those that can afford to buy, or private rent would be beneficial.
- No if its suitable for their needs they should not be on housing list (home ownership)
- I believe if you have the money to pay privately you shouldn't be a priority but allowed to join the waiting list
- Should be taken into consideration, if someone owns a house especially if only stay in sheltered housing so long then own house for rest of the time (living in two houses)

Key points

Housing Allocation Policy

1. Few people understood the present allocation policy and the banding prior to the session. Having worked through the exercise to deconstruct the matrix everyone had increased their understanding and were able to accurately allocate the persona examples.

2. Many commented that the present application process was stressful and too complicated.

3. Those who presented as 'homeless' felt they had little choice, they were already in crisis and had to accept what was available. Those who were banded B or C felt they were trapped on the waiting list.

4. Having discussed the process there was greater understanding of the system and acceptance that it was difficult to get into a Council house given the high number of people on the waiting list and few houses available.

Housing Application Process

5. Whichever process is agreed there is a need to improve information given to applicants. A number of people referred to the common occurrence of agreeing terms and conditions i.e. online for purchases without reading them. It is not easy to read instructions and the small print especially if in a crisis situation. Few, if anyone had read the allocation policy previously.

6. Few people were aware that Housing Service could provide support and advice. It was suggested that points of contact were based in accessible locations such as Citizen Advice Bureaux with someone who can provide information on housing and benefits. The library was suggested but not always seen as an acceptable hub as staff cannot give advice and computers are on restricted timer. There was a suggestion that a drop in could be formed similar to Job Clubs that could be managed by the Housing Service.

7. An easy to follow video online would help, as many people now look at 'You Tube' for 'how to…' information.

Choice based letting

8. There was agreement that the CBL process appears simpler and provides greater choice for applicants. However, the whole process could not tested fully as participants only viewed examples online and it may be more complicated than it appears. We could only show the full online application and how to bid for homes using the Grampian Housing model at the Inverurie session.

9. The overall consensus was that choice is important which many felt was not a feature of the present system. Being able to see a property in advance and know how many other people bidding was advantageous.

10. Having more control over where they lived was important, many felt that they had little control or choice over where they stay presently. "bidding against four other people is better than not knowing how many people are competing for a house in the present system".

11. The negative of CBL is also what makes it simpler, being online. It was accepted that for people who are IT literate the system is easier to use but a greater barrier for those without Internet access. Although there could be a paper brochure and public access computers, people would have to look at the sites frequently to see new properties and update registration information regularly.

Transfer First

12. When discussing Transfer First there was less debate as many felt this should be already in the current policy.

13. Where participants were existing tenants, they agreed that they should get priority over someone on the waiting list, other than those who were in Band A or homeless.

14. People who are presently on the waiting list thought otherwise, that there should be a percentage of each given priority.

15. People accepted that if the Council was to take the CBL process forward it would take some time to change, though felt that Transfer First could be combined with the present banding system or could be used as an initial stage to change. As with CBL, the thought that tenants could move again was reassuring.

16. Those who did not like their present housing situation thought this would reduce the stress of feeling trapped in a house they did not choose and uncertainty that they could move. If they knew that they could move again once becoming a tenant, they may have accepted first offers or chosen other properties.

Evaluation

Feedback regarding the engagement was undertaken so that we could evaluate the process and learn from it. This included group exercises where participants used sticky dots to score how they felt the sessions had gone and informal feedback from everyone involved.

This process was done at the beginning and end of each session and asked participants to score between 1 – 10, 10 being the highest. We asked, how the participants felt about taking part, their knowledge of both the Housing Allocation Policy in the first session and Choice Based Letting and Transfer First in the second session. We also asked for some feedback after sessions from participants and housing officers that took part in sessions.

How well do you understand the Housing allocation policy and banding?

Average before session	3.3
Average after session	6.2

This evaluation showed that the understanding of the groups in session one almost doubled. The housing officers attending the sessions commented there was consensus that the banding system is too complicated but were impressed with the way it was broken down. The feedback from both the evaluation, participants and housing staff showed that by the end of the night participants had a better appreciation of how the banding system works. Some participants commented that they did not envy the job of a housing officer, stating that they were shocked by how little stock the council has to allocate.

How well do you understand Choice Based Letting (CBL) & Transfer First?

Average before session	2.4
Average after session	6.8

This showed that there was a big increase in the knowledge gained in the second session regarding Choice Based Letting and Transfer First. As this was the second session many of the participants were talking more freely. Housing officers stated that conversations were interesting and useful points were being made. It was also noted that participant's views changed on CBL between session one and two after they became more aware of what was involved. Generally, feedback from housing staff showed that participants saw CBL as a preferred option and a good way forward.

How do you feel about taking part?

	Average Score 1st session	Average Score 2nd session	Overall Scores across sessions
Before	7.7	8.4	8.1
After	8.9	8.8	8.9

The sessions indicated increased confidence in taking part, especially as the groups got to know each other after the first session. Starting at an average of 7.7 the evaluation shows that while the groups increased their confidence in taking part, most felt comfortable to begin with. This may be due to relationships built through prior contact. Housing officers mentioned that conversations were lively, everyone contributed and seemed to leave the night happy to have been part of the discussion.

Overall the process was successful in that people with lived experience of welfare situations and housing need participated, raised queries and generated lots of good discussion around the current housing policy and how it could be improved.