

BLAENAU GWENT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL: REVISED HOUSING ALLOCATIONS SCHEME EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EQIA) NOVEMBER 2019

Date approved	
Approved by:	<i>Add approval e.g. Portfolio Holder, cabinet, Full Council</i>
Next Review Date:	2021

Background

Under Part 1 of the Housing Act Wales 2012 every Local Authority is required to have an Social Housing Allocation Scheme, the purpose of which is to determine priorities in allocating housing and to set out the procedures to be followed. The Allocation Scheme determines individual priority for housing. Blaenau Gwent's Housing Allocation Scheme was last reviewed in 2017 and is now being reviewed in line with legislative guidance.

The Policy has been subject to a period of consultation during October 2019 and has been finalised in the light of the consultation responses. As part of the consultation every relevant community group in Blaenau Gwent were made aware of the Consultation document and their opportunity to respond. This included specialist organisations working with groups and individuals owed a protected characteristic including organisations for disability, mental health, domestic abuse, older persons and race. All relevant public sector bodies were written to including Health and Social Services.

In addition staff members who work in the applications and allocations team were consulted with and their comments were used to shape the revised Policy.

Under the Equality Act 2010, Blaenau Gwent Council must have due regard to the need to:

- a) Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by, or under the Act

- b) Advance equality of opportunity between those with a protected characteristic and those without
- c) Promote good relations between those with a protected characteristic and those without

The 'protected characteristics' referred to are: age; disability; gender reassignment; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; sexual orientation. It also covers marriage and civil partnership with regard to eliminating discrimination. The equalities impact assessment set out below, considers the impact of the changes to the Allocation Policy on the protected groups and, where there is an impact, sets out the justification for continuing with the Policy change and any actions the Council will take to reduce any impact that has been identified.

Applicants wishing to join the Housing Register are typically on low incomes and many who are assessed as being in housing need are fully, or partially, benefit dependant. Many applicants will have to wait some time before securing an offer of social housing.

Many others without a statutory housing need have little prospect of being housed.

The revisions to the Allocation Policy aim to:

- a) Support local people most in need of housing
- b) Address the limited housing options available
- c) Ensure the Policy is transparent, is fair and is seen to be fair
- d) Contributes towards mixed and sustainable communities where people of different backgrounds and socio economic groups live side by side. In The Council's view this fosters better community relations.

What are the changes to the Blaenau Gwent Allocation Policy?

The changes to the Policy are minor and the details are set out below. In summary the changes are:

- 1) **More priority to be given to people who have served in the armed forces (including families)** - The effective registration date for applicants who are existing armed forces personnel that are due to leave the armed forces

- 2) **Changes to the process when allocating adapted/accessible properties and Bungalows** - The Council wish to ensure that the Policy makes the best use of the adapted housing stock and adaptations that have already been installed in properties. When an adapted property becomes available to let, it is allocated to the person who needs that Level of property and who is in the highest band. There are also minor changes to how applicants with a disability will be assessed.
- 3) **Incorporating the Extra Care accommodation within the allocation scheme** - the Extra Care allocations panel previously undertook Allocations. However, to ensure that allocations are made in line with housing need/priority it has been decided that to ensure transparency these lettings will be undertaken in line with the Policy and processes of the Common Housing Register.
- 4) **Making direct match/sensitive lettings in exceptional circumstances** - The revised Policy allows Housing Associations some flexibility in exceptional circumstances to make the best use of their housing stock. The vast majority of general needs properties will continue to be allocated based on the proposed Policy, there are times when the Housing Association would like to directly match a hard to let property to an applicant (e.g. Low demand area and short list has been exhausted). This will be done in exceptional circumstances and in consultation with the Council.
- 5) **Implementing a high-risk form for MAPPA (Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements) cases** - A high-risk applicant assessment form will be introduced and needs to be completed and attached to the housing application by the Registered Social Landlords on all match/offer rejections for bypass reasons. This will ensure transparency so that reasons for any exclusion are given.
- 6) **Making changes to the process when dealing with applicants that need to move immediately** – For applicants needing to move on welfare grounds such as domestic abuse, extreme violence or extreme harassment the Policy wording has been made clearer for applicants to understand and more appropriately reflects the Policy intention.
- 7) **Proposing to introduce text messaging to inform applicants of progression of their application**

The EQIA assessment

This EQIA considers the changes to the Allocations Policy and assesses their impact on those applicants/households within the protected characteristic groups. The assessment considers whether any assessed impact is a positive, negative or neutral impact and sets out what steps Blaenau Gwent Council have taken or will take to reduce any impact identified.

The Council has been careful to build into the Allocation Policy discretion to consider exceptional circumstances.

Data used to assess the EQIA

This assessment has been drawn up taking into account legislation and case law governing allocations. Regard has been had to the Welsh Government guidance on the allocation of housing, the Equality Act 2010 and case law on the operation of Section 149 of that act.

The Council has considered a wide range of relevant data:

Consideration has been given to existing data for those on the Housing Register by the protected groups. However, it is recognised that Blaenau Gwent does not yet have a comprehensive set of data for the households on the Housing Register and for those rehoused by each protected group. This is because a large number of applicants fail to complete the section of the application form that provides personal data.

Importantly, moving forward the Council is committed to obtaining better information and statistics for those on the Register and has been housed under the Policy. This will allow the Council to consider if those housed by each protected group is proportional to the proportion from each group on the Housing Register.

To ensure that Blaenau Gwent has better information to review the EQIA in the future the following actions will be taken:

- a) The telephone or personal application interview process will be amended to encourage more applicants to fully complete the relevant monitoring sections
- b) Officers will on contact with all applicants to ask any applicant who has not completed the relevant section information so they are able to complete it.
- c) Changes will be considered for the Blaenau Gwent Homes website home page of the on-line account for all applicants to show a message explaining the importance of providing the information.

- d) For existing applicants at the point all applicants are written to asking them if they wish to remain on the Housing Register they will be prompted to complete the personal data section

Based on the evidence available there is no reason to believe that protected groups are impacted negatively by the Policy or Policy changes. Data indicates that the following groups are already over-represented in the high priority bands on the Housing Register:

- Families with children
- Households with disabled or long-term health problems.
- Female headed households

The EQIA assessment is set out in the table below and is structured to consider:

- a) Each Individual protected group in the context of the changes; and
- b) The changes in the context of their impact on all of the protected groups

The EQIA: Assessment of Impact and outcomes

Part A – Consideration of each Individual protected group in the context of the changes

Protected characteristic	Potential issue where there may be a positive or negative impact	Impact Judgement + / -	Observations and Recommendations	Relevant comments or Action/s to reduce any impact
Age				
	<p>A customer must always be interviewed, and you can request an interview in person or by telephone by contacting the Housing Access Team:</p> <p>The impact could be that older people are less able to use an on-line application system therefore the decision to retain applications by phone or in person</p>	Negative	<p>There is no decision to move to on-line applications. An applicant is asked to complete an on-line initial housing advice application but applicants can be assisted to fill out the on-line form and are able to make an application in person or over the phone where this is not possible. After completing the on-line form all applicants are given either a telephone application interview or can be interviewed in Person at the Church Street Office.</p> <p>The Council’s Housing Team can assist older people to fill out their initial housing advice application and</p> <p>There is no evidence from applicants or stakeholders that people are finding difficulty in applying for the Housing Register</p>	<p>The Council’s and Housing Association websites can be amended to inform applicants that help is available if they are having difficulty in using any of the online advice form</p>
	There is evidence	Positive	The Housing Register is overwhelmingly made up of people under	None additional

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	<p>nationally that younger people find it easier to access services online rather by filling out forms and may be disadvantaged by a system where access is by completing a paper form</p>		<p>35. Delivering the application system fully on-line in the future may be an advantage to younger people</p>	
	<p>Requiring an initial application to be made through an advice portal may disadvantage those applicants without internet access and these tend to be older applicants, or applicants most impacted by poverty</p>	<p>Negative</p>	<p>Libraries have free public PC's. There are also free computer training sessions available in Blaenau Gwent.</p> <p>Information is available from the Housing Team on the availability of free local public internet access.</p> <p>There are numerous PCs in Council venues and venues of other public authorities.</p> <p>The office of National Statistics reported that In 2018, 90% of adults in the UK were recent internet users, up from 89% in 2017. 8.4% of adults had never used the internet in 2018, down from 9.2% in 2017. Virtually all adults aged 16 to 34 years were recent internet users (99%) in 2018, compared with 44% of adults aged 75 years and over</p>	<p>There is sufficient internet access points and support available in Blaenau Gwent to help people without access to the internet.</p>

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Disability				
	<p>What is the impact of the Policy on the housing prospects of applicants</p>	<p>Positive</p>	<p>Blaenau Gwent’s Allocations Policy actively promotes the needs of disabled groups by being designed to ensure that applicants with mobility problems are prioritised for accommodation that is suitable for them.</p> <p>Many applicants with a physical disability where their current housing circumstances impact on their disability will be prioritised for housing under the Allocation Policy</p> <p>Many applicants with a severe mental health condition and are homeless will be prioritised under the Policy through being awarded reasonable preference for being owed a statutory homelessness duty</p>	<p>No additional comments</p>
	<p>How accessible is the application processes for applicants with a disability?</p>	<p>Positive</p>	<p>The Blaenau Gwent Homes website has an accessibility section. Actions include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) The website is W3C 1.0 compliant and dementia friendly b) Information on how to adjust type, font size, colour contrast and how to make the applicant’s computer speak text aloud. c) Information for people who need to contact or talk to the Council in Welsh or another language other than English, or need a letter in audio. 	<p>No additional comments</p>
<p>Transgender/ Gender</p>				

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reassignment				
	Is there an impact of the Policy, or the changes, on transgender/gender reassignment applicants	Neutral	Applicants who have undergone gender reassignment – can apply to join the housing register and will qualify as long as they meet the eligibility and qualification criteria	There is no information on the Housing Register re applicants who are Transgender. Blaenau Gwent will more actively collect monitoring information for this group but has insufficient data at present.
Pregnancy and maternity				
	No further impact identified	Positive	<p>The majority of applicants on the register are female and applications from female single parents make up a large percentage of the housing register and a percentage will be pregnant. Pregnant women are more likely to have become homeless due to being excluded from a family home, or homeless due to domestic abuse, or homeless due to being unable to continue to afford the rent on a private rented property once they have given birth given the cost of childcare</p> <p>The homeless are given a high priority banding for housing under the Policy and therefore pregnant women as a groups are likely to be advantaged and not disadvantaged by the Policy</p>	No additional comments

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Race				
	<p>Access via an advice portal may impact on applicants whose first language is not English</p>		<p>The 'Blaenau Gwent Homes' website has information for people who need to contact or talk to the Council in Welsh or a language other than English.</p> <p>Low risk as if a person's command of English is particularly poor they are likely to have access to someone with interpretation skills; other less able people are likely to have access to professional support</p> <p>There is an increased likelihood of this potential negative impact amongst residents for whom English is not their first language, or who have learning impairments or severe mental health problems. The new Scheme has been written to be easier to understand. As is currently the case, housing application Officers can provide advice and assistance for people who may have difficulty understanding the policy</p>	
Religion / belief				
	<p>Is there an impact of the Policy or the Policy changes on applicants with a religion or belief?</p>	<p>Neutral</p>	<p>It can be difficult to distinguish what are factors to do with a person's religion as opposed to their ethnic or cultural origins. The Council does not have data for the Housing Register and lettings.</p>	<p>Blaenau Gwent will place more effort on collecting the information in order to be able to assess any impact as the policy and the</p>

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				EQIA is reviewed
Sexual orientation				
	Is there an impact for this protected group?	Neutral	There is insufficient information for this protected group	Blaenau Gwent will place more effort on collecting the information in order to be able to assess any impact as the policy and the EQIA is reviewed
Sex				
	Is there any potential gender bias in the Policy?	Negative	<p>Females make up the majority of the housing register. This is because women are likely to be the main carers and are more likely as a result to come under one of the reasonable preference categories for a statutory housing need. This is likely to continue.</p> <p>A large proportion of the register is made up of 'female headed' households. The changes will not impact on the proportions of female headed households owed a statutory housing need</p> <p>Married, civil partners and co-habiting couples, same sex couples, brothers and sisters who wish to live together, can make applications.</p>	The Council going forward will collect and monitor application and letting data to check that it is in proportion to those on the Housing Register to confirm whether or not there is

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				any gender bias.
General comments on impact and safeguards			<p>The Council is satisfied that the changes to the Policy are positive to many of the protected groups under the Equality Act and achieve an appropriate balance and if there is any negative impact on any group this is minimal.</p> <p>Although it can always be argued that any change that positively impacts on the chances of social housing for one or more protected group may have a negative impact on other protected groups seeking social housing the impact is not considered to be substantial.</p> <p>All applicants have a statutory right to seek a review of their housing application if they are dissatisfied with the Council’s decision re how they have been assessed and the Band they have been awarded.</p> <p>The Policy also provides all applicants with the opportunity to submit reasons why they believe their case should be considered under the exceptional circumstances part of the Policy.</p>	
Part B Consideration of the specific changes in the context of their impact on all or several of the	All Groups/Several Groups	Impact positive or negative		

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protected groups				
	<p>More priority to be given to people who have served in the armed forces including families and bereaved spouses or civil partners</p>	<p>Positive for some applicants owed a protected characteristic</p> <p>Neutral for others</p>	<p>To redress the disadvantage people who have served in the British Armed Forces often face when accessing social housing, the effective date of registration may be reset set to the date they joined the British Armed Forces in a number of set circumstances.</p> <p>This change will have a limited impact on protected groups. Leaving members of the armed forces already have priority under the scheme and the change increases the priority in a number of circumstances. It is estimated this may impact on no more than 10/15 lettings per year being allocated to leaving or former members of the armed forces</p> <p>A number of Leaving members of the armed forces may have to leave due to injury or disability caused by active service and the changes will advantage those who come under the definition of a disability for that protected characteristic.</p>	<p>The Council will analyse the equality profile of households who will potentially be affected by the proposed changes</p>
	<p>Changes to the process when allocating adapted/accessible properties and</p>	<p>Positive</p>	<p>The Council wish to ensure that the Policy makes the best use of the adapted housing stock and adaptations that have already been installed in properties When an adapted property becomes available to let, it is allocated to the person who needs that Level of property and who is in the highest band. There are also minor changes to how</p>	

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	Bungalows		<p>applicants with a disability will be assessed.</p> <p>This change will advantage applicants owed a protected characteristic for having a disability. It will mean allocations of an already adapted property are able to be made to disabled applicants in need of the existing adaptations</p>	
	Incorporating the Extra Care accommodation within the allocation scheme	<p>Positive for the protected groups of age or disability Neutral for the other groups</p>	<p>The Extra Care allocations panel previously undertook allocations. However, to ensure that allocations are made in line with housing need/priority it has been decided that to ensure transparency these lettings will be undertaken in line with the Policy and processes of the Common Housing Register. This will ensure consistency in the assessment of applicants requiring extra care accommodation.</p> <p>It is positive to the protected groups for age and disability, as extra care is more likely to be required by older applicants and those with a mental or physical disability.</p>	
	Making direct match/sensitive lettings in exceptional circumstances	<p>Positive for the protected groups of sex, disability and sexual orientation Neutral for the other</p>	<p>The revised Policy allows Housing Associations some flexibility in exceptional circumstances to make the best use of their housing stock. The vast majority of general needs properties will continue to be allocated based on the proposed Policy, there are times when the Housing Association would like to directly match a hard to let property to an applicant (e.g. Low demand area and short list has been exhausted). This will be done in exceptional circumstances and in consultation with the Council.</p> <p>The change is mainly aimed at ensuring that low demand housing</p>	

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		<p>groups</p>	<p>can be let through a process of direct lets. This will mean more social housing units are let and is positive to all groups owed a protected characteristic</p> <p>Where direct lets are made in sensitive circumstances this is often where an applicant may be a victim of domestic abuse or is being harassed or has complex needs. A direct sensitive let will allow the best match to be made depending on the circumstances and needs of a particular applicant. This is an advantage to a number of protected groups for disability, sex (women are more likely to be victims of domestic abuse)</p> <p>For the other protected groups making direct lets outside of the policy band and date order will have a minimal negative impact as these will only be made in exceptional circumstances and in consultation with the Council</p>	
	<p>Implementing a high-risk form for MAPPA (Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements) cases</p>	<p>Positive for the disability protected group</p> <p>Neutral for the others</p>	<p>A high-risk applicant assessment form will be introduced and needs to be completed and attached to the housing application by the Registered Social Landlords on all match/offer rejections for bypass reasons. This will ensure transparency so that reasons for any exclusion are given</p> <p>Many MAPPA cases may fall under the criteria for the disability protected group where they may have complex mental health needs.</p> <p>By introducing a risk assessment form and procedure for bypassing cases this will ensure that fewer MAPPA cases are overlooked for social housing and provide transparency for how risk will be assessed and the level of support needed for an allocation and to ensure that a tenancy is sustainable once let.</p>	

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	<p>Making changes to the process when dealing with applicants that need to move immediately</p>	<p>Positive for a number of protected groups</p> <p>Neutral for others</p>	<p>For applicants needing to move on welfare grounds such as domestic abuse, extreme violence or extreme harassment the Policy wording has been made clearer for applicants to understand and more appropriately reflects the Policy intention.</p> <p>This change will advantage people owed a protected characteristic who are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Escaping domestic violence Are victims of severe harassment or threats due to their sexuality or transgender Need to move due to their impact of their current housing on their physical or mental health 	
	<p>Proposing to introduce text messaging to inform applicants of progression of their application</p>	<p>Positive for all protected groups</p>	<p>Providing more information by text on the progress of an application is a benefit to all on the housing register including those that come under the protected groups listed in the Equality Act</p> <p>Some older people may not be able to use a mobile phone and this will be determined at the application interview so that they can be updated by letter. Text updates will not replace written communication on the outcome of applications or offers of accommodation.</p>	

