

Agenda Item 9

Housing Review Board

26 November 2009

JG/DB



Regional Choice Based Lettings Scheme – Devon Home Choice

Summary

The report provides an update on progress implementing the Devon Home Choice scheme. The Council's housing register will be part of a Devon-wide common housing register using the Abrisas system. Existing housing register applicants will need to re-register with Devon Home Choice during October and November prior to Devon Home Choice commencing in some local authorities in December 2009.

The system is going live in East Devon at the end of January 2010.

Recommendation

1. It is recommended that the Board note the progress being made to implement Devon Home Choice.

a) Reasons for Recommendation

To update the Board on the implementation of Devon Home Choice.

b) Alternative Options

Not applicable.

c) Risk Considerations

Limited staff resources to implement change and provide support to applicants to re-register with Devon Home Choice. Staff will concentrate on providing support to 'gold' band applicants to re-register online. There may be more applicants requiring support than anticipated.

d) Policy and Budgetary Considerations

These are set out in the report.

e) Date for Review of Decision

A further report will be presented to the Board following implementation.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 On 12th June 2008 the Board approved a report relating to the introduction of a Devon-wide Choice Based Letting scheme (now known as Devon Home Choice).
- 1.2 Under Devon Home Choice, the Council and Registered Social Landlords (RSL's) empty properties will be advertised, and applicants will be able to choose between and apply for properties available for letting in Devon.
- 1.3 The Government has set a target that by 2010 all local authorities will have adopted a Choice Based Lettings scheme. The Devon Home Choice scheme allows Councils in Devon to meet that target. EDDC introduced a Choice Based Lettings Scheme in 2006.
- 1.4 The Council has adopted a 'local letting' policy to sit alongside the Devon Home Choice CBL/Allocation Policy. This will enable the Council to continue to allocate homes to meet specific local housing need.

2. PROGRESS ON IMPLEMENTATION OF DEVON HOME CHOICE

- 2.1 The District Councils and RSL's in Devon, along with the Plymouth and Torbay unitary authorities have jointly:
 - Secured £123,000 from Government to implement a sub regional choice based lettings scheme.
 - Joined the Northern Consortium to take advantage of an existing procurement process to speed up implementation of Devon Home Choice.
 - Approved a common Allocation Policy to be used by all housing authorities in Devon.
 - Purchased the 'Abritas' system to administer a single housing register for Devon.
 - Purchased 'Dixierit' – a speech enabling software on the Devon Home Choice website for people who have impaired sight or who have difficult reading.
 - Agreed a common way of advertising empty properties and letting housing owned by social landlords.
 - Agreed a project implementation plan for Devon Home Choice.
 - Agreed a 'go' live date for each housing authority from December 2009. East Devon is going live at end of January 2010.
 - Develop a common procedure manual for all partners/staff to operate Devon Home Choice scheme that should be available prior to going live in December 2009.
 - A letter was sent to all applicants in April 2009 on the Council's housing register explaining about the introduction of the Devon Home Choice scheme.
- 2.2 A further letter was sent to applicants in mid October 2009 explaining that current applicants will need to re-register with Devon Home Choice. Applicants will need to do this online. Following the Systems Thinking approach in Housing it has been introduced to concentrate support and provide help to gold band applicants.

- 2.3 A helpline (01395 571644) has been provided to give advice and guidance to 'gold' band applicants during the re-registration process. Gold band applicants are being offered the opportunity to attend Council offices on a Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evening – 5.00-7.00pm from 9th – 27th November, if they are not able to access a PC/Internet to re-register with Devon Home Choice.
- 2.4 Silver and bronze band applicants are not being given the same kind of support to help them re-register. There are around 3,800 applicants in the silver and bronze banding and they have only a slim chance of ever being housed by the Council. The majority of housing goes to gold band applicants. No family housing is offered to applicants outside the gold band. Less than 10% of sheltered housing goes to silver or bronze band applicants.
- 2.5 Therefore taking an average of 250 empty properties available for letting each year, only around 25 will go to applicants in the silver/bronze banding. Therefore, although silver and bronze band applications are welcomed and accepted on to the register there is only a slim chance an applicant in this banding will be housed. These applicants will be encouraged to register online only. Only where the applicant has been identified as being very vulnerable and it is essential they are registered for housing will staff resources be used to provide help and support to silver and bronze band applicants to re-register.
- 2.6 Housing Needs have been provided with a 'laptop' PC with internet connection. This will allow us to visit very vulnerable gold band applicants who are not able to re-register on line or attend the 'surgeries' in the Council office in the evening during November 2009, and help them re-register.
- 2.7 The decision to ask all applicants to re-register online we think is a sound one. Significant staff resources are required to process a paper application form and to manage applications on the housing register. The experience of managing the Council's existing Choice Based Lettings scheme shows that many applications are not 'clean' and require to be sent back to applicants to provide the full information required to go on the housing register. The process is 'paper' dependent and very little is 'automated'. The opportunity to 'scan' documents and hold data online for use by all staff rather than have paper files will be a more efficient and effective way of managing and maintaining a housing register. Moving to a 'paperless' office is an objective to achieve over the next two years. This can be achieved by investing in Optical Reading technology and the use of a scanner in Housing Needs.
- 2.8 Applicants will be able to register online and to maintain their applications online using a PC connected to the internet. The experience of Exeter City Council using the Abris system for the last three years shows that once registered over 90% of applicants manage their own applications online.
- 2.9 As a last resort the Housing Needs Manager will provide a paper form for completion by current applicants to enable an applicant to re-register with Devon Home Choice. This form will be verified by Housing Needs staff and if not completed fully will be returned to applicant to complete and resubmit. These forms will be held until early December and then submitted to SWM Ivybridge for scanning and input onto Abris. Plymouth City Council has been working with this organisation to develop optical reading technology to enable applications to be processed and input onto the housing register. There is a cost for this work and paper applications will be kept to a minimum and only provided to applicants when absolutely necessary. The process is also likely to introduce preventable demand, waste and rework from a Systems Thinking perspective.

- 2.11 The Abrisas system will be fully available from 9th December 2009. From 26th October 2009 all partners will have access to the re-registration module to allow existing applicants to join Devon Home Choice.
- 2.12 Training for staff and RSL partners in East Devon on Devon Home Choice will take place on 13th and 14th January 2010.
- 2.13 Comprehensive procedures are being developed that will set out the processes and actions relating to the operation of Devon Home Choice.
- 2.14 An East Devon Implementation Group including the Housing Needs Manager has been established and is available to help and support applicants through the re-registration process.
- 2.15 Once the scheme is implemented vulnerable applicants and partner agencies such as PCT, Social Services, will be sent 'newsletters' on a weekly basis showing available empty properties. It will also be possible to set up 'automatic bidding' on Abrisas for vulnerable applicants. This will automatically bid on behalf of identified applicants when a property meeting their housing need e.g. right size, right type and right location is advertised. Newsletters will also be sent to Town and Parish Councils and local libraries as well as the Council and Devon Home Choice websites.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 The budget allocated for implementation of Devon Home Choice is £23,800. The main cost is associated with the purchase of the Abrisas system and the employment of a Project Manager and associated costs.
- 3.2 The annual cost following implementation from 1 April 2010 will be £12,500 per annum. This includes the ongoing cost of the Project Manager and the costs associated with advertising properties plus the maintenance of the system by Abrisas.
- 3.3 A HRA budget of £33,000 in 2009/10 is currently being used to fund the existing Choice Based Lettings scheme including the advertising of empty properties in local free newspapers. This budget should reduce to around £15,000 in 2010/11, as we will no longer be advertising our properties in local free newspapers.

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1 Devon Home Choice is a partnership with other housing authorities and RSL's in Devon to provide greater choice and transparency to the way social housing is allocated to applicants on the housing register. Implementation is planned for December 2009 with East Devon going live at the end of January 2010. The re-registration process is key to our housing register being 'clean' and hold accurate data on applicants prior to going live. It will also be a key element in meeting our purpose – **to match the right people with the right home**. It is important that the Council maintain the agreed approach to provide help and support to applicants during October and November 2009.
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Legal Implications

There are no legal implications within the report.

Financial Implications

The financial implications are included in the report.

Consultation on Reports to the Executive

None.

Background Papers

None.

Dennis Boobier

Housing Review Board

Housing Needs Manager

26 November 2009