

Communities and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Board (4)
Cabinet Member for Community Development, Co-operatives and
Social Enterprise

4th Nov 2015

13th Nov 2015

Name of Cabinet Member:

Cabinet Member for Community Development, Co-operatives and Social Enterprise -
Councillor Abbott

Director Approving Submission of the report:

Executive Director of Place

Ward(s) affected:

All

Title:

Coventry Homefinder Policy – 12 month review

Is this a key decision?

No

Executive Summary:

Coventry Homefinder is the choice based lettings system used to allocate social housing in Coventry. The Coventry Homefinder Policy sets out who can register, how properties are advertised, and who is given priority for social housing in the city. Coventry Homefinder was first established in September 2007.

A new Coventry Homefinder Policy was approved by Cabinet in April 2014 and was implemented from 31st July 2014. This report gives an update of the first 12 months of operation of the new Policy, along with analysis of the effects of the changes on the Homefinder Register and the allocation of available properties.

Recommendations:

The Communities and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Board (4) is recommended to:

- 1) Consider the content of the report and forward any comments to the Cabinet Member for Community Development, Co-operatives and Social Enterprise.
- 2) Support the recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Community Development, Co-operatives and Social Enterprise as proposed below.

The Cabinet Member for Community Development, Co-operatives and Social Enterprise is recommended to:

- 1) Consider any comments from the Communities and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Board (4).

- 2) Request that officers negotiate a more detailed agreement for identifying the mix of properties that Partner Registered Providers can allocate within the existing policy, whereby 10% of properties advertised can be prioritised for existing tenants of that Registered Provider.
- 3) Provide guidance and instruction regarding the assessment of customers' needs where potential adapted accommodation is required and where the present housing is reported to be inadequate due to health concerns.
- 4) Approve the proposed addition to the Policy regarding applicants who are currently social tenants and who do not have a local connection, who need to move for work related purposes, as set out at paragraph 2.47.
- 5) Request that officers carry out customer consultation/survey (including vulnerable customers) to establish satisfaction levels with the service.

List of Appendices included:

Appendix 1 - Results of data analysis

Appendix 2 – Equalities and Consultation Analysis (ECA)

Background Documents:

None

Other useful documents:

The Coventry Homefinder Choice Based Lettings Policy is available on the Coventry Homefinder website: www.coventryhomefinder.com

'Coventry Homefinder Choice Based Lettings Policy 2014' - Report to Cabinet, 10th April 2014. Available:

<http://democraticservices.coventry.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=124&MId=10154>

Report back from the Homefinder Task & Finish Group – Recommendations to the Transport and Infrastructure Development Scrutiny Board, 13th March 2013. Available:

<http://moderngov.coventry.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=158&MId=9627&Ver=4>

'Allocation of Accommodation: Guidance for Local Authorities in England' – Department for Communities and Local Government, June 2012. Available from:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/allocation-of-accommodation-guidance-for-local-housing-authorities-in-england>

'Right to Move: statutory guidance on social housing allocations for local housing authorities in England' – Department for Communities and Local Government, March 2015. Available from:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/right-to-move-statutory-guidance-on-social-housing-allocations-for-local-housing-authorities-in-england>

Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

Yes – Communities and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Board (4) on 4th November 2015

Has it been or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

No

Will this report go to Council?

No

Report title: Coventry Homefinder Policy – 12 month review

1. Context (or background)

- 1.1 Coventry Homefinder is the choice based lettings (CBL) system by which the majority of social housing in Coventry is allocated. The Coventry Homefinder Policy sets out who can register, how properties are advertised and who is given priority for social housing in the city. The Coventry Homefinder CBL system has operated since September 2007.
- 1.2 The Council no longer owns any housing following the Large Scale Voluntary Transfer of all the former Council housing to Whitefriars Housing Group in 2000. The local authority is still statutorily required to have an allocation scheme for determining how allocations are made, in order that those who have the greatest need for housing are prioritised. Coventry Homefinder is therefore a partnership between Coventry City Council and Registered Providers of social housing (mostly Housing Associations). The Homefinder Partner landlords are referred to throughout this report as Partner Registered Providers.
- 1.3 People who want to move to a social home in Coventry can register with Coventry Homefinder. A banding system is used to give priority to people who have a recognised housing need (such as being homeless, being overcrowded, fleeing violence etc) over those who are already adequately housed.
- 1.4 Available social housing properties are advertised each week and applicants can express an interest in (bid on) properties that they want to be considered for. At the end of each bidding period, an automatic system shortlist is created of all the applicants that have bid on the property, based on the band (level of housing need) and effective date (the length of time the applicant has been in housing need). The Partner Registered Provider then offers the property to applicants in order of the shortlist.
- 1.5 Following changes to legislation and statutory guidance, a new Coventry Homefinder Policy was developed and was approved by Cabinet at the meeting on 10th April 2014. This Policy was then implemented from 31st July 2014.
- 1.6 This report gives an update of the first 12 months of operation of the new Policy, along with analysis of the effects that the changes have had on the Homefinder Register and the allocation of available properties.
- 1.7 Additional statutory guidance has been released by the Government in March 2015, regarding the 'Right to Move' for certain social housing tenants, meaning that further minor changes to the Policy are necessary.

2. Options considered and recommended proposal

- 2.1 Analysis has been carried out to identify what effect the changes to the Coventry Homefinder Policy (implemented on 31st July 2014) have had on the make-up of the register and the allocation of available properties, during the first 12 months of operation.
- 2.2 The results of this analysis are set out in detail in Appendix 1. The main points of relevance include:
- 2.3 Priority for all properties is now based on Band and Effective Date. The intention of this policy was to ensure that applicants with the greatest housing need (in the highest band)

who have been in housing need the longest (the earliest 'effective date') are prioritised for properties above other applicants.

- 2.4 71% of properties advertised in the 12 months after implementation were let to applicants in priority bands 1A, 1B, 2A, 2B and 2C (with an assessed housing need). In the 12 months before the implementation of this policy, only 58% of properties were let to applicants in the priority bands.
- 2.5 Applicants without a housing need (in Bands 3A and 3B) are less likely to successfully bid for a property. However, with the shortage of social housing in the city, the Policy intends to support those who are currently homeless or in unsuitable housing over those who are suitably housed but want to move. The Government's statutory guidance states: "we expect social homes to go to people who genuinely need them".
- 2.6 There was concern that this policy change would result in an increase in applicants requesting an assessment for priority banding, or deliberately worsening their circumstances, however performance figures for the Homefinder Team show that there has not been a significant increase. We cannot tell from the information available whether there are households who do not have any housing needs who have been deterred from registering.
- 2.7 Additional priority is given to members/former members of the Armed Forces who have a housing need which would place them in a priority band. Armed Forces applicants are placed one band higher than their housing circumstances would normally require.
- 2.8 Nine households have been given this additional priority in the 12 months since implementation. Seven of these households were housed within that time.
- 2.9 The Band for applicants who are homeless and living in hostel accommodation was increased from Band 2B to Band 2A, to enable them to move into permanent accommodation more quickly (as the nature of the hostel accommodation is that it is short term) and to free up spaces within the hostels more rapidly.
- 2.10 212 people with hostel priority were housed in the 12 months following implementation, with mean average of 129 days between their effective date and an offer of accommodation (this includes some long term residents that have been assisted to move out – the median was 88 days). This compares with 164 people with hostel priority housed in the 12 months before the policy was implemented.
- 2.11 The Band for applicants experiencing or at serious risk of violence, harassment or abuse was increased from Band 2B to Band 1B, in order to enable them to move more quickly. Ten applicants received this higher band in the 12 months after implementation, and seven of these were also housed during this time.
- 2.12 An additional category for tenants of Partner Registered Providers who are under-occupying their current property by three or more bedrooms was added to Band 1A. This was to allow people who are under-occupying large family homes to move to smaller homes more quickly, freeing up those larger homes for families on the register and reducing the potential impact of the 'bedroom tax' on under-occupiers. Three households have been awarded this priority. Two have successfully been housed. The two properties released by these applicants were both four bedroom houses that have now been re-let to families who were homeless.

- 2.13 An additional category was also added to Band 1A for households who needed to move as part of the National Witness Mobility Scheme. One household has received this priority and has been housed.
- 2.14 An additional category was included in Band 2A covering the reasonable preference category (from legislation) for households who need to move to a particular location to relieve or avoid hardship.
- 2.15 No households have been given priority under this category. There is considerable overlap in the guidance between this category and the reasonable preference category for people who need to move to a particular location for social and welfare reasons, and so many applicants who apply for this priority are placed in the band under the social/welfare category instead. However, the hardship category is included to comply with legislation and ensure that cases which do not come under social/welfare category can be included (for example, needing to move for work-related purposes). One advice agency has highlighted this as a potential issue, that the meaning of the hardship priority criteria may be unclear to applicants. However, every applicant that applies for priority banding has their circumstances assessed, and they will be placed in the most appropriate band according to their circumstances.
- 2.16 Applicants who are successful in their bidding and are offered a property, but who then refuse that property without good reason on more than five occasions, are suspended from the register. So far, nine applicants have had their applications suspended for this reason.
- 2.17 10% of properties prioritised for existing tenants**
- 2.18 Following the changes to the policy in 2014, all properties now have their shortlists ordered based on the band and effective date of the applicants that placed a bid. This ensures that the applicants in greatest housing need for the longest time are prioritised above others.
- 2.19 However, in order to ensure that existing tenants also have the opportunity to move, Partner Registered Providers can advertise 10% of their properties with priority within the shortlist for their existing tenants.
- 2.20 The data analysis shows that this has been used by Whitefriars for 131 properties during the 12 months following implementation. This is out of a total of 1665 properties advertised by Whitefriars, so equates to 8% of properties advertised. This is well within the policy, however when this is analysed by the size of the property, it becomes apparent that three bedroom properties are over-represented. 71 out of 245 three bedroom houses were advertised with existing tenant priority (29%). Over half of all properties advertised with existing tenant priority (71 out of 131) were three-bedroom properties.
- 2.21 Of the 132 properties advertised with existing tenant priority, 115 were let to existing tenants who also had a housing need. The majority of these (77) were due to overcrowding.
- 2.22 Option 1 – keep the policy as it is with no further guidance on the mix of properties advertised with existing tenant priority.
- 2.23 Option 2 – negotiate with Partner Registered Providers to develop an agreed mix of properties that can be advertised with existing tenant priority, to make sure that this is representative of the overall mix of properties and that no particular property type is overrepresented.

2.24 The Cabinet Member for Community Development, Co-operatives and Social Enterprise is recommended to request that officers negotiate a more detailed agreement for identifying the mix of properties that Partner Registered Providers can allocate within the existing policy whereby 10% of properties advertised can be prioritised for existing tenants of that Registered Provider.

2.25 Adapted Properties and medical priority

2.26 The changes to the Policy made in 2014 included a change to the way that adapted properties and those purpose-built for wheelchair users are advertised and allocated.

2.27 Previously, these properties were advertised on the Homefinder website when they became available, and applicants who had an assessed need for an adapted property were able to place bids. However, this often resulted in applicants placing bids on properties where the adaptations were not suitable for their needs, or no bids being received. This meant that properties were being advertised for several weeks, and in some instances were eventually let as general needs properties and adaptations removed.

2.28 The Partner Registered Providers have raised this change as a particular issue for them. In practice, they report that there has been no reduction in the time taken to re-let adapted properties, and there are still instances where adaptations are removed from properties as no suitable applicant can be found. Applicants put forward for consideration as their needs meet the adaptations often refuse the property based on the location.

2.29 We will continue to work with Partner Registered Providers and applicants to improve the recording and matching process, and explore ways to encourage applicants to consider a wider choice of areas when adapted properties become available.

2.30 It should be noted that applicants who require an adapted property are also able to place bids on the general needs properties advertised on Homefinder alongside other applicants. If they are placed at the top of the shortlist, the Landlord would then need to assess whether it is possible and reasonable for that property to be adapted for the applicant's needs.

2.31 The policy also strengthened the process for assessing whether applicants had a medical need, stating that an Occupational Therapist (OT) assessment should be carried out (where appropriate) in order to give an expert opinion on what the needs of the applicant are, and also whether aids and adaptations could be provided in their existing home.

2.32 This was identified as a risk in the report which went to Cabinet on 15th April 2014, with the risk that the OT service may not be able to provide this increased level of service within a reasonable timeframe. The risk was mitigated by communication with the OT service and assurances that the additional work could be carried out.

2.33 It was anticipated that there would be a reduction in households requiring alternative housing as a result of OT assessments, as some homes would be able to be made suitable with the provision of aids and adaptations.

2.34 However, since implementation, the OT services have not been able to meet the demand for this assessment, resulting in very few assessments being carried out.

2.35 Applications for priority banding due to medical needs have not been delayed because of this difficulty. The Homefinder Officers are, however, having to base their decisions on self-reported information and supporting information from relevant medical providers (such as

GPs). Where an OT assessment has already been carried out, these are used to ensure appropriate banding and whether an adapted property is required.

- 2.36 The Cabinet Member is recommended to provide guidance and instruction regarding the assessment of customers' needs where potential adapted accommodation is required and where the present housing is reported to be inadequate due to health concerns.

2.37 'Right to Move' statutory guidance

- 2.38 The Government issued statutory guidance in March 2015 on the 'Right to Move', aimed at enabling existing social tenants to move to an area where they have no current local connection, when they need to avoid or relieve hardship by taking up a firm offer of employment (not short-term or marginal) or an apprenticeship.

- 2.39 This is guidance that the Local Authority must 'have regard to' when formulating the allocations policy, but it is not additional legislation or a change to existing legislation.

- 2.40 The guidance states that applicants who are currently social housing tenants, who need to move between local authority areas for work related reasons, should not be excluded from the register because they do not have a local connection to the area.

- 2.41 Coventry Homefinder has an 'open' register and does not disqualify applicants who do not have a local connection from joining the register. The current Coventry Homefinder Policy, therefore, complies with this part of the guidance and no changes are required.

- 2.42 The guidance also states that a quota of properties should be made available for this group each year, but if the local authority decides not to implement a quota, it should publicly state its reasons. The guidance considers that an appropriate quota may be 1% of available properties.

- 2.43 Feedback from the Partner Registered Providers shows support for the principle of assisting social tenants under the 'Right to Move' provisions, but that setting aside a quota of properties is not appropriate.

- 2.44 There is very little evidence that there is any significant demand, and any properties set aside for the quota may be left empty for longer than necessary if suitable applicants cannot be found.

- 2.45 It would be possible instead to clarify within the current policy that the Hardship category can include existing tenants who need to move for work-related purposes.

- 2.46 Option 1 – To change the Coventry Homefinder Policy to require that 1% of properties that become available each year are set aside for existing social tenants without a local connection who need to move for work-related reasons. This option is not recommended for the reasons set out above.

- 2.47 Option 2 – To retain the current provisions in the Coventry Homefinder Policy, without setting a quota, but to add the following paragraph to section 3.14 of the current Homefinder Policy: "The Government has issued guidance regarding the 'Right to Move' for current social housing tenants who need to move to another district (where they have no local connection) for work-related purposes, to avoid hardship. The guidance suggests a quota of 1% of available properties is set aside for this group. As Coventry City Council is no longer a stock-holding authority, a quota of properties will not be provided; this will be impractical to implement with our partner organisations and risks properties being left

vacant. Applicants in this group will be assessed under the current hardship priority category where appropriate.”

- 2.48 The Cabinet Member for Community Development, Co-operatives and Social Enterprise is recommended to approve the proposed addition to the Policy regarding applicants who are currently social tenants and who do not have a local connection, who need to move for work related purposes, as set out in paragraph 2.47

3. Results of consultation undertaken

- 3.1 During the development of the Coventry Homefinder Policy, consultation was carried out in several stages with Registered Providers, advice agencies, relevant council services, Councillors, applicants already registered with Homefinder, and the general public through the Council website. Details of this consultation can be found in the ECA attached as Appendix 2 and in the report which was presented to Cabinet on 15th April 2014.
- 3.2 In order to now assess the impacts of the policy changes, data analysis has been carried out on both the Homefinder Register and the properties that became available in the 12 months since implementation. This has been presented to the Coventry Homefinder Partnership Board.
- 3.3 This data was also used as a basis for a consultation document which was sent out to Partner Registered Providers, advice agencies, and relevant Council services, showing the effect of the changes and asking for comments. The data analysis and a summary of the responses received are attached as Appendix 1.
- 3.4 The results of this consultation showed that the majority of the Policy changes have achieved their stated aim. The Partner Registered Providers are happy with the majority of the changes made, with the exception of the way that adapted properties are now allocated. This has been addressed in the main body of the report (2.25).
- 3.5 There has not been an increase in complaints to the advice agency that responded to the consultation as a result of the changes to the policy, and they believe the new policies seem to be achieving their stated aims. Concern was raised about the lack of understanding that applicants have of the hardship priority, which may be the reason for the lack of applications for this priority category.

4. Timetable for implementing this decision

- 4.1 If approved, recommendation 2 and 5 will be implemented within 12 months.
- 4.2 If approved, recommendation 4 will be implemented by adding the agreed paragraph to the Coventry Homefinder Policy with effect from 7th December 2015.

5. Comments from Executive Director of Resources

- 5.1 Financial implications
There are no specific financial implications arising from the recommendations in this report. There was a one-off cost of approximately £4000 for changes to the computer system required as a result of the changes to the policy, which was met from existing resources.
- 5.2 Legal implications
Under Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996 the Council, is required to have an allocation scheme which needs to include the Council's policy on offering those to be allocated housing a

choice of housing accommodation or an opportunity to express preferences for accommodation.

Following the changes to social housing allocations made by the Localism Act 2011, the new statutory guidance "Allocation of Accommodation: Guidance for local housing authorities in England" was published by the Department for Communities and Local Government in June 2012. This replaced all previous guidance on social housing allocation. Housing Authorities are required to have regard to this guidance in exercising their functions under Part 6 of the 1996 Act.

Secondary legislation has also been made through the statutory instruments 'Allocation of Housing (Qualification Criteria for Armed Forces) (England) 2012' and 'The Housing Act 1996 (Additional Preference for Armed Forces) (England) Regulations 2012', which affects the way that certain former members of the Armed Forces and their families are given access to the housing register and preference on the housing register.

The 'Allocation of Housing (Qualification Criteria for Right to Move) (England) Regulations 2015' came into force on 20th April 2015, which provide that local authorities must not disqualify certain persons with the 'Right to Move' on the grounds that they do not have a local connection with the authority's district.

Statutory guidance on the Right to Move also strongly encourages local authorities to set aside a quota of 1% of available properties for applicants in this group who require a cross-boundary move. Local authorities should publish the quota as part of their allocation scheme, together with their rationale for adopting the specific percentage. Where less than 1% is proposed, local authorities should explain why they have chosen to do so. The Council is required to have regard to this guidance and should be prepared to justify any departure from it.

6. Other implications

6.1 How will this contribute to achievement of the Council's key objectives / corporate priorities (corporate plan/scorecard) / organisational blueprint / Local Area Agreement (or Coventry Sustainable Community Strategy)?

The Coventry Homefinder Choice Based Lettings Policy supports the Council Plan objectives: to increase the supply, choice and quality of housing; and to protect and support the most vulnerable people, including preventing homelessness and helping people who do become homeless.

6.2 How is risk being managed?

The Policy has had regard to all relevant legislation and statutory guidance and has been developed following a robust consultation process. There is always the risk of challenge to a Council decision; however this risk will be minimised by a policy meeting statutory requirements.

6.3 What is the impact on the organisation?

None

6.4 Equalities / EIA

An Equalities and Consultation Assessment (ECA) was carried out in 2014 at the time that the changes were proposed and the new Policy was implemented. This has been updated following the first 12 months of implementation, showing the effects of the policy changes on protected groups, and is attached as Appendix 2 to this report (12 month update is page 34 onwards).

71% of properties advertised in the 12 months after implementation were let to applicants in priority bands 1A, 1B, 2A, 2B and 2C (with an assessed housing need). In the 12 months before the implementation of this policy, only 58% of properties were let to applicants in the priority bands. Applicants in the priority bands may be in any of the protected characteristic groups, but as the data in the ECA shows, certain groups are more likely to be registered with Coventry Homefinder and/or are more likely to have a housing need.

The increase in the proportion of properties that are let to applicants in housing need is therefore a positive impact.

This does mean that applicants without a housing need (in Bands 3A and 3B) are less likely to successfully bid for a property. However, with the shortage of social housing in the city, the Policy intends to support those who are currently homeless or in unsuitable housing over those who are suitably housed but want to move. The Government's statutory guidance states: "we expect social homes to go to people who genuinely need them".

6.5 Implications for (or impact on) the environment

None

6.6 Implications for partner organisations?

The Council no longer owns any housing following the Large Scale Voluntary Transfer of all the former Council housing to Whitefriars Housing Group in 2000. The local authority is still required to have an allocation scheme for determining how allocations are made in order that those who have the greatest need for housing are prioritised. Coventry Homefinder is therefore a partnership between Coventry City Council and Registered Providers (mostly Housing Associations) in the city.

The Coventry Homefinder Policy determines how applicants who express an interest in a property are prioritised, which therefore impacts on the Registered Provider which then receives the shortlist determining who should be offered the property (subject to the Provider's own tenancy checks).

Registered Providers and other partner organisations were involved in consultation throughout the process and the changes to the policy have been discussed at the Coventry Homefinder Partnership Board meetings.

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Appendices