

Report to: **Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

Date: **27 July 2021**

Title: **Devon Home Choice Review**

Portfolio Area: **Homes / Cllr Ratcliffe**

Wards Affected: **All**

Relevant Scrutiny Committee:

Urgent Decision: **N** Approval and clearance obtained: **Y**

Date next steps can be taken: Any recommendations will be considered by the Hub Committee at its meeting to be held on 21 September 2021

Author: **Stephanie Rixon** Role: **Senior Housing Specialist**

Contact: **01803 861234** email: stephanie.rixon@swdevon.gov.uk

Recommendations:

That the Committee RECOMMEND to the Hub Committee that the Council continues to be a member of Devon Home Choice.

1. Executive summary

- 1.1. Devon Home Choice has been the joint housing register for all local authorities in Devon since 2009. This report looks to review and analyse the waiting list and allocation trends to better inform members and officers of the housing needs across the area and how well these needs are being met.
- 1.2. As a result of public and partner consultation a number of proposed changes were approved by the Hub Committee. These changes came into effect on 01 July 2021 therefore this report does not reflect these updates.
- 1.3. The full Devon Home Choice policy can be found at www.devonhomechoice.com

2. Background

2.1. It is a statutory requirement for local authorities to have allocation schemes which give "reasonable preference" to certain categories of those in housing need. In addition, housing can only be allocated to those who are "qualifying persons", in accordance with the provisions of the Housing Act 1996.

Statutory guidance was issued in June 2012 regarding the factors which could affect eligibility and qualification. Housing authorities are required to have regard to this in exercising their functions under Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996.

Devon Home Choice operates a Choice Based Lettings approach to allocations. This places people in a level of priority based on their circumstances and properties are then allocated according to priority and the length of time they have been in that level of priority. Priority is issued in the form of Bandings:

Band A – Emergency, where the need for housing is assessed as being so exceptional that they take priority over all other applicants.

Band B – High, where the need to move is urgent but there is no immediate risk.

Band C – Medium, where the housing situation is having a negative impact on the applicant's wellbeing but the situation is manageable in the medium term.

Band D – Low, where the situation is having a negative impact on the applicant's well-being but it is not causing any significant deterioration to their health or ability to live independently.

Band E – No housing need.

(More detailed information regarding Bandings can be found at https://www.devonhomechoice.com/sites/default/files/DHC/devon_home_choice_policy_v9.3_january_2021.pdf)

Customers check the website each week and express an interest in up to 3 properties per week that meet their housing needs. This system places the customer at the centre of the process allowing them to have control over the properties they are offered. It also offers a transparent allocations system which does not allow for officer or registered provider influence and lettings are reported so the band and waiting time of the successful applicant is in the public domain.

There are currently 1011 households on the Devon Home Choice register, of these 489 are in housing need.

Key Themes:

The Numbers:

Housing Need					
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	General Needs	Maximum of 3 Steps	Step Free	W/chair Accessible	Total
Band B	44	10	14	6	74
1 Bed	15	8	8	1	32
2 Bed	12	2	3	3	20
3 Bed	7		1	1	9
4 Bed	7		2	1	10
5 Bed	3				3
Band C	109	22	13	1	145
1 Bed	6	10	7		23
2 Bed	29	5	2		36
3 Bed	49	5	2	1	57
4 Bed	23	2	2		27
5 Bed	2				2
Band D	246	12	10	2	270
1 Bed	174	8	6	2	190
2 Bed	44	2			46
3 Bed	21	1	3		25
4 Bed	5	1			6
5 Bed	1		1		2
6 Bed	1				1
Band E	441	32	44	4	522
1 Bed	200	26	38	2	266
2 Bed	173	5	4	2	184
3 Bed	62	1	2		65
4 Bed	6		1		7
Total	840	76	82	13	1011

Bedroom need and waiting times

Bedroom size	Number of people	Average waiting time in days	Number of lets
1	511 (266 band E)	405	172
2	286 (184 band E)	373	131
3	156 (65 band E)	374	63
4	50 (7 band E)	622	4

There are 51 households requiring a 4 bed or larger property in housing need with 13 of these of these being categorised as high housing need. Comparatively in the last 2 years only 4 properties with 4 bedrooms have been let with no 5 or 6 bedrooms becoming available. While recent policy updates have been implemented to enable these high need households to bid on properties one bedroom smaller than is required this will not diminish the demand for this property type and supply is currently limited.

The data would suggest that the supply of 1 bedroom properties is highest this information can be misleading due to limitations on the reporting system being unable to sort the number of age restricted properties advertised. These are the lowest demand property types however I estimate that 40-50% of one bedroom properties advertised would be for older people (over 55s) only.

Local Connection

Operating alongside the Devon Home Choice Policy we have retained our own Local allocations policy. This allows us to allocate properties in a rural location (and not covered by a section 106 agreement) to people in housing need with local connection to that parish, then cascading to the wider area. This ensures that we are able place community at the centre of our allocations approach alongside housing need.

In addition to this and section 106 restrictions we monitor the number of people moving into our local authority area who do not have a local connection to this area and the number of people who move out of this local authority area and do not have a local connection to their new local authority area. Where the balance of these figures accounts for 2% or more of the homes let within that area, homes in that local authority area are advertised with preference to applicants with a local connection to this local authority.

West Devon has currently exceeded this 2% and therefore properties will be allocated in the first instance to applicants with local connection to West Devon. The current deficit stands at 16 in compared to 3 moving out. Over the last 2 years 88 households have moved into the area compared to 45 moving out of the area. Of these 88 households moving into West Devon 39 had Local Connection to the area either through family, recent residency or employment. Of a total number of 368 lets via Devon Home Choice in West Devon 49 were to people with no Local Connection to the district.

Properties let	No. let to apps. currently living in WD	No. let to apps currently living outside WD	No. let to apps from outside WD with LC
368	280	88	39

Wheelchair Adapted properties

There are currently 9 households on the register in housing need requiring a property with some adaptations needed. In response to this we have developed and implemented the Disabled Adapted Needs Panel which has evolved to include representatives from the Devon Home Choice Team, Disabled Adapted Needs Team, Affordable Housing Team and Occupational Therapists from various care assessment and provider team cross WD. Through the interventions of the panel we have housed 5 over the last 2 years.

While the numbers waiting for an adapted property is not high compared to those needing a general needs property the number of adapted properties

available over the past five years is 2. This is not reflective of properties that have been adapted after the tenancy has started.

An additional pressure point is step free and properties with a maximum of 3 steps properties where demand increases to 82 households. The number of lets matching this criteria is 4.

Accessibility

It is vital that the register is accessible to all our customers. The accessibility of the Devon Home Choice register was reviewed by the Management Board in April of this year with a particular focus on Digital inclusion and BAME inclusion.

The review found that the system is well equipped to meet the needs of customers. While primarily a web based system there are alternative ways of registering and accessing information including the continued use of paper forms where needed, staff taking phone as well email enquiries and letters being sent via the post as well as via email where requested.

For data protection reasons we are prohibited from holding data on people that is not directly relevant to the purposes for which it was supplied meaning we cannot hold information on the number of BAME customers on the Devon Home Choice register. However in addition to the support outlined above the website is equipped with a full translation module enabling customers to access the information and forms in different languages.

Recent consultation showed that 88% of the 391 respondents understood the way in which priority was awarded (or were neutral) demonstrating that the system appears to be clear to the majority of applicants.
(The full consultation report and feedback can be found at https://www.devonhomechoice.com/sites/default/files/DHC/devon_home_choice_2021_consultation_feedback.pdf)

3. Outcomes/outputs

O&S is asked to agree the continuation of our membership in the Devon Home Choice Partnership.

The performance of the Devon Home Choice Allocations will continue to be monitored.

4. Options available and consideration of risk

4.1. If we do not continue in the Devon Home Choice Partnership we would need to set up our own system of allocation. As a non-stock holding authority we would likely return to a nomination arrangement with our partner landlords (currently in all but exceptional circumstances all properties are allocated through Devon Home Choice). Typically this is in-between 65%-80% of all homes available with the rest retained by the RP (and likely to remain advertised through Devon Home Choice) Our

residents would be required to register on 2 schemes to ensure they were able to apply for all suitable homes. In addition to this, leaving Devon Home Choice will affect the current partnership working with specialist schemes for supported accommodation and extra care housing working through Devon Home Choice to assist some of our more vulnerable applicants. The practicalities of securing Registered Provider Buy In beyond the previously agreed nominations agreement would be unlikely due to the replication of work required and the unlikely possibility that we could offer the same value for money as Devon Home Choice due to being solely liable for the running costs which are outlined in more detail below.

5. Proposed Way Forward

It is proposed that the Council continues as a member of Devon Home Choice. The costs of implementing our own allocations system would be prohibitive and would cause difficulties with getting buy in from Registered Providers who would have little incentive to let any properties outside the agreed nominations agreement through us at the exclusion of the rest of Devon.

6. Implications

Implications	Relevant to proposals Y/N	Details and proposed measures to address
Legal/Governance	Y	The Housing Act 1996 as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002, and the Localism Act 2011 provides the legislative framework for the allocation of social housing. While local authorities are not legally required to maintain a housing register they must provide a framework for prioritising and allocating social housing.
Financial	Y	No additional funding is sought at this time. The total cost (which is funded through property adverts) of the software is: Year 1: £29,002 Year 2: £29,727 Year 3: £30,470 Our only cost associated with the register is a FTE at Level 7 and a £1000 contribution which the additional funding is raised by Registered Providers paying £25 per advert to advertise their properties on the Website. The joint register offers an efficient and customer

		led approach to managing the housing register, delivering on customer service and value for money.
Risk	y	Failure to provide a framework for the prioritisation of applicants and allocation of social housing would be a failure to meet statutory requirements.
Comprehensive Impact Assessment Implications		
Equality and Diversity	Y	The Devon Home Choice Policy is checked by an independent specialist housing barrister when any fundamental changes are made to ensure that meets all the legislative requirements.
Safeguarding	Y	
Community Safety, Crime and Disorder	Y	The Devon Home Choice Policy contains detailed information about relevant offending and other relevant disorderly conduct. The decision to operate a Choice Based Lettings system is to help communities thrive by enabling people choice over where they want to live.
Health, Safety and Wellbeing	Y	The prime objective of the Devon Home Choice Policy is to assist people with securing sustainable, safe long term accommodation which is vital to improving the health and wellbeing of people living in the area.
Other implications		

Supporting Information

Appendices:

Appendix 1: Local Lettings Allocation Policy

Background Papers:

None