

Report to: **Overview and Scrutiny**
Date: **20th January 2022**
Title: **Devon Home Choice Review**
Portfolio Area: **Homes / Cllr Pearce**

Wards Affected: **all**

Relevant Scrutiny Committee:

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

Date next steps can be taken: NA

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

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

Recommendations:

That the Committee recommend to the Executive that the Council continues to be a member of Devon Home Choice.

1. Executive summary

- 1.1. Devon Home Choice (DHC) 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. The full Devon Home Choice policy can be found at www.devonhomechoice.com
- 1.3. The key DHC statistics are:
 - 1.3.1. Average waiting times range from 373 – 430 days depending on property size.
 - 1.3.2. Overall housing need currently stands at 1513 properties.
- 1.4. DHC is an effective administrative tool which provides a good user experience for those in housing need and through which the Council can discharge its statutory duty.

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.

2.2 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)

2.3 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.

2.4 There are currently 1513 households on the Devon Home Choice register in South Hams, of these 489 are in housing need.

3. Key Themes:

3.1 The Numbers:

Housing Need					
	General Needs	Maximum of 3 Steps	Step Free	W/chair Accessible	Total
Band A	0	0	0	0	0
Band B					
1 Bed	32	20	19	4	65
2 Bed	39	10	10	2	61
3 Bed	13	2	3	2	20
4 Bed	6	1	0	0	7
5 Bed	6	1	0	0	7
6 Bed	1	0	0	0	1
Band C					
1 Bed	12	12	6	2	32
2 Bed	25	4	7	0	36
3 Bed	60	0	2	0	62
4 Bed	27	0	0	0	27
5 Bed	2	0	0	0	2
Band D					
1 Bed	293	28	1	5	346
2 Bed	75	2	1	1	79
3 Bed	16	2	0	0	18
4 Bed	1	0	0	0	1
5 Bed	0	0	1	0	1
6 Bed	0	0	0	0	0
Band E					
1 Bed	324	56	38	1	419

2 Bed	199	17	6	0	142
3 Bed	85	3	3	0	91
4 Bed	4	0	1	0	5
Total	1220	156	119	17	1513

Of note in these figures is the number in Housing Need is 856 with 657 being in Band E for no housing need.

Bedroom need and waiting times

Bedroom size	Average waiting time in days	Number of lets
1	373	292
2	387	271
3	461	110
4	430	16

3.2 There are 51 households requiring a 4-bed or larger property in housing need with 15 of these of these being categorised as high housing need. Comparatively in the last 2 years, only 16 properties with 4 bedrooms have been let with no 5- or 6- bed properties 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.

3.3 The data would suggest that the supply of 1-bedroom properties is highest, however, 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 it is estimated that 40-50% of one-bedroom properties advertised would be for older people (over 55s) only.

Local Connection

3.4 Operating alongside the Devon Home Choice Policy, the Council has retained its own Local allocations policy. This allows the Council 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 the Council is

able place community at the centre of its allocations approach alongside housing need.

- 3.5 In addition to this and section 106 restrictions, the Council monitors the number of people moving into its area who do not have a local connection to the area and the number of people who move out of our 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 our area.
- 3.6 South Hams has currently had more than 2% of applicants moving into the area than those moving out of the area, therefore properties will be allocated in the first instance to applicants with local connection to the South Hams. Since April 2019 of the 210 households moving into South Hams 122 had Local Connection to the area through family, recent residency or employment. Of a total number of 689 lets via Devon Home Choice in South Hams 88 were to people with no Local Connection to the district, however 11 of the 88 were exempt from Local Connection restrictions due to their circumstances, this is 11.2% of total allocations. In addition to this 84 households have moved out of the South Hams into other areas of Devon via Devon Home Choice.

Properties let	No. let to apps. currently living in SH	No. let to apps currently living outside SH	No. let to apps from outside SH with LC
689	479	210	122

Wheelchair Adapted properties

- 3.7 There are currently 17 households on the register in housing need requiring a property with some adaptations needed. In response to this, the Council has developed and implemented the Disabled Adapted Needs Panel which includes representatives from the Devon Home Choice Team, the Disabled Adapted Needs Team, the Affordable Housing Team and Occupational Therapists from various care assessment and provider teams cross South Hams. Through the interventions of the Panel, we have housed 18 over the last 2 years.
- 3.8 While the number of applicants 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 only 15 compared to 674 general needs properties.
- 3.9 An additional pressure point is demand for properties that are step free, or have a maximum of 3 steps which stands at 275 households. The number of properties matching this criteria is 147.

Accessibility

- 3.10 It is vital that the register is accessible to all those who are in housing need. 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.
- 3.11 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.
- 3.12 Currently the DHC register does not hold information on the number of BAME customers on the register. We are currently investigating whether we are legally able to request and store this data. 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.
- 3.13 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)

4. Outcomes/outputs

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to recommend to the Executive the continuation of the Council's membership in the Devon Home Choice Partnership.

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

5. Options available and consideration of risk

- 5.1. If the Council does not continue in the Devon Home Choice Partnership, it would need to set up its own system of allocation. As a non-stock holding authority, the Council would be 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 Registered Provider (and likely to remain advertised through Devon Home Choice). Residents would be required to register on two 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 agreement beyond the previously agreed nominations agreement would be unlikely due to the replication of work required and the likelihood that the Council would be unable to 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.

6. 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.

7. Implications

Implications	Relevant to proposals Y/N	Details and proposed measures to address
Legal/Governance	Y	The Housing Act 1996 provides the legislative framework for the allocation of social housing. While local housing authorities are not required to maintain a housing register they must have an allocation scheme for prioritising and allocating social housing. An allocation scheme must include a statement of the authority's policy on offering applicants a choice of housing accommodation or the opportunity to express preferences about the accommodation to be allocated to them
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 Full Time Equivalent at Level 7 and a £1000 contribution which the additional funding is raised

		<p>by Registered Providers paying £25 per advert to advertise their properties on the Website.</p> <p>The joint register offers an efficient and customer led approach to managing the housing register, delivering on customer service and value for money.</p>
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: Local Lettings Allocation Policy Appendix 1

Background Papers:

None