

Briefing Paper to the meeting of the Decent & Affordable Homes Policy Development Group on 22 May 2013 on the Review of Devon Home Choice

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At the last meeting of the PDG on 19 March 2013, Members received a briefing on the Devon Home Choice (DHC) scheme. The DHC Management Board met on 17 April 2013 to consider the feedback from the recent consultation undertaken with partners and to agree any changes to the scheme. The purpose of this briefing is to inform Members of changes to the scheme which will be implemented during 2013.

The partners are currently assessing the feasibility of centralising some administrative functions. A consultant has been engaged to do some work around this and the Council was consulted on the proposal. Some partners feel that there would be benefits in terms of efficiency and cost if some tasks were centralised. These are likely to include responding to telephone queries, emails and letters regarding applications for rehousing and the administration of applications at an early stage, including assessment of these.

At this stage, Officers do not feel that centralisation of some of the administrative functions arising from the management of applications to DHC would deliver any advantages for Mid Devon. Our Allocations team has a dual role and is responsible for strategic rehousing within the District as well as for ensuring that the landlord service meets targets in relation to voids. They are responsible for the allocation and letting of properties within our own stock and undertake pre-vacate inspections and viewings. Performance in respect of voids was excellent last year with the average time to re-let one of our properties being 17 days.

However, analysis of the costs involved in each local authority partner continuing to administer the system at their offices is on-going. If there are indications that there could be savings achieved by removing some of the more basic tasks relating to administration of the scheme to a centralised team, then the PDG would be asked to consider a recommendation.

The feasibility study has highlighted some savings which could be made and this includes allowing applicants to reset their own passwords, providing self-serve to enable them to check banding data, and amending the system so that those people who do not bid are automatically removed from the housing register. Some of these changes can be achieved with minimal cost and the Management Board is likely to approve most of these recommendations.

There was some discussion at the meeting about the discharge of the homeless duty into the private sector and it was agreed that the policy should be reworded to make it clear that local authorities may discharge homeless duty into the private sector.

There was a major change agreed in connection with the size criteria. It had been amended last year stipulating that two children of the same sex could share a room up until the age of 21. DHC is to be changed to ensure that the scheme is compatible with that specified in the Housing Benefit regulations, where the age in these circumstances is 16.

There was also some discussion about changing the income threshold for housing applicants and the Management Board is going to look at different options. At the moment very low paid people in work may not be able to access properties through DHC in some areas because their earnings are still considered too high. There is concern about this because of the need to build sustainable communities.

The policy relating to housing members of the armed forces will remain as it is as it enables the partners to meet their statutory obligations following recent changes to legislation.

During a discussion about a recent decision made by the Local Government Ombudsman, it was agreed to amend the policy to show that if there is an issue around the offer or non-offer of a tenancy, then the issue lies with the landlord and the applicant must pursue their complaint with the landlord.

There was also discussion about fostering because having suitable sized accommodation is an integral part of the decision as to whether or not to allow individuals to foster. The policy has already been amended to reflect government guidance and it was agreed that no further changes are necessary.

As Members may know, Teignbridge District Council has just undertaken consultation relating to rehousing issues and there has been overwhelming support for removing band E from their scheme for rehousing. Band E is the band for those cases where there is no housing need. As a result, it is likely that applicants who have been assessed as not being in housing need will no longer be able to apply for homes in Teignbridge. Furthermore, housing applicants living in that District will no longer be able to apply to other authorities to go into band E. There was a lot of discussion about this at the meeting on 17 April 2013 and in particular about the continuing viability of a county-wide system if one local authority operates the scheme using different assessment criteria. However, the prevailing opinion was that the scheme is a framework and that the existence of local allocations policies supports this. Members will recall that MDDC operates its own local allocations policy which enables us to label properties. In this way, we can make best use of stock because we can ensure that only those needing adaptations can bid for adapted homes, and we can also ensure that rural homes in the villages are available for those with a local connection.

In light of these potential changes in Teignbridge, it was agreed that the partners could discuss the benefits of maintaining a band for those in no housing need (band E) at a future meeting. This authority occasionally rehouses people from this band if there are no other qualifying applicants, especially into homes in rural areas where a local connection must be applied as a result of a s106 agreement, and so Officers feel that there is some merit in maintaining a list showing people with no housing need.

There is also to be a future discussion about the priority given to those who are living in insanitary conditions. These cases are usually given very high priority but there is some support across the county for reviewing this policy. In most cases, people living in homes which are found to be unfit for human habitation are moved into alternative accommodation but there is support for the view that this provides the landlord with an easy way to resolve the problem. In such cases, the objective

should be to compel the landlord to make good any defects which then enables the tenant to remain in situ and removes the need for them to be rehoused in social housing which is a scarce resource.