

CABINET

Agenda Item: 6

Ward: All
Portfolio: Nigel Taylor
Date: 11 July 2016

Report Author:
Jai Vick & Debbie Lambert - Housing Options Team

Subject: Proposed Changes following Review of
Homefinder Somerset Allocations Policy

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| Report Sign off | Seen by: | Name | Date |
| | Legal | Alex Kershaw-Moore | 28.6.16 |
| | Finance | N/A | |
| | Procurement | N/A | |
| | Corporate Manager | Tracy Aarons | 24.6.2016 |
| | Portfolio Holder | Nigel Taylor | 24.6.2016 |
| | Scrutiny | Due to Countywide timescales, we were unable to present to Scrutiny prior to Cabinet. The five Local Authorities need to commission the changes by mid July. | |
| Summary: | <p>The Homefinder Somerset Monitoring Board has reviewed the Homefinder Common Allocations policy in the light of ongoing changes to welfare payments and also in changes to the way in which applicants express an interest on properties. The review has taken account of issues raised by Local Authorities and Landlord Partners when administering and applying the Policy. The updated draft policy has been reviewed in detail by Local Authority and Registered Providers (Housing Association and Council Landlords) and has been the subject of a consultation exercise with applicants and stakeholders.</p> <p>Over 1100 applicants responded to the consultation exercise with all proposed changes being supported.</p> <p>The summary of the proposed key policy changes and the reasoning behind each change is provided in the background papers. See Appendix 2.</p> <p>The Policy Consultation feedback report is provided in the background papers. See Appendix 3.</p> | | |

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| Recommendation: | The Homefinder Somerset Monitoring Board (of which Mendip District Council is a board member) has considered the consultation feedback in detail and has recommended that the proposed changes to the Homefinder Allocations policy be adopted by the five District and Borough Councils. |
| Direct and/or indirect impact on service delivery to our customers and communities: | Approving the policy changes will assist in the delivery of the Corporate Priority – Taking all possible steps to support the provision of housing in the District. |
| Legal Implications: | Under the Housing Act 1996, Mendip District Council must have an allocation scheme which they must follow when deciding the priorities and procedures for allocating housing. The Scheme must meet certain requirements laid down in the Act. Failure to review the Homefinder Somerset policy would breach the Council's statutory duty under the Housing Act 1996 and leave the council open to legal challenge. |
| Financial Implications: | <p>There will be a small revenue implication in terms of minor works to the Homefinder IT system. This cost will be borne by the Homefinder Somerset Partnership.</p> <p>There will be resources required to implement the changes in terms of Officer time which will be required to re assess applicants to ensure correct bands are awarded. This will be administered internally with no additional cost to the Local Authority.</p> |
| Value for Money: | N/A |
| Equalities Implications: | An Equalities Analysis has been carried out and be will published alongside the Homefinder Somerset policy – Appendix 4. |
| Risk Assessment: | <p>Failure to review the Homefinder Somerset Allocations policy would breach the Council's statutory duty under the Housing Act 1996 to review its housing policy and to ensure that the policy takes into consideration changes in legislation and best practice.</p> <p>The risk to accepting the proposed changes are very minimal as all of the proposed changes were supported following a consultation exercise with the Local Authorities and Registered Providers who operate Homefinder, applicants and stakeholders.</p> |

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| | The risk implications of not accepting the proposed changes would mean that Mendip District Council could then be excluded from the Homefinder Somerset partnership and due to significant cost implications, would not be in a position to operate its own housing allocations system. |
| Scrutiny Recommendation (if any) | N/A |

INTRODUCTION

The Council introduced Choice Based Lettings across Somerset in 2008 as a Countywide scheme, Homefinder Somerset. Choice Based Lettings schemes were designed to introduce an element of choice for people who apply for social housing. Choice Based Lettings allow people applying for a home, (including existing social housing tenants who want to transfer) to express an interest on properties which become available through Homefinder Somerset.

During 2010 a review group made up of the Somerset Local Authorities undertook a review of the Homefinder Somerset scheme. The review recommended some amendments to the policy, the application form and the system that is used to assess housing register applications and operate the Choice Based Lettings allocations process.

As a result of recent changes in allocations legislation and the introduction of the Localism Act 2011, a further review of the Homefinder Somerset Allocations policy was reviewed and changes to the policy were made and approved by Cabinet 2013.

In light of welfare reform and issues raised by customers, Registered Providers and the Local Authorities, Homefinder Monitoring board asked the Homefinder Operational Staff to review the policy again in 2016. That review led to the proposals for changes in the policy which are set out in Appendix 2.

BACKGROUND

The Homefinder Partnership consists of the five Local Authorities in Somerset and over forty Registered Providers. The Homefinder Partnership has undertaken a number of reviews since going 'live' in 2008 and in response to changes in legislation and welfare reform.

In the last 12 months, the Homefinder Somerset Monitoring Board has reviewed the Common Allocations policy in the response to ongoing changes to welfare reform and changes to the way applicants express an interest in properties.

The review has taken into account issues raised across the whole partnership. The draft policy – Appendix 1 – has then been reviewed in detail by a variety of Local Authorities and Registered Providers. There was then a consultation exercise with applicants and stakeholders.

The proposed policy changes are listed in Appendix 2 and the summary response changes are listed in Appendix 3. Over 1,100 applicants responded to the consultation exercise with all changes being supported. The full version of the amended Homefinder Somerset policy change can be found in Appendix 1.

The changes being sought are not significant shifts in policy but simply reflect changes in law, current demands for housing and need, correcting errors, providing clarification and making other minor amendments.

South Somerset DC and Taunton Deane BC have already taken the decision through their relevant cabinets and it has been approved.

OPTIONS CONSIDERED

The options are:

- 1) Not to accept the proposed changes
- 2) Accept some of the proposed changes
- 3) Accept all of the proposed changes.

Options 1 and 2 should be discounted as per the risk assessment. Homefinder Somerset is a partnership of the five Local Authorities working together and Mendip could be excluded from the Partnership if the proposed changes are either not accepted or some are accepted. South Somerset DC and Taunton Deane BC have already approved the policy changes at recent Cabinet meetings.

Options 3 – Accept all of the proposed changes and continue to work together as a Countywide scheme with the other four Local Authorities as Homefinder Somerset Choice Based Lettings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That Members approve and adopt the revised Countywide Homefinder Somerset Allocations Policy.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

Failure to review the Homefinder Somerset Allocations Policy will leave the Council open to legal challenge having not taken into account the Council's statutory duty under the Housing Act 1996 to review the Housing Allocation policy and changes in legislation and best practice.

The proposed policy changes were raised by the whole Homefinder partnership, over a period of 12 months, followed by a large consultation exercise which involved Local Authorities, Registered Providers, applicants and stakeholders in which all of the proposed changes were supported. Therefore, if Members approve and adopt the revised and proposed changes to the Countywide Homefinder Somerset Allocations policy, on behalf of Mendip District Council, the partnership can continue to provide a Choice Based Lettings scheme across our districts which has been a successful joint scheme since introduction in 2008.

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List of background Papers:

Homefinder Somerset Allocation Policy July 2016 – Appendix 1
HFS Policy Changes Report for LA members – Summary of key policy changes -
Appendix 2
Homefinder Somerset Consultation Responses – Appendix 3
Equality Analysis Form July 2016 - Appendix 4



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2016 Report for LA m



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Equalities Analysis
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