

Report to:	EXECUTIVE
Relevant Officer:	Andrew Foot, Head of Housing
Relevant Cabinet Member	Councillor Mrs Christine Wright, Cabinet Member for Housing
Date of Meeting	17 July 2017

ALLOCATION OF SOCIAL HOUSING

1.0 Purpose of the report:

- 1.1 To consider changes to the arrangements for the allocation and letting of social housing in Blackpool.

2.0 Recommendation(s):

- 2.1 To enter into a new Partnership Agreement with local social housing providers and Fylde Borough Council and Wyre Borough Council to maintain and further develop the My Home Choice Fylde Coast sub-regional system for letting social housing.
- 2.2 To enter into a new contract for the provision of software for the My Home Choice system on behalf of the partnership.
- 2.3 That the new Blackpool Council / Blackpool Coastal Housing Local Lettings Policy attached at Appendix 4a is adopted for Blackpool Council-owned housing stock.
- 2.4 To authorise the Head of Housing to commence a public consultation exercise on changes to the way that all social housing in the Blackpool is allocated and that a report is brought back to Executive with proposed changes to the allocations policy.

3.0 Reasons for recommendation(s):

- 3.1 To continue to provide a single point of access to social housing across Blackpool and the Fylde Coast, to improve the ease of use of the My Home Choice system, and to ensure that the allocation of social housing continues to reflect local needs.
- 3.2a Is the recommendation contrary to a plan or strategy adopted or approved by the Council? No

3.2b Is the recommendation in accordance with the Council's approved budget? Yes

3.3 Other alternative options to be considered:

Not to sign a new partnership agreement or software contract. This would mean the fragmentation of arrangements for the letting of social housing with individual application processes and waiting lists for each social housing provider.

To sign a contract with a new software provider. This would mean higher costs and the loss of Housing Options case management software that is linked to the existing system.

Not to review the lettings and allocations policies. The policies were last reviewed in 2013; there have been significant changes in the demand for and supply of social housing since then, making it important to consider again how the policies can be refined to better meet local needs.

4.0 Council Priority:

4.1 The relevant Council Priority is:

“Communities: Creating stronger communities and increasing resilience.”

5.0 Background Information

The Current System for allocating social housing

5.1 Since May 2012 social housing in Blackpool has been allocated through a single system called My Home Choice Fylde Coast that also covers social housing in the boroughs of Fylde and Wyre. This web-based system is supplied by Abris Ltd which has recently become part of Civica. This means that someone looking for housing can make one application and have access to homes owned by the six largest social landlords in the area, including Blackpool Council's own homes managed by Blackpool Coastal Housing. This is much better than the previous arrangements that required separate applications to each social landlord, had different criteria being applied by each landlord and required the Council's Housing Options team to negotiate to get individuals most in need accepted for housing.

5.2 Blackpool Council's Housing Options team assesses applications to the common housing register from Blackpool residents and awards levels of priority. The Fylde Coast Consistent Assessment Policy (CAP) sets out how to determine priority across the partnership. Applicants are awarded priority with regard to statutory housing needs criteria, but since the Localism Act 2012, Councils have had more flexibility in who they prioritise. In December 2013 following the Localism Act, the Consistent

Assessment Policy was changed to introduce a stronger local connection requirement.

- 5.3 Once on the housing register, applicants can express interest in available properties as they are uploaded each week by the partner social landlords. Generally the applicant expressing an interest who has the greatest priority and who has been on the list for the longest time is offered the property. Social landlords are committed under the Partnership Agreement to letting all of their homes in accordance with the Council's policies and not just the 50% minimum that is required by the social housing regulator.
- 5.4 Individual landlords still have their own lettings policies that set out any specialist requirements for some groups of homes. For example, for the Blackpool Council housing stock, the Local Lettings Policy sets out that sheltered housing is primarily for people over the age of 55.

The need for review

- 5.5 There is now a number of challenges with the way that these systems and policies are operating that mean that a review and further investment is required:
- The choice-based lettings arrangement does not suit everyone, with many people either not able or not willing to wait until they are successful in expressing interest in a property. Currently around 2,000 new applicants are assessed in Blackpool each year but only around 750 lettings are made each year. The average waiting time is 6 – 12 months for those who find a new home, but many people wait much longer or end up looking elsewhere.
 - The system is very complicated and hard to understand, with a very detailed application and assessment process that we would like to streamline for the benefit of applicants and improved efficiency in assessment. Partner social landlords want to be able to offer a service similar to private lettings for some properties, advertising and letting them on a first come first served basis.
 - The system is five years old and clunky by today's standards. Too many people start applying on the system and never complete their application. The Council wants to invest in a newer version and make it much easier to use, especially on mobile phones.
 - The original partnership agreement has expired and partners will not continue to let their properties on the system, in accordance with the single allocations policy, unless a new agreement is put in place and there is investment in an updated system.
 - The Fylde Coast Consistent Assessment Policy needs to be reviewed to reflect the latest dynamics in local supply and demand and recent legislation. In particular while the number of people on the housing register has increased, the number of social housing lettings each year has significantly reduced, with

tenants staying longer in their homes. The “bedroom tax” has changed the balance in demand between different sizes of homes, with strong demand for one bedroom flats and for all houses, but weaker demand for two and three bedroom flats.

The proposed changes

- 5.6 It is proposed that a new Partnership Agreement is signed between Blackpool Council, Fylde Borough Council and Wyre Borough Council, Blackpool Coastal Housing and six other social landlords. This will commit the partners to continuing to work together on a sub-regional social housing lettings system for the next five years. In particular, the agreement will continue to require that all partners make a financial contribution to the costs of developing and continuing to maintain the system, commit to continuing to use the system to let their local housing stock and continuing to abide by the Fylde Coast Consistent Assessment Policy. The Partnership Agreement also sets out a plan to introduce a twin track approach to the letting of social housing, with at least 50% of homes let through a choice-based lettings arrangement, but the remainder of homes let on a first come first served basis. Targets will be put in place and performance monitored to ensure that the majority of homes continue to be let to applicants who are in housing need.
- 5.7 It is proposed that Blackpool Council enters into a new contract with the existing software provider, Civica, to purchase the latest version of the system and incorporate the new first come first served approach to lettings alongside improved choice-based lettings functionality. The cost of the updated system will be no more than £75,000, shared across the partnership, with Blackpool Council contributing no more than £15,000. The rest of the costs will be met by the other partners in accordance with the terms of the new Partnership Agreement. The contract will be for a duration no longer than the Partnership Agreement and will allow for annual maintenance costs similar to current levels at around £28,000 per year, again shared between all members of the partnership.
- 5.8 It is proposed that Blackpool Council adopts a new Local Lettings Policy for homes owned by the Council and managed by Blackpool Coastal Housing. This is attached at Appendix 4a and makes the following key changes:
- To introduce a requirement that new residents of sheltered housing do not have recent histories of anti-social behaviour or current substance misuse issues. This is to help ensure that sheltered housing residents do not cause problems for their neighbours.
 - To stop letting Horsebridge Road as a sheltered housing scheme and to expand sheltered housing lettings at Cherry Tree Road so that both ground and first floor flats there are sheltered. This is to concentrate sheltered housing in the most suitable / popular areas and promote sheltered housing

as small communities of mutually supporting older people.

- To give preference in the letting of new homes at Queens Park to applicants who work at least 16 hours per week or undertake equivalent voluntary work. This is to help establish a more economically stable community in this area.

5.9 It is proposed that the Fylde Coast Consistent Assessment Policy is reviewed and that a new draft policy is the subject of statutory public consultation. Many of the existing policies will remain, but the principal changes that will be included in the public consultation are:

- To make the local connection required to join the housing register a local connection to the whole Fylde Coast area rather than the current connection to individual boroughs. However, preference will still be given in letting homes in each borough to those applicants whose strongest link is to that individual borough.
- To simplify the housing register and priority bands so that only those with a statutorily defined housing need are given a priority band and the bands are reduced to A- high need and urgent requirement to move, B – high need, and C- low need. Qualifying applicants without a defined housing need will undergo a much simpler assessment process and will only be eligible for the first come first served homes. This should help make the application process much quicker and simpler for many people, and reduce the costs of assessing applications.
- Properties will be uploaded onto the system as soon as they are available rather than relying on weekly advertising cycles to improve efficiency in letting.
- There will be more flexibility and choice in the size of homes that households can express an interest in. Currently, applicants are only allowed to bid for homes with a particular number of bedrooms. The new proposal will allow households an “extra” bedroom if they can show that they can afford the additional rent. This is especially helpful where families want children to have their own bedrooms or parents do not have children living with them full time but want them to be able to stay over. This additional choice should make social housing more attractive to working households who would not otherwise consider it.

5.10 Once consultation is complete a revised draft Fylde Cost Consistent Assessment Policy will be brought back to Executive for approval in the Autumn. This will then inform the development of the updated My Home Choice lettings system in early 2018.

5.11 Does the information submitted include any exempt information? No

5.12 **List of Appendices:**

Appendix 4a- Blackpool Council / Blackpool Coastal Housing Local Lettings Policy

6.0 **Legal considerations:**

- 6.1 The new Partnership Agreement is based on the original agreement first signed between partners in 2011 and that has successfully enabled cooperation between partners for the last six years. All partners will need to go through their own approval processes.
- 6.2 The new contract with Civica will be a standard form of contract from a national local authority procurement framework. Alternative providers have been considered but in all cases the costs of developing a new system from scratch would exceed the costs of further developing the existing system.
- 6.3 The provisions of the Local Lettings Policy comply with statutory requirements, and in particular the proposed lettings arrangements at Queens Park comply with the 2016 Ealing judgement case law.
- 6.4 Any changes to the Fylde Coast Consistent Assessment Policy will be subject to statutory consultation and further approval by Executive. Before the final draft is brought forward for approval, legal advice will be sought to ensure that it remains in accordance with the relevant legislation.

7.0 **Human Resources considerations:**

- 7.1 There are no specific proposals that place additional pressure on human resources within the Council. The development of the system will be undertaken using existing resources in the Housing Options team.

8.0 **Equalities considerations:**

- 8.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed with regard to the Blackpool Council/ Blackpool Coastal Housing Local Lettings Policy. This found that no one with any of the protected characteristics should be adversely affected by the new Policy. Blackpool Coastal Housing need to ensure that in looking at histories of anti-social behaviour or substance misuse, each case is carefully considered based on up to date information. The policy applied to Queens Park lettings allows people who cannot undertake paid work to still be eligible through their voluntary or community work contributions.

8.2 A further Equality Impact Assessment will be undertaken before the revised Fylde Coast Consistent Assessment Policy is brought back to Executive for approval, so that the final proposals can be reflected. This will include consideration of the impact of introducing a first come first served approach for some lettings.

9.0 Financial considerations:

9.1 The Council's contribution to the costs of upgrading the system will be met from the Housing Revenue Account as 70% of the social lettings in Blackpool are lettings of Council housing. The Council already makes an annual contribution to the running of the system that will remain broadly the same under the new contract. The Council will not sign the new contract with Civica until other partners have signed the Partnership Agreement and committed to making their financial contributions.

10.0 Risk management considerations:

10.1 By building on an existing system and an established partnership arrangement, we will minimise the risks of problems in continuing to allocate and let social housing in accordance with legal requirements. Further consultation on the Consistent Assessment Policy, taking legal advice, and ensuring regular monitoring of outcomes, will help ensure that the system continues to achieve our objectives.

11.0 Ethical considerations:

11.1 The proposals are consistent with the Council's values, and aim to balance the need to continue to help those in the greatest need with providing opportunities for everyone to find the housing that they need.

12.0 Internal/ External Consultation undertaken:

12.1 The proposals have been developed through extensive discussion between the nine partner organisations to establish commitment to maintain and upgrade the system. Once that commitment has been guaranteed through the signing of the new Partnership Agreement, public consultation will be initiated to seek views on the details of system improvements and changes to the Consistent Assessment Policy.

13.0 Background papers:

13.1 None.

14.0 Key decision information:

- 14.1 Is this a key decision? Yes
- 14.2 If so, Forward Plan reference number: 17/2017
- 14.3 If a key decision, is the decision required in less than five days? No
- 14.4 If **yes**, please describe the reason for urgency:

15.0 Call-in information:

- 15.1 Are there any grounds for urgency, which would cause this decision to be exempt from the call-in process? No
- 15.2 If **yes**, please give reason:

TO BE COMPLETED BY THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

16.0 Scrutiny Committee Chairman (where appropriate):

Date informed: 7 July 2017 Date approved:

17.0 Declarations of interest (if applicable):

17.1

18.0 Executive decision:

18.1

18.2 Date of Decision:

19.0 Reason(s) for decision:

19.1 Date Decision published:

20.0 Executive Members in attendance:

20.1

21.0 Call-in:

21.1

22.0 Notes:

22.1