

## BRECKLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

**Report of:** Executive Member for Growth

**To:** Full Council – 28<sup>th</sup> June 2016

**Author:** Ross Bangs, Housing Manager

**Subject:** Breckland Housing Allocations Policy

**Purpose:** To propose changes to the Council’s Housing Allocations Policy

### **Recommendation(s):**

- 1) That the Housing Allocations Policy is changed as detailed in the report and that the review and verification element of the Policy (Part 2) is completed upon the customer registering a successful bid for a property as oppose to on applying to the Council’s housing register.

### **1.0 BACKGROUND**

- 1.1 Application to the Council’s housing register is made via an on-line form. The information obtained within this form subsequently determines the applicants housing need in accordance with Breckland’s Housing Allocations Policy.
- 1.2 The Council are currently receiving an average of 150 new applications to the housing register per month. The existing policy requires an officer to verify and review the application along with all supporting information before access to the housing register can be approved. This process can take anything between 1 and 2 hours of officer time per application to complete and will often involve a number of customer interactions.
- 1.3 The purpose of the review and verification is twofold. Firstly, this process confirms that the system has correctly determined the applicant’s housing need and secondly provides the necessary assurances that the information provided by the applicant is both true and accurate.
- 1.4 Customers accessing the Council for housing advice are, in the vast majority of cases advised to join the Council’s housing register. This is in part due to officer capacity as well as a lack of alternative advisory or housing options tools. This practice falsely raises customer expectation that they will be housed within the social housing sector and results in an inflated housing register. The outcome is a housing register of customers, the majority of which have no realistic possibility of being housed within the social housing sector where more appropriate forms of advice and options exist.
- 1.5 The existing housing register ranks applicants into four need based bands of priority. As of the 6<sup>th</sup> June 2016, 2182 households were registered with Breckland Key Select as below.

Priority	17
Gold	202
Silver	393
No Reasonable Preference	1570

The No Reasonable Preference band consists of households deemed as has having no

housing priority as set out in the Breckland Council Allocations Policy. It is this band where it could be argued that other forms of housing options and advice would be more appropriate. 10% of stock advertised via Breckland Key Select is allocated to households within the No Reasonable Preference band. The Housing Team is currently working to understand why, given the shortage of affordable housing, these properties are not being allocated to households who have been assessed as having a greater housing need.

- 1.6 There is currently no Council engagement with the private rented sector as a suitable housing option for customers approaching the Council for advice.
- 1.7 Homeless prevention is extremely reactive and the Council does not undertake any form of meaningful preventative activity.

#### **Issues resulting from the existing service.**

- 1.8 The existing practise of review and verification at application stage detracts officer capacity from focussing on those cases of highest need and, or exploring alternative and in many cases more appropriate housing options.
- 1.9 By directing customers to the housing register, regardless of that customers need, the service presents a false expectation to that customer that they will be housed within the affordable housing sector when in reality; certainly within the lower need bands this will not be the case.
- 1.10 The lack of engagement with external partners, particularly the Private Rented Sector causes problems of awareness and possible alternative housing options.

## **2.0 OPTIONS**

### **Housing Service**

- 2.1 The options are:
  - Retain the existing processes and working practices
  - Amend the Housing Allocations Policy to support a new way of working.
- 2.2 Retaining the existing service will result in an increase in customers not receiving appropriate housing options advice as well as a continued increase in the Council's housing register. Continuing with the existing working practise will also not address the issue of prioritisation in terms of officer capacity to deal with those customers presenting with the highest need.
- 2.3 A report detailing how the below recommendations, if approved, will be implemented and delivered in terms of staff structure and resource/capacity has been presented and approved by Transformation Board under the heading of the Housing Service Review and will come to Committee for approval.
- 2.4 It is recommended that the Housing Allocations Policy is amended (Part 2) to transfer the review and varication process from on initial application at present to a point where an applicant had registered a successful bid on a property. If approved, applicants registering a successful bid will be required to supply the necessary validating information within in fixed timescale to prevent delayed re-let times.

- 2.5 A re-design of the Housing Options offer is recommended to include a change of direction and ethos with a view of developing a person centred and bespoke Housing Options and Advice Service. The intention being that Housing Options Officers will provide a meaningful and lasting solution to a customer's housing crisis whilst promoting independence and choice.
- 2.6 The existing catchall practice of directing customers to the housing register will cease with the development of a new suite of housing options, one of which will be application to the housing register if appropriate. This will allow the Housing Options Officers the tools to provide the right advice and options according to the specific and individual needs of the customer. By providing meaningful and realistic housing options and advice, it is anticipated that within 12 months, the housing register will contain only those customers who present as having a genuine need for affordable housing. It is recognised that alongside the proposed workforce culture shift, a programme of re-education with a view of changing customer behaviour will also be necessary.
- 2.7 It is proposed that customers will access the Housing Options and Advice Team via the Breckland District Council website, telephone and in person at both Thetford and Dereham Council offices.
- 2.8 In addition it is further proposed that a 24/7, web based virtual Housing Options Officer will be developed. In essence this will form the basis of an on-line digital process flow which will generate generalist housing options advice based on the inputting customer's specific housing situation. This product has been previously procured as part of the Home Connections Choice Based Lettings system which went live in July 2015 but has never been developed and launched.
- 2.9 It is proposed that customers accessing the Housing Options and Advice Team by any of the above means will be scheduled for a needs assessment interview, this will be conducted either in person or over the telephone. This pre-qualification assessment will allow the housing options officer to evaluate the full extent of the housing situation and to provide the appropriate level of advice according to need. It is envisaged that this assessment will last no more than fifteen minutes and form part of the options officer's case management workstream. Capacity to carry out this assessment will be achieved by the proposed reduction in review and verification cases.
- 2.10 The existing housing register will be purged to both identify those customers who are not actively bidding, but also those who have previously been included, where alternative options or advice would have been more appropriate. There is a case to remove the existing No Reasonable Preference band altogether although by providing meaningful advice other than entry to the housing register, the numbers currently ranked within this band will naturally decline. There is also a requirement for Breckland Key Select to remain a competitive product for registered providers who could argue that by removing this band completely will result in a reduced pool of potential customers therefore increasing the risk of extended re-let times. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that registered providers have experienced difficulties letting properties on large new-build developments where there are a number of lets within a small period of time in Local Authorities areas who offer a closed register with limited applicants,
- 2.11 It is recommended that a proactive and educational response to homeless prevention is developed. The existing homeless prevention initiative fund is committed in the main to providing temporary accommodation and transport for customers who present and are accepted by the Council as being homeless. It is envisaged that by promoting the Housing Options and Advice Team and by providing the proposed bespoke service as well as further advice and options on sustaining a home, the team will support customers and

prevent homeless cases. This move is akin to the Council's focus towards Early Help and it is envisaged that Housing Options and Advice will have a permanent presence within the co-located multiagency hub agreement.

- 2.12 If the recommendations are approved, a new suite of performance management measures will be introduced to record demand, outcomes of advice and options taken and causes of homelessness. Together with the new way of working, a culture of continuous improvement will be instilled within the team to promote capacity to adapt and evolve with the changing needs of customers wishing to access the service. The demand capture will be used to ensure that the team is responsive to these changing needs as well as enabling the team to proactively intervene prior to a housing crises developing. This demand capture will also inform what external advice services are required, supporting the Council to focus resource on the services which the measures dictate have the greatest impact.
- 2.13 In addition to the above, it is recognised that further engagement with external partners, advisory services and charities is required. There is currently no District homelessness forum and no link between the Housing Options and Advice Team and existing Private Landlords Forum or wider private rented sector.

### **3.0 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)**

- 3.1 To ensure that the Housing Options Team are fit for purpose by providing appropriate levels of support and advice and that their work is supported by Council policy
- 3.2 To ensure that customers joining the Council's housing register have an appropriate level of housing need and that other housing advice and options has been considered.
- 3.3 To release capacity to realign the service to focus on frontline delivery.

### **4.0 EXPECTED BENEFITS**

- 4.1 Customers accessing the Council for housing advice will receive appropriate levels of support and advice bespoke to their individual need.
- 4.2 The Councils housing register will demonstrate a true figure of customers experiencing housing difficulties and crisis.
- 4.3 Meaningful homelessness prevention initiatives to prevent homeless cases before they exist.
- 4.4 To improve customer care and experience with a view of housing customers quicker and in more appropriate and realistic housing tenures.
- 4.5 To brand the Housing Options Team as a high quality, efficient and high impact, outcome driven service.
- 4.6 The change of direction and ethos, together with the increase in capacity to provide a meaningful housing options service will have a positive impact on staff morale and productivity.

### **5.0 IMPLICATIONS**

#### **5.1 Constitution & Legal**

As a key decision there are constitutional implications associated with the above recommendations.

## 5.2 **Contracts**

Some verification to the existing Choice Based Lettings contract may be necessary to ensure that the Virtual Housing Options Officer product is delivered. This has been explored with both Breckland's procurement team and Home Connections and minimal implication is expected.

## 5.3 **Corporate Priorities**

Corporate Priority 2 – Providing the right services at the right time in the right way.

## 5.4 **Equality and Diversity / Human Rights**

An Equality Impact Assessment has been considered but not deemed required as the assessment criteria will not change. The recommendations relate purely to how applications are reviewed and verified.

## 5.5 **Financial**

No negative financial implications are envisaged as a result of the above recommendations

## 5.6 **Risk Management**

No implications are envisaged as a result of the above recommendations

## 5.7 **Safeguarding**

This process together with the introduction of an operational corporate safeguard lead within the housing service will ensure that cases are picked up at the first point of contact.

## 5.8 **Staffing**

A parallel report on a service review in Hosuing is being taken to committee. If approved and once implemented a work force planning process will also be undertaken to consider the resource required to deliver the service.

## 5.9 **Stakeholders / Consultation / Timescales**

Consultation with the Register Provider partners will be necessary to advice on changes to the review and verification process.

## 6.0 **WARDS/COMMUNITIES AFFECTED**

### 6.1 All

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Background papers:-

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### **Lead Contact Officer**

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**Key Decision:** Yes

**Exempt Decision:** Yes

**This report refers to a Service which has Mandatory and Discretionary elements**

**Appendices:**

Appendix 1 – Housing Allocation Policy