

TELFORD & WREKIN COUNCIL

CABINET - 26 JUNE 2014

A NEW APPROACH TO SUPPORTING HOUSING OPTIONS

JOINT REPORT OF ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: DEVELOPMENT, BUSINESS & EMPLOYMENT and ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: FAMILY, COHESION & COMMISSIONING

LEAD CABINET MEMBER: CLLR CHARLES SMITH

1 SUMMARY OF MAIN PROPOSALS

As a local authority TWC have a number of statutory housing responsibilities including:

- A duty to provide accommodation for a number of priority categories of individuals/families when they are found to be homeless or threatened with being made homeless.
- The development and adoption of a Housing Allocations Policy.

Since 2006, the allocation of social housing in the Borough has been provided via the choice based letting system "Choose Your Home" (CYH) which is managed by the Wrekin Housing Trust (WHT). Three other Registered Providers (RPs); Bromford, Bournville Village Trust (BVT) and Sanctuary, are part of the CYH partnership and advertise their properties via the system. Some 16,000 people are currently registered on CYH forming the 'waiting list' for social housing.

WHT has given notice to cease managing CYH from 4 July 2014, after which they will launch a new system for allocating their properties via their own web site. This means that the Council and other housing providers need to implement their own processes for managing housing allocations in the borough.

In this context, this report sets out the Council's proposals to launch a new web based housing assessment tool on 7 July 2014. This will provide a bespoke housing options appraisal to every applicant including realistic, tailored advice across the full range of housing options, adaptations and financial support. This will also include links to Telford Homefinder, a new TWC managed Lettings Agency website, also online from 7 July, which will provide accredited accommodation in the private rented sector, significantly extending viable housing options for those currently focussed solely on accessing social housing.

The Housing Act 1996, as amended, requires all local authorities to make housing allocations and nominations in accordance with an Allocations Policy. The Council will need to prepare a new Housing Allocations Policy to reflect the above proposal. Work has commenced on this and a draft will be brought to Cabinet in due course.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- **That Cabinet grant delegated authority to the Assistant Director for Development, Business & Employment, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing, Development & Borough Towns, to implement the proposals set out in paragraph 4 of this report.**

- That Cabinet approve the one off and ongoing expenditure being incurred by the Assistant Director: Development, Business & Employment and the Assistant Director: Family, Cohesion & Commissioning from the funding sources outlined at paragraph 5 of this report.

3 SUMMARY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

COMMUNITY IMPACT	Do these proposals contribute to specific Priority Plan objective(s)?	
	Yes	Individuals that are currently on the CYH waiting list will receive better housing advice and greater housing options. In particular the proposals within this report will contribute towards: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regenerating those neighbourhoods in need and working to ensure that local people have access to suitable housing • Ensuring neighbourhoods are safe, clean and well maintained through improving the private rented accommodation in the borough and promoting good landlords
	Will the proposals impact on specific groups of people?	
	Yes	Residents in the borough in need of housing options and communities affected by poor housing
TARGET COMPLETION/ DELIVERY DATE	4 July 2014	
FINANCIAL/ VALUE FOR MONEY IMPACT	Yes	The proposals in this report require a one-off investment of £62k to implement the development of the Telford Housing Options and Telford Homefinder scheme as per the table in section 6. These one off costs will be funded from available housing reserves. The ongoing costs will be met from existing budgets and monitored through Financial Monitoring. It is anticipated that the scheme will generate income in future years which will be used to develop the service and ensure its ongoing financial sustainability. The potential to develop Telford Homefinders further as a commercial lettings operation will also be considered. JAC 150514
LEGAL ISSUES	Yes	The statutory duties in relation to housing and homelessness are detailed in the main body of the report and the report details how these duties are to be met in the future. Implementation of these new proposals will need to be aligned to the adoption of an amended housing allocations policy and be subject to an equalities impact assessment. The detailed communications plan detailed below is the way that the Council is managing the risk of challenge.
OTHER IMPACTS, RISKS & OPPORTUNITIES	Yes	The proposals aim to provide tailored, realistic housing options advice, which will manage expectations around the likelihood of accessing social housing and direct clients to consider alternative options including private rented

		accommodation. The new arrangements will remove the need for a housing waiting list and increase opportunity to discharge housing duty into the private rented sector. The proposals also offer the opportunity to raise the quality of private rented accommodation and landlord practices through incentivising accreditation. There are also commercial opportunities associated with the development of a Lettings Agency model. Risks include negative response to the withdrawal of the waiting list and client's associated date of registration and banding, but these are being managed through the implementation of a detailed communications plan as set out at paragraph 4.5.
IMPACT ON SPECIFIC WARDS	Yes	The changes have the potential to impact on all Wards

4. INFORMATION

4.1 Background

Choice based letting schemes were developed to provide an element of choice for people applying for social housing, including existing tenants who wanted to transfer to another home. They were intended to make the allocation of homes fairer and more transparent.

Telford & Wrekin's choice based letting scheme, "Choose Your Home" (CYH), was launched in 2006 and since then has been managed by WHT. Sanctuary Housing (formerly Beth Johnson), Bromford and Bournville Village Trust were founding partners and remain members today.

Under the existing CYH scheme there are circa 16,000 people on a waiting list for social housing with a further c.100 joining the scheme each week. People on the list are allocated to one of three categories – urgent (814), needing (11,781) and wanting (2,793). Anecdotally, a significant number of those on the list are not active (i.e. not regularly bidding for properties).

Currently circa 1,000 affordable homes are made available to let through CYH every year meaning that only around 6% of those on the waiting list will successfully access a property each year. Although the Borough saw 300 affordable homes built in 2013/14 (30% of total housing completions) the reality is that the majority of those on the waiting list have little hope of getting a property through the existing scheme. Choose Your Home is not designed to offer additional advice or signpost to alternative, more viable housing options or support.

4.2 The Council's Position

As a local authority TWC have a number of statutory housing responsibilities including:

- A duty to provide accommodation for a number of priority categories of individuals/families when they are found to be homeless or threatened with being made homeless.
- The development and adoption of a Housing Allocations Policy.

There is no legal requirement for the Council to develop or host any equivalent to CYH or to hold a waiting list. However the Council is committed to supporting customers to meet their

housing needs and has therefore developed a new approach to housing options and allocation that aims to provide tailored housing options with a greater focus on accommodating people through a well regulated, private rented sector.

4.3 New Approach to Meeting Housing Needs

In detail the new approach has two elements:

Telford Housing Options

Telford Housing Options will be an online assessment tool which, through a series of questions, filters clients' housing needs and provides a bespoke housing options report. The report will provide a range of tailored advice depending on the client's needs. This could, for example, include advice on mortgage rescue, how homes can be adapted and opportunities to access accredited private rented accommodation via Telford Homefinders (see below).

Where social housing is identified as a viable option (and this will typically be 'last resort' rather than the automatic response) information on the likely waiting times for preferred accommodation will be highlighted and links then made to WHT web site and to Homes Direct. Homes Direct is a choice based lettings system, similar to CYH but operated by Midland Heart, through which properties in the Borough owned by BVT, Sanctuary Housing and Bromford will be advertised. Clients signposted to the WHT website or Homes Direct will need to register and wait for appropriate accommodation to become available. If people are homeless or threatened with being made homeless, the Council's new system will automatically email a member of the Council's Housing Options Team who will call them to book a face to face appointment.

The new system will go live on 7 July and be hosted on the Council's website. Screen shots of the system are included at Appendix 1.

Telford Homefinders

On the 7 July the Council will also launch Telford Homefinders. This will be a web based Lettings Agency managed by TWC's Home Improvement Agency (HIA), advertising private rented accommodation provided by landlords accredited by TWC. Telford Homefinders will link with the assessment tool as well as being accessible as a stand alone Lettings Agency website. The site extends the existing approach to sourcing private rented accommodation as temporary accommodation and prevention for homelessness. The HIA already have established links with the Wrekin Landlord Association and are actively building the landlord/property database.

All landlords that advertise through Telford Homefinders will be expected to join the T&W Landlord Accreditation scheme. The accreditation scheme will not only accredit the landlord but also each property.

In order to grow the landlord/property database it is proposed to offer incentives for landlords to join the scheme. The landlord accreditation scheme is free to join, but all landlords must attend a training course within 6 months of joining at a cost of £50, this course will need to be refreshed on an annual basis. As an introductory offer, landlords will be able to advertise their properties free of charge for the first six months, following which it is proposed that there will be a c£100 fee to find a tenant. This will include an inventory, tenancy agreement and a credit check if required. The figures are based on market testing of existing letting agencies in the borough and their tenant finding fees. While fees differ between letting agencies, these

figures are competitive in relation to agencies providing accommodation to clients in receipt of housing benefit. Other incentives will include access to advice through the Tenancy Relations Officers regarding tenancy issues and landlord advice. Where landlords have properties that would enable us to meet high levels of need stemming from discharge of our housing duty, we will consider waiving up to two weeks council tax if they agree to hold the property vacant for a homeless client.

Branding has been developed for Telford Homefinders and this is included in Appendix 2.

4.4 Timescales

The transition to the new system includes a number of key stages and dates:-

- **From w/c 2 June 2014**
 - notification via CYH website to all customers that the CYH system will cease to operate from 7 July 2014. WHT start to remove their frequently let properties from CYH
 - inclusion message notification via CYH website visible to all accessing CYH regarding forthcoming changes
- **4 July 2014** – Properties cease to be advertised on the CYH website.
- **7 July 2014** – CYH scheme closes
- **7 July 2014** The Council launches Telford Housing Options and Telford Homefinder

In parallel with these dates WHT, BVT, Bromford and Sanctuary will brief their existing tenants of the changes.

4.5 Communications Plan

It is critical that a robust communications plan is implemented that ensures all existing users of CYH, as well as those wishing to access housing support are aware of the changes and the benefits of the new system and customers are supported in accessing the new systems.

In order to manage the transition from CYH to the new Housing Assessment Tool effectively, communications around the new system have already begun.

To support this, a TWC Housing Options Contact Centre is in place to address all enquiries. In addition customers can access support and advice via First Point, libraries, community centres and links are being made with drop in sessions such as Job Junctions to provide opportunities for people to talk to Officers and access the new system on line. All 800 clients on the “urgent” band on CYH and the 270 customers who bid for properties through mailouts and do not have access to CYH online have already been contacted by phone to explain the changes. Advertising via Parish and Town Councils and at WHT Shops as well as use of social media also forms part of the communication plan. This is illustrated in summary for the transition period detailed in Appendix 3.

5. FINANCIAL RESOURCES

The table below sets out the anticipated one off and ongoing resources associated with the development and implementation of the preferred option set out in this report.

Resources	Cost
One-Off Investment Required	
Development of the websites and web tool	£18,000
Upgrade of phones for call centre in Housing Options	£871
Additional Staff for 3 months for inward and outbound Calls starting the 2 June – estimated 4 staff needed:	
Option 1: Agency staff based on 3 months:	£38,400
Option 2: Internal staff at scale 6 based on 3 months:	£27,600
Contingency	£5,000
Total	£51,471 to £62,271
Ongoing Annual Costs – Telford Homefinders	
Marketing and Promotion	£1,000
Landlord 2 week Council Tax Break	£3,000
20 Hours Tenancy Relation Officer	£18,000
1 FTE Social Lettings Officer	£39,324
Total	£61,324

It is proposed that the one of costs are funded from reserves within Development, Business & Employment (DBE). Ongoing costs associated with the operation and development of Telford Homefinders will also be met by existing budgets within DBE. The costs of operating Telford Housing Options will be met by Family & Cohesion Services. A draft business case has been developed which identifies opportunities to make savings to offset any increase in costs through reduction in usage of B&B accommodation as a result of developing opportunities to discharge our housing duty into the private rented sector.

6. PREVIOUS MINUTES

Draft Homelessness Strategy 19 September 2013.

7. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Housing Act 1996

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Appendix 1 – Screen Shots of the New Housing Options Tool

Assessment

You are logged in as: adamwinsper@gmail.com [change password] [update your details] [log out]

Please state your current housing status

How many adults are in your household (including yourself?)

Occupant 1. Date of Birth

Occupant 1. Sex

How many children are in your household?

Are you or your partner pregnant? Yes No

Are you currently homeless or threatened with homelessness? Yes No

Are you currently experiencing domestic abuse? Yes No

Are you looking to move home? Yes No

Are you currently in paid employment? Yes No

Are you currently in receipt of benefits? Yes No

Are you having trouble managing in your current home due to health or mobility reasons? Yes No

Is your accommodation in disrepair? Yes No

Are you interested in energy efficiency advice? Yes No

Are you currently experiencing anti-social behaviour? Yes No

Are you currently experiencing harassment? Yes No

Would you benefit from additional support to sustain your current living arrangements? Yes No

Are you experiencing problems with your current landlord? Yes No

Housing Pre-assessment Tool

This tool will ask a series of questions and then guide you through the different options you can explore to enhance your housing situation.

If you have already registered for the Housing Pre-assessment Tool, then please [click here to log in](#).

[Click here to begin a new Assessment](#)

[Click here to Register](#)



TELFORD
HOMEFINDER

Appendix 3 Communications Plan

Date	Activity
2 June 2014	Message to those logging into CYH on the urgent band that it is ceasing – signposted to log onto www.telfordhousingoptions.co.uk or to call the call centre to find out more
2 June 2014	Holding page details on www.telfordhousingoptions.co.uk provide clients with details of the new system coming on the 7 July 2014
2 June 2014	TWC call centre function set up and outbound calls begin to the 800 urgent banded clients and the 270 clients with no access to CYH online
2 June 2014	TWC call centre function prepared for any inbound calls generated from on-line message on CYH
w/c 2 June 2014	Promoting the new Telford Homefinder to local landlords through the Home Improvement Agency
w/c 2 June 2014	Message provided to all those who log into CYH that the scheme is ceasing and to log onto www.telfordhousingoptions.co.uk or to call the call centre function
w/c 9 June 2014	TWC call centre to complete calling the 800 urgent banded clients and the 270 clients with no access to CYH online
w/c 9 June 2014	TWC call centre ready to answer all incoming calls generated from the message on CYH and any word of mouth or social media enquiries
w/c 16 June 2014	Promotion to private landlords and private landlord properties to be sought for www.telfordhomefinder.co.uk
w/c 16 June 2014	Posters and info about changes and new system distributed to key venues including PC/TC, WHT Shops, community centres
4 July 2014	Last day that any properties will be advertised on CYH
7 July 2014	CYH ceases to function
7 July 2014	TWC launches the www.telfordhousingoptions.co.uk online web tool and the www.telfordhomefinder.co.uk
7 July 2014	BVT, Sanctuary, Bromford properties transfer to Homes Direct
c.3 months	Call centre, libraries, community centres, First Point and other TWC led community based sessions (e.g. Job Junction) provide info, advice, support (period of time dependent on response)