

Appendix 1 Devon Home Choice Policy Review July 2012

Introduction

The Devon Home Choice Management Board undertook the second annual review of the policy and operation of the scheme. The review was undertaken in light of the Localism Act.

This briefing summarises the decisions that were agreed.

It is anticipated that the changes will be implemented and that the revised policy will come into effect in August. This will be confirmed as soon as possible.

Local authorities will contact those applicants affected by the agreed changes in advance of the revised policy taking effect.

Banding

- All under occupiers will have their applications placed in Band B regardless of how many bedrooms they are freeing up. Please note that the Operational Group (4 July) will agree how this will be applied.
- A new Band B category will be introduced for 'Severe overcrowding'. This will include the current Band B categories (lacking 2 bedrooms and 2 children lacking a bedroom), as well as those households assessed as a Category 1 hazard due to overcrowding.
- The Band D reasons of 'Non Stat Homeless' and 'Rough Sleeper/NFA' will be combined and re-named 'No Permanent Home'.
- The banding reasons of Agricultural workers in tied accommodation, Moves for work and staying access to children will be removed. Existing cases will retain their banding
- The additional banding and waiting times awarded for cumulative need will no longer be given (e.g. applications will not be given 6 months extra time or moved up a band if they have 2 or 3 needs in the same band).
- Devon Home Choice will continue to register Band E households subject to the following:
 - o The application form will be redesigned so that Band E households only need to complete a limited number of questions
 - o Online applications from Band E households will be automatically made active, without any need for housing officers to review/ activate them
 - o The renewal date for Band E households will be automatically set for 3 years in advance. A new folder will be created for Band E applications

that have reached their renewal date and have not bid in the previous 6 months. It will then be possible for local authorities to batch close the applications

- Band E households will not be included in housing need figures
- Households who need to move to larger accommodation to become foster carers or adopt will have their applications placed in Band B under 'Supporting another priority service' subject to procedures being agreed with Social Services
- People who formerly served in the regular UK armed forces and are in the new Band D category of 'No permanent home' will have their application moved to Band C to reflect the government's forthcoming legislation.
- Priority for housing defects/ hazards will continue to be awarded to households in Band A (e.g. where there is a Prohibition order) and Band B (e.g. where there is a Cat 1 hazard). Procedures will be agreed with the Private Sector Housing Group. Existing social tenants will continue to be excluded from any priority for housing defects/ hazards
- Local authorities and landlords will agree locally whether to advertise some homes with a preference to working households or those making a positive community contribution, rather than by providing additional priority in the policy to such households.
- Local authorities will contact (or at least review) all applicants in Bands A & B every 6 months

Bed Need

- Devon Home Choice will adopt the Government bedroom standard for assessing bedroom need. This will mean that:
 - Children can share a bedroom up until 10 regardless of sex
 - Same sex children can share a bedroom up to 20
 - People require their own room when they are 21

Application form

- The application form will be redesigned so that:
 - There are an initial set of questions to establish whether the application will fall into one of the reasonable preference groups (Bands A - D), and to make it clear that if not, the application will be placed in Band E
 - Band E applicants will not need to complete all of the form
 - The paper application is as easy as possible to understand and complete

Accessible homes

- Accessible homes will continue to be advertised through Devon Home Choice and will only be let using direct match in exceptional circumstances
- Local authorities will complete the missing accessibility need information for applicants in Bands B & C by 1 September, and applicants in Band D by 1 December
- An applicant's accessibility need will be included in both the initial registration and the renewal letter, with a request that applicants make contact if they feel this is wrong
- A business case for a pilot central Occupational Therapy resource will be developed for consideration by the Devon Home Choice Management Board
- Each partner local authority and landlord will identify a named person to lead on accessible homes
- The 6 accessibility categories will be left as they are
- Supporting information will be required before any applicant is assessed as being in need of wheelchair accessible or part wheelchair accessible accommodation
- All landlords will develop and maintain an up-to-date record of accessible/ adapted properties (and those that are adaptable), and report back to the Management Board on progress with this. Where an up-to-date database isn't available landlords will undertake a pre-void inspection before properties are advertised
- Additional fields will be added to the property advert (e.g. to clarify the bathing facilities, whether there is a stair lift etc)
- At least 1 photo must be added to each advert (this relates to all homes and not just accessible homes)
- At the point where a local authority sets an advert as 'Ready to advertise' they can indicate whether they would like to be consulted before an accessible/ adapted property is let. Please note that it was agreed that this is only a request to be consulted and that short listing remains the responsibility of the landlord

- If an advert for a wheelchair/part wheelchair accessible property (or one with major adaptations) includes a preference to applicants with a local connection (because the LA is above the 2% limit on cross border moves), but nobody with a local connection has a need for that type of property, preference will then be given to those with a need for that type of property, rather than those with a local connection but no need for that type of property

1.1 No local connection to Devon

1.1.1 Applicants who have no local connection to Devon will have their application placed in either:

- The Low housing need band (D) if they are assessed as having a housing need (whether this be high, medium or low need), or
- The No housing need band (E) if they are assessed as having no housing need

1.1.2 However exceptions to this will include where:

- They have been accepted by 1 of the Devon local authorities as statutorily homeless, and local connection has been waived for specific reasons such as the applicant is fleeing domestic violence
- They need to move to Devon to give or receive support where failure to do so would cause hardship
- There are special circumstances such as health or support needs that are only available within Devon
- An applicant has no local connection in any district within the United Kingdom, then they will be deemed to have a local connection to Devon

1.1.3 In such circumstances applicants will be banded in line with the above policy, regardless of the fact that they have no local connection to Devon.

1.1.4 To demonstrate a local connection (defined in Part VII of the Housing Act 1996) with Devon applicants will:

- Normally be resident in Devon. Local Government Association guidelines define this as having resided in the area for six of the last twelve months, or three out of the last five years, where residence has been out of choice. In line with the Housing and Regeneration Act (2008) service personnel who have been based and living in Devon will be considered to have local connection with Devon. Their local connection will be to the local authority area where they are based or where they have been assessed.

- Work in Devon. The Local Government Association guidelines define this as employment other than of a casual nature. For the purposes of this policy this will be defined as having had permanent work with a minimum of a 16 hour contract per week for the previous 6 months, and without a break in the period of employment for more than three months.
- Have family connections in Devon. The Local Government Association guidelines define this as immediate family members (parents, siblings and non-dependent children) who have themselves lived in the area for five years.

1.1.5 Applicants will be required to provide proof of their local connection to Devon before their banding is assessed.

1.1.6 A number of housing associations with homes in Devon operate across a wider regional or national area. Tenants of such associations may on occasion wish to transfer to Devon from outside the county, but will not meet the local connection criteria (e.g. they do not have a local connection to Devon). In such cases the local connection to Devon criteria shall not be applicable. In such circumstances the tenant will be placed in the band determined by their housing needs, in the same way as applicants with a local connection to Devon. They will then be able to bid for homes in the same way as other applicants.

1.1.7 Similarly the local connection to Devon criteria will not be applied to:

- (a) Members of the Armed Forces and former Service personnel, where the application is made within five years of discharge
- (b) bereaved spouses and civil partners of members of the Armed Forces leaving Services Family Accommodation following the death of their spouse or partner
- (c) Serving or former members of the Reserve Forces who need to move because of a serious injury, medical condition or disability sustained as a result of their service

1.1.8 If a home is subject to more specific local connection to Devon criteria however these will still apply to both tenants of partner landlords with no local connection to Devon and members of the armed forces and reserve forces. For example Section 106 planning conditions that mean the home can only be let to someone with a local connection to a specific local area.

1.2 Members of the Armed and Reserve Forces

1.2.1 In addition to the local connection provision for members of the armed forces and former service personnel etc (see 3.9.7. above); Devon Home Choice

will take on legislation that is proposed to be introduced in autumn 2012 relating to members of the armed and reserve forces.

- 1.2.2 The government propose that all local authorities provide additional preference to the following categories of people who fall within one or more of the reasonable preference categories and who have urgent housing needs:
- (a) Former members of the Armed Forces
 - (b) Serving members of the Armed Forces who need to move because of a serious injury, medical condition or disability sustained as a result of their service
 - (c) bereaved spouses and civil partners of members of the Armed Forces leaving Services Family Accommodation following the death of their spouse or partner
 - (d) Serving or former members of the Reserve Forces who need to move because of a serious injury, medical condition or disability sustained as a result of their service
- 1.2.3 Specifically, any household within these categories who is assessed as having 'No permanent home' (within Band D – see 3.7.1 above), will have their application placed in Band C. This will ensure that such households who fall within the reasonable preference groups and have urgent housing needs are provided with additional priority.
- 1.2.4 It is felt that Devon Home Choice already provides a sufficient level of priority to other households within these categories who have urgent housing needs. For example former members of the armed or reserve forces who are accepted as homeless by one of the Devon local authorities.
- 1.2.5 Devon Home Choice will also seek to meet the housing needs of serving or former Service personnel as follows:
- Local authorities and landlords will agree locally whether to advertise some homes with a preference to certain groups (see 4.7 below). This could include former members of the armed forces.
 - Local authorities will not any lump sum received by a member of the Armed Forces as compensation for an injury or disability sustained on active service into account when assessing whether they have sufficient resources to meet their own housing need (see 2.6 above).

Changes to Devon Home Choice

- Changes to the policy will only be implemented once a year, except in exceptional circumstances
- Any agreed changes will have a set date to be implemented
- An agreed approach to applying policy changes will be developed and agreed (for example where the changes will lead to some applications receiving reduced/ increased priority etc)

- Any changes to the policy agreed by the Management Board will only require sign off (by email) by local authorities who did not attend.
- The policy will display a 'from' date so that applicants and partners are sure that they have the most up-to-date version.

Participation in Devon Home Choice

- Local authorities will undertake regular analysis of those applicants in Bands A – C who are not bidding/ logging onto the website, to identify the reasons for this and put in place any appropriate support
- A common short survey form will be developed for applicants in Bands A – C who are not bidding, to enable the results to be collated and analysed

Consultation with customers

- Consultation be carried out on how the quality of adverts affects the bidding for accessible homes (with both applicants and housing staff)

Quality Assurance

- The creation of a central administration team to process and assess all applications will be considered
- A Quality Assurance (QA) process will be developed, focusing on assessment of applications, differences in the proportion of applications in different bands/ categories, short listing etc. The Operational Group will take the lead for the QA process
- The implementation of the Health & Wellbeing element of the policy will be reviewed