

Scrutiny Committee – 3 September 2013

10. Homefinder Somerset Lettings Policy

Lead Officer: Kirsty Larkins, Housing and Welfare Manager
Contact Details: kirsty.larkins@southsomerset.gov.uk or 01935 462744

Please note:

Appendices A to D mentioned in the report are circulated as a separate document.

Purpose of the Report

To present the draft Homefinder Somerset Lettings Policy and outline the main changes to the existing policy.

Action Required

That Scrutiny Committee consider the revised Homefinder Somerset Lettings Policy and the process that has driven the changes.

Background

Homefinder Somerset (HFS) Partnership first went live in December 2008. The partnership is made up of the five Local Authorities in Somerset and over forty social landlords. In 2010 the partnership carried out a review of the original lettings policy, consultation took place and the amended policy was formally adopted by South Somerset District Council.

HFS Partnership has now undertaken another review of the lettings policy to take into account Government changes to Allocation Legislation and Welfare Reform. The Homefinder Somerset Operational Group reviewed the policy and took into account any other changes that had been recommended by applicants and the landlords in the partnership. Appendix A shows the draft HFS Lettings Policy.

A task and finish group from Scrutiny assist the partnership with the consultation documents aimed at applicants to ensure they were in plain English. The survey was available for use from 2nd April 2013 to 24th May 2013. The consultation documents were:-

- E-mailed to Members.
- E-mailed to partner social landlords.
- E-mailed to local authority staff.
- E-mailed to applicants
- E-mailed to Citizen Advice Bureau's and other support agencies

Links were provided on:-

- South Somerset District Councils home page
- Homefinder Somerset website

Hard copies were available:-

- In the Housing Advice Centre
- Upon request

Appendix B shows the responses we had from the consultation.

Alongside the review of the policy an equalities impact assessment (EIA) was completed (see Appendix C). The EIA is in the process of being approved by the Equalities Group.

The main changes to the policy

Appendix D gives the full details of all the changes to the policy. The main changes are summarised below.

Qualifying Criteria- applicants will now need to have a local connection to Somerset to join the HFS Housing Register. All of the areas surrounding Somerset are closing their housing registers. If we leave our housing register open there is a possibility we would see an increase of applicants from outside the area wishing to move to the South West as they would only be able to apply to Somerset.

Gold Band Harassment- The wording has been changed to reflect when Gold band is awarded for harassment it will be time limited, although subject to review and extension where appropriate. There will also be a requirement for an applicant to bid on properties away from the location of the harassment.

Silver Relationship Breakdown- Removal of this banding reason as it has been very difficult to verify circumstances. Those affected by the removal may still qualify under silver other homeless or silver shared facilities/lodger.

Silver need to move for work/support- wording changed to reflect the move must be to give or receive essential and critical support where significant harm would result if this was not provided.

Silver band shared facilities- The wording has been amended so this award can only be applied to applicants that have dependent children. This change has been introduced to reflect the Welfare Reform changes that are encouraging people to share accommodation if they are single.

Bronze Band Deliberately worsening circumstances- Additional wording has been added to make it clear to applicants if they move into accommodation knowing that it is making their housing situation worse they will not be given a higher priority on the housing register.

Armed Forces Personnel- Additional wording has been added making it clear armed forces personnel or ex-armed forces personnel will get a higher priority given to them on the housing register by awarding additional time to their effective date.

Bedroom Eligibility- The bedroom allowance has been changes to bring it in line with the Housing Benefit criteria. This ensure applicants are only offered properties that they could receive housing benefit, this is takes into account the wishes of social landlords operating within the partnership.

Foster Carers- we are required by the Department of Communities and Local Government to allow foster carer an additional bedroom so they are able to foster children.

Refusals- If an applicant refuses three offers of accommodation they will be suspended from the register for three months. Landlords are reporting that some applicants are repeatedly refusing properties which takes up a lot of time and resources.

Summary

A full report will be going to District Executive in October 2013 to seek formal approval for the amended policy.
