Wyre Borough Council
Date of Publication: 26 July 2018
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Scrutiny Officer
Tel: 01253 887606

Overview and Scrutiny Committee Agenda

Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on Monday, 30 July 2018 at 6.00 pm
in the committee room 2, Civic Centre, Poulton-le-Fylde

(a) MyHomeChoice task group - draft recommendations (Pages 1 - 22)

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Report of:	Meeting	Date	Item No.
Councillor Howard Ballard, Chair of the MyHomeChoice task group	Overview and Scrutiny Committee	30 July 2018	

MyHomeChoice task group - report

1. Recommendations

1.1 That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee endorses the draft recommendations of the MyHomeChoice task group.

1.2 That the recommendations of the MyHomeChoice task group be submitted to the Cabinet.

2. Background

2.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee commissioned a task group to review the proposed changes to the arrangements for the allocation and letting of social housing in Wyre via My Home Choice Fylde Coast (see Appendix A).

2.2 The task group met once. The group considered a summary of the responses to the consultation on the proposed changes to MyHomeChoice Fylde Coast allocations policy and lettings system. The following attended the task group meeting, presented the report and responded to comments and questions from task group members:

Councillor Roger Berry, Neighbourhood Services and Community Safety Portfolio Holder

Dave McArthur, Private Sector Housing and Housing Options Manager

Pamela Holroyd, Housing Options Team Leader.

2.3 The task group was supportive of the proposals made and agreed to ask the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to consider their recommendations at the earliest possible opportunity. All of the information that is necessary for the Committee to consider is contained in Appendix A (Proposed

changes to MyHomeChoice Fylde Coast allocations policy and lettings system - Summary of consultation responses, January 2018) and Appendix B (Minutes of meeting of MyHomeChoice task group held on 25 July 2018).

2.4 In the immediate absence of the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Vice Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed that this item be added to the agenda of the meeting to be held on Monday 30 July 2018.

Report Author	Telephone No.	Email	Date
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APPENDICES

Appendix A Proposed changes to MyHomeChoice Fylde Coast allocations policy and lettings system - Summary of consultation responses, January 2018

Appendix B Minutes of meeting of MyHomeChoice task group held on 25 July 2018

APPENDIX A

Proposed changes to MyHomeChoice Fylde Coast allocations policy and lettings system

Summary of consultation responses, January 2018

Introduction

Consultation on proposed changes to the MyHomeChoice Fylde Coast policy and system took place between 8th November 2017 and 18th December 2017. The Consultation was publicised through:

- Fylde Coast local authority websites
- Mailshots to key stakeholders and registered applicants to the MyHomeChoice scheme (approx. 4600)
- Fylde Coast local authority offices
- Press Release
- MyHomeChoice Fylde Coast website

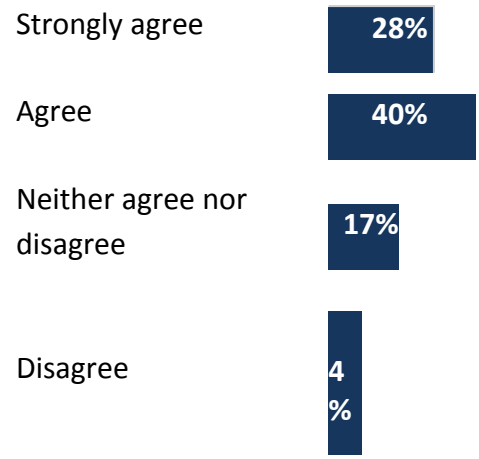
The summary of the changes proposed, and consultation questions, is attached at Appendix 1.

Respondents could complete a response either on-line or by submitting a paper copy of the consultation questionnaire. In total 258 response questionnaires were received.

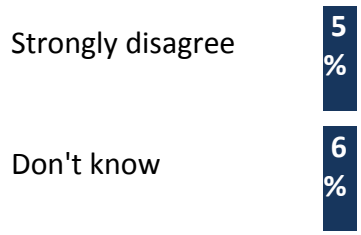
Results from the consultation survey

The results from the consultation survey are as set out below.

1. Do you agree with the revised local connection requirement?

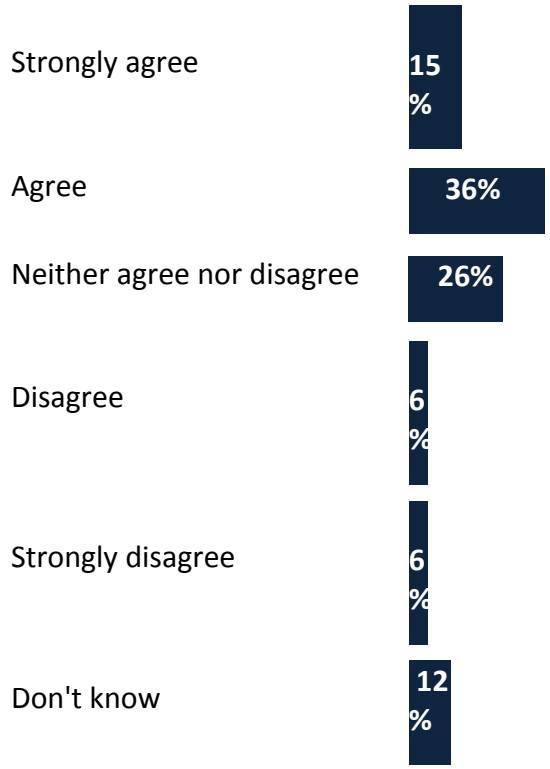


1. Do you agree with the revised local connection requirement?



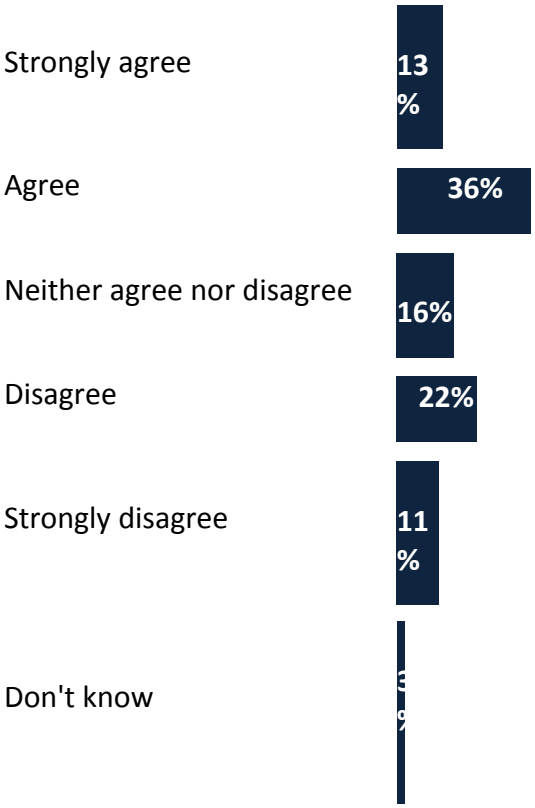
68% of respondents agreed with the revised local connection requirements, with 9% disagreeing.

2. Do you agree with the introduction of two ways of letting?



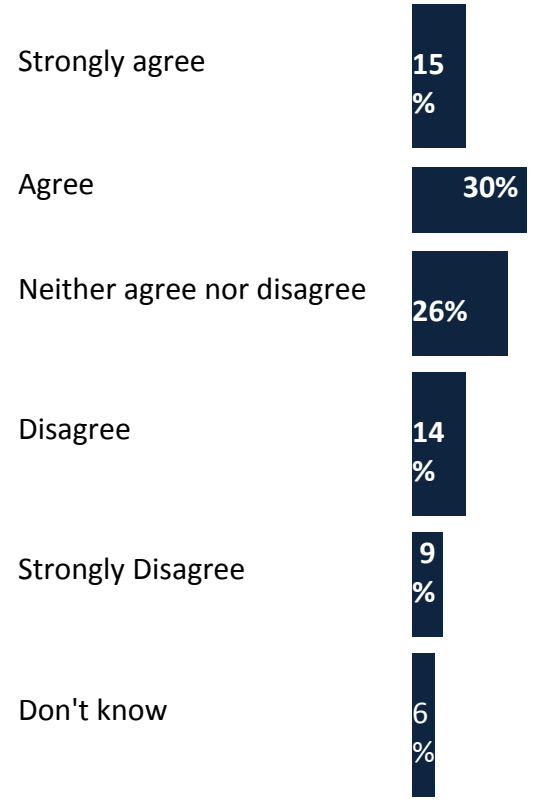
51% agreed with the introduction of two ways of letting, and 12% disagreed, but 38% of those who responded neither agreed nor disagreed or didn't know.

3. Do you agree with how applicants are awarded a priority band?



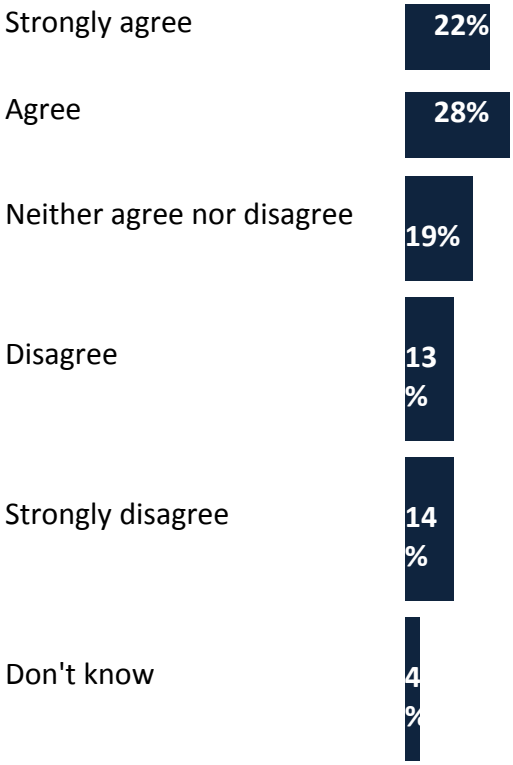
49% of respondents agreed with how applicants are awarded a priority band with 33% not in agreement.

4. Do you agree with restrictions on the use of the system by existing social housing tenants?



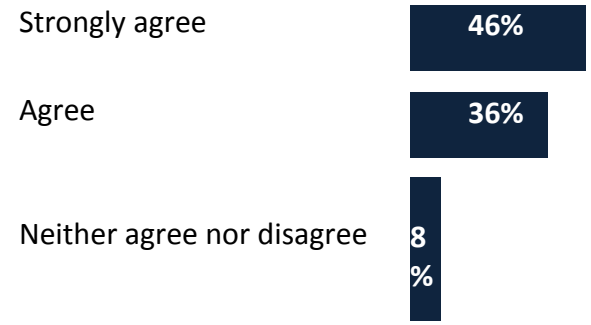
45% agreed with the restrictions on the use of the system by existing social housing tenants. 23% disagreed, but 26% neither agreed nor disagreed.

5. Do you agree with the proposed priority for working applicants for some homes?

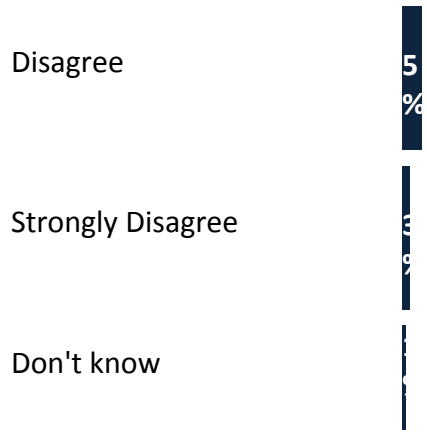


Half of the respondents agreed with the proposed priority for working applicants for some homes but 27% were in disagreement.

6. Do you agree with giving more flexibility in the size of properties that applicants can bid for?

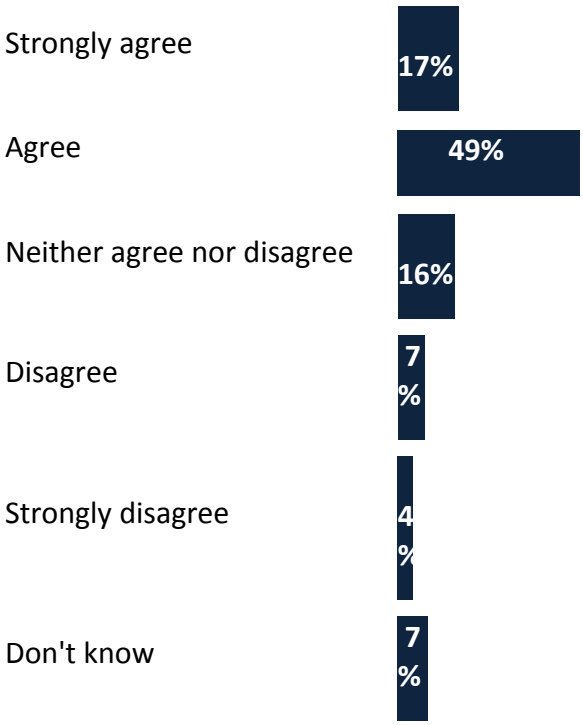


6. Do you agree with giving more flexibility in the size of properties that applicants can bid for?



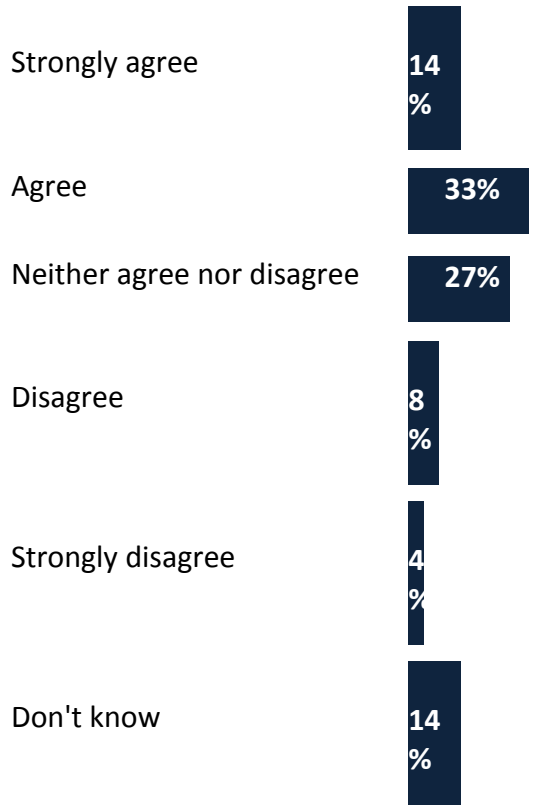
83% agreed with giving more flexibility in the size of properties that applicants can bid for.

7. Do you think that, overall, the proposed new arrangements will enable us to make the best use of the social housing stock in the area?



66% of respondents felt the proposed new arrangements will enable the local authorities to make best use of the social housing stock in the area. 11% were in disagreement.

8. Do you agree that the current income and savings thresholds are correct?



47% agreed with the current income and savings threshold are correct and 12% disagreed, but 41% of applicants neither agreed nor disagreed or didn't know.

Comments on the Proposals

Respondents were also given the opportunity to give comments on the proposals. There were 103 responses and this feedback has been collated and summarised under the categories listed below:

A. How applicants are prioritised for social housing

1. **Income and Savings Eligibility Criteria, and Priority for working households**

   There were mixed comments on these issues.

   Some respondents felt that there shouldn't be any threshold - one respondent commented that applicants with savings of £30k + are not necessarily financially stable, so should be allowed onto the register. Practically it is difficult for housing providers to verify applicants' savings in any case.

Another commentator saw having any maximum income and savings threshold as contributing to the marginalisation of social housing by deterring some honest people who might be interested in social housing and would add positively to the social mix in areas of social housing.

Some respondents supported the proposal to prioritise 20% of lettings available to all applicants to people who meet the working household and community contribution criteria as a positive change.

But some respondents felt that social housing should only be allocated to low income households, so there should be a lower income threshold in place.

One comment was that the household income threshold is too high because it is above the average income within the Fylde Coast area and the maximum income threshold should be no more than £50k.

2. Priority Banding

Some respondents raised concerns on how applicants are awarded a priority banding and felt the criteria should be widened, and in particular, more consideration should be given to the length of time an applicant has been on the housing register.

3. Priority for ground floor properties

Including age restrictions on properties was not favoured by some respondents, as ground floor accommodation in particular could benefit all residents.

4. Wider choice of property sizes

The opportunity to bid for properties with an additional bedroom, for those with financial means, was seen as a positive change with benefits for working families.

5. Local Connection

It was agreed that the local connection criteria should take into consideration applicants working in the Fylde Coast area. Some respondents disagreed with continuing to prioritise properties to applicants with a connection to particular local boroughs, while others were concerned to ensure that the link to each borough continued to be a core requirement for all lettings.

B. The Process for Applying for and Letting social housing

1. Registering an application

It was commented that the process to register a rehousing application or update existing information is cumbersome and should be simplified.

2. Advertisement of properties

The proposal to advertise properties as soon as they are available received mixed views. Those in disagreement felt applicants without regular access to a computer would be disadvantaged.

3. First come first served approach

Some respondents expressed concerns with letting some properties on a 'first come first serve' basis because those without regular access to the on-line letting system would be disadvantaged.

4. Lettings

The process of notifying applicants of their successful bid should be reviewed. Respondents suggested more time is given to confirm an interest in a property. Furthermore, tenancy start dates should take into consideration the notice period required by the successful applicant's current landlord. The current process can leave applicants in financial hardship.

5. Downsizing

The process to downsize a property should be simplified without the need to register an application and follow the bidding process.

6. Support

Better support should be made available for vulnerable applicants to ensure they can use the on-line lettings system and bid for suitable properties.

Response from the Local Authorities and Way Forward

Given the feedback to consultation, it is proposed to move forward on each issue as follows:

1. Local Connection

The proposed change to the system was to enable local connection (and thereby access to the Fylde Coast housing register) to be established through connection to any of the three boroughs, so that people do not fall out of the system if they move from one part of the Fylde Coast to another. This was comprehensively supported in the survey, and this approach will now be implemented in the new system.

Local connection will continue to be possible through residence, work, or family connection.

Some respondents also pressed to break down the priority given for connection to individual boroughs in allocating properties but this was not supported more generally, and will not change.

2. Introducing two ways of letting

There was overall support for introducing a first come, first served lettings process alongside lettings based on priority banding, but many survey respondents had no clear view. There were some concerns expressed about how the process would work, that people who are vulnerable or who don't have regular access to a computer would be disadvantaged, and that local connection might be compromised.

The new approach of two ways of letting will be taken forward, but kept under review to ensure that two thirds of lettings are made to applicants in priority bands A-C, compared with 64% to priority needs groups currently.

All lettings will give the first opportunity to applicants with a connection to the local borough. So, whether the letting is based on priority need or "first come first served", applicants who have expressed an interest will first be prioritised based on connection to the local borough and then on priority need / time on the register (for the priority need lettings) or time of bid (for "first come, first served" lettings). This ensures that the current approach to local connection is maintained for all properties.

The policy will be slightly amended to ensure that housing providers advertise lettings under "first come first served" for at least seven days, to give local people a chance to see adverts and express an interest.

When the system changes so that properties can be placed on the system on any working day, and some properties are "first come first served", they will be first advertised during day time hours and not at midnight (as the current weekly cycle). Consideration will be given to the time of day so that those occupied by work, education, or child care are not disadvantaged.

The concern about access to a computer will be addressed by making the updated system more user friendly on smart phones, which are used by the majority of applicants. It will still be possible to find out about available properties and express an interest through local offices of the Councils and partner social housing providers, but it is expected that the large

majority of system users will continue to interact with the system on-line. It is noted that the full local roll out of Universal Credit from December 2018 will require that most benefits claimants have digital access.

Support is offered to applicants who struggle to understand and use the system, but the process of application will be simplified under the revised system, and this should go a long way to making the system more accessible.

It is currently up to individual housing providers to organise the letting process and the notice that is given to new tenants. This will continue to be the case, but the local authorities will work with them to review their current approaches and encourage good practice.

3. How applicants are awarded a priority band

The consultation proposed that the current Bands C and D are merged into a single Band C, and that those who do not have a housing need defined in law and were previously in Bands E and F are now placed on the housing register without a formal priority band. The relatively high 33% of respondents who disagreed with the proposal may reflect applicants who are unhappy with their current priority or length of time on the housing register without success.

While local authorities have some discretion in how priority bands are defined, there is a minimum legal responsibility that applicants in “reasonable preference” categories are prioritised for at least 50% of social housing lettings. In the proposed Fylde Coast system, people in these “reasonable preference” categories are prioritised in Bands A-C. Applicants who do not meet the legally defined criteria of Bands A – C but who have wider reasons for needing to move will have the opportunity to bid for the homes that are advertised as “first come first served”.

Time on the housing register will continue to be significant in deciding who is prioritised for homes allocated on the basis of priority need; where two applicants with the same priority band express an interest, it is the applicant who has been on the register for the longest time who is awarded the property.

Given the legal constraints and the balance already in the system, the way in which applicants are awarded a priority band will go forward unchanged from the consultation proposal.

4. Restrictions on the use of the system by existing social housing tenants

On balance, respondents supported the proposed change that existing social housing tenants should not be able to register for a new social housing property unless they have a housing need (including current under occupancy), but many did not have a view one way or the other and 23% disagreed. There were few comments on this issue.

Local housing providers were concerned that they may lose working tenants if this exclusion does not allow some movement to be close to new job roles, so the policy will be slightly amended to allow existing social housing tenants to register for new social housing if they either have a housing need or they are in permanent employment.

5. Priority for working applicants for some homes

The proposal slightly increases the chances of access to social housing for working applicants, in a similar way that Band E does under the existing system. More people supported this proposal than disagreed, but there were comments both supporting and disagreeing with this approach.

The proposed new policy seeks to strike a balance between meeting the needs of people in the greatest housing need, with providing opportunities for people who are working and often struggling to afford good quality market accommodation. It also seeks to promote balanced communities within areas of social housing.

Given the opposing views for and against, but an overall balance of support for the proposal, this aspect of the policy will be implemented as proposed.

6. More flexibility in the sizes of properties that applicants can bid for

There was very strong support for this policy in both the survey responses and comments. But there is also concern to ensure that those properties that are in the shortest supply – typically large family houses – continue to be allocated to people who need all of the space.

The policy to allow applicants to register and be able to bid on properties with one bedroom more than their minimum requirement will be implemented, but there are likely to be restrictions placed at the point of advertising and letting on under-occupying large properties in local areas where these are in short supply.

7. Whether the arrangements overall will enable the best use of social housing

There was positive feedback from the survey that a majority of respondents think that the arrangements overall will enable the best use of social housing, with only 11% disagreeing. There were further comments on how the system operates, including age restrictions for ground floor properties and a suggestion that down-sizing is dealt with outside of the system.

Age restrictions, and housing providers' local lettings policies more generally, will be kept under review to ensure that there is an appropriate balance between meeting the needs of particular groups (like older residents) and opportunities for the wider population.

It is important that the system does give priority to people looking to down-size as this helps release larger properties as well as assisting tenants to get a home that is more manageable. But this doesn't rule out a more pro-active approach by housing providers to work with their

tenants outside of the allocations system to assist with moves and the freeing up of larger homes for families.

8. Income and savings thresholds

There were no changes proposed to the income and savings thresholds, but the consultation sought to get views on whether these remain appropriate. The survey response showed general support for maintaining the existing thresholds, but many comments were received that advocated either lowering or, conversely, removing the thresholds.

The argument advanced for lowering the thresholds was that social housing should only be available to people on low incomes who could not be expected to afford market housing; conversely, those who argued for removing the thresholds argued that social housing should be for a wide mix of households and that to focus only on those on the lowest incomes leads to social housing estates always being characterised by concentrations of poverty. This difference possibly reflects competing ideas on the role of social housing, but also variations across the Fylde Coast housing market area where some areas have an acute lack of access to housing that is affordable, and other areas have wider access to housing (mostly in the private rented sector) but entrenched deprivation on social housing estates.

The current thresholds do not in themselves prevent the majority of households across the Fylde Coast from accessing the housing register, but do set some limit to prevent the most affluent households from benefitting from social housing's sub-market rents. Given the balance of support, the existing income and savings thresholds will be maintained.

Appendix 1 – Consultation Information and Questions

Changes to how you access social housing in Blackpool, Fylde & Wyre

Blackpool, Fylde, and Wyre Councils, together with local Registered Providers, are proposing to make some changes to how people find and are offered social housing in the area and we would like to hear your views. We want to make the My Home Choice Fylde Coast system easier to use and fairer for everyone.

How are things working now?

There are currently 6,000 people who are registered on the My Home Choice Fylde Coast system but only 2,200 have high priority (Bands A-D) because they have the greatest housing need.
Last year just under 1,200 social rented homes were let through the system, with 64% of homes let to people in Bands A-D and 36% let to everyone else.

What do we want to change?

While we can't easily make more homes available, we want to make it quicker and easier for you to find the home that you are looking for. We plan to upgrade the system and reduce the amount of information that we ask for. Homes will be advertised as soon as they are available rather than all being advertised at the same time each week.

We also want to make some changes to how we prioritise people for our homes:

One local connection to the Fylde Coast
This means that local residents who have moved between the three Fylde Coast boroughs will now be able to get onto the housing register when previously they may not have met the local connection requirement.
However priority will still be given to Blackpool residents for Blackpool homes, Fylde residents for Fylde homes, and Wyre residents for Wyre homes.

Two ways of letting homes
The new system will offer at least 50% of homes, including those in the shortest supply, only to people in Bands A-C; each of these homes will be offered to the "bidder" with the highest priority. The rest of the homes will be available to everyone on the list and offered on a first come first served basis.

This is designed to ensure that people in the greatest need still have access to the most homes, while offering opportunities to everyone who needs to move quickly to find a suitable home as soon as it is available. There will be a target that across the whole system two thirds of lettings will go to people in Bands A-C.

Three Priority bands

We plan to simplify the priority bands for people with a legally defined housing need so that there are only three bands, with the current bands C and D now becoming a single band C. There will be no bands given to everyone else, making application simpler, while still allowing everyone to bid on first come first served homes.

Existing social housing tenants can only use the system if they have a housing need
We want to prioritise new applicants who are not already housed in social housing. Social housing tenants who do have a good reason to move because their situation has changed will still be given a priority band and be able to use the system to find a new home.

Some homes will be offered with priority to people in paid or voluntary work
We want to encourage people in work to access social housing, and propose that 20% of homes made available on a first come first served basis will be offered with priority to people in paid or voluntary work.

More flexibility to get a home with an extra bedroom
Instead of only allowing you to express an interest in a home that meets your household's minimum needs, we want you to be able to get a home that has more space, as long as the rent is affordable to you. We hope that this will make social housing attractive to a wider range of people.

We would also appreciate your views on aspects of the current eligibility criteria:
Eligibility for those with high income or savings
Currently applicants whose gross household income is over £60,000, and applicants with savings over £30,000 (except those over 55) are excluded from the housing register. This means that social housing is currently restricted to those on low incomes.

The full draft new policy is available on the MyHomeChoiceFyldeCoast and partner organisations' websites and **www.myhomechoicefyldecoast.co.uk**

Tell Us What You Think

You can tell us what you think by using the on-line survey at
www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/CBRYN
Or, complete the survey form and return it to Housing Strategy, One Bickerstaffe Square, Talbot Road, Blackpool, FY1 3AH

Please let us have your views by Monday 18th December 2017 so that we can take them into account in the new system.

Based on the responses we receive a new system would be developed and tested in the first part of 2018, and would go live in September 2018.

The current policy and system will continue to operate until the new system goes live.

My Home Choice Consultation Questions

1. Do you live in Blackpool, Fylde or Wyre?

2. Do you agree or disagree with the revised local connection requirement?

3. Do you agree with the introduction of two ways of letting?

4. Do you agree with how applicants are awarded a priority band?

5. Do you agree with restrictions on the use of the system by existing social housing tenants?

6. Do you agree with the proposed priority for working applicants for some homes?

7. Do you agree with giving more flexibility in the size of properties that applicants can bid for?

8. Do you think that, overall, the proposed new arrangements will enable us to make the best use of the social housing stock in the area?

9. Do you agree that the current income and savings thresholds are correct?

Do you have any comments about why you agree or disagree with this proposal and any impact it might have on you/your household?

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APPENDIX B

MyHomeChoice task group Minutes

The minutes of the MyHomeChoice task group meeting of Wyre Borough Council held on Wednesday, 25 July 2018 in committee room 2, Civic Centre, Poulton-le-Fylde.

MyHomeChoice task group members present:
Councillors Howard Ballard, John Hodgkinson, Andrea Kay, Patsy Ormrod, Ron Shewan, Ann Turner and Val Wilson

Apologies for absence:
Councillor Emma Ellison

Other councillors present:
Councillor Roger Berry, Neighbourhood Services and Community Safety Portfolio Holder

Officers present:
Peter Foulsham, Scrutiny Officer
David McArthur, Private Sector Housing and Housing Options Manager
Pamela Holroyd, Housing Options Team Leader

No members of the public or press attended the meeting.

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1 Election of Chair

Councillor Howard Ballard was elected as Chair of the task group.

2 Election of Vice Chair

Councillor Ann Turner was elected as Vice Chair of the task group.

3 Declarations of interest

None.

4 The context of the review

The Private Sector Housing and Housing Options Manager, Dave McArthur, introduced the report summarising the consultation responses to the proposed changes to the arrangements for the allocation and letting of social housing in Wyre via the My Home Choice Fylde Coast scheme. A report detailing the responses had been circulated previously.

There had been some problems with the current system of allocating properties and the intention was to make it easier to understand and to deliver. It was also the intention of the Housing Associations to take steps to eliminate the stigma of social housing.

The consultation took place between 8 November 2017 and 18 December 2018 and was publicised through:

- Fylde Coast local authority websites
- Mailshots to key stakeholders and registered applicants to the MyHomeChoice scheme (approx. 4600)
- Fylde Coast local authority offices
- Press Release
- MyHomeChoice Fylde Coast website

258 responses were received.

The point was made that the percentage of social housing allocated on a first come first served basis was 33%, which appeared high. Mr McArthur confirmed that this figure simply reflected what happened at present and the new system would endure that at least 50% would be allocated to those with a housing need. That figure would be closely monitored.

Mr McArthur confirmed that the current income and savings thresholds would remain, although he acknowledged that different Local Authorities had different thresholds. Cllr Berry added that if was intended to broaden the offer of social housing in order to promote balanced, mixed communities.

It was not proposed to set aside properties for people moving into the area for work; the agreed criteria would be applied in such cases.

In response to a question Mr McArthur confirmed that Regenda would provide assistance with the online allocation process, where necessary, for people who did not have the requisite digital skills. Cllr Berry added that libraries and the Fleetwood Market Digital Hub provided other facilities that could be used, with the support of the staff if necessary. It was also intended to make the application process simpler and more accessible so that no one would be disadvantaged.

Cllr Berry advised the task group that the council had an excellent relationship with Regenda, who were the main provider. There were regular liaison

meetings between the council and Regenda, who were investing significantly in renovations and upgrades to properties.

The task group welcomed having had the opportunity to question and comment on the proposals. They were in agreement with the suggested changes to the allocation process and asked that their views be reported to the Cabinet at the earliest opportunity.

It was agreed:

(i) That the proposed changes to the arrangements for the allocation and letting of social housing in Wyre via My Home Choice Fylde be supported.
(ii) That the task group's views be reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at the earliest opportunity.
(iii) That the task group's views be reported to the Cabinet at the earliest opportunity.
(iv) That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee receive a report on the implementation of the revised allocation and letting arrangements once they have been in place for 12 months (September 2019).

5 Scoping document

In the light of the decisions taken by the task group under the previous item, as detailed in minute 4, no further discussion took place about the draft scoping document.

6 Public involvement

In the light of the decisions previously taken by the task group, as detailed in minute 4, no further discussion took place about this agenda item.

7 Next steps

The task group agreed to submit their views to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Cabinet at the earliest opportunity.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and finished at 6.54 pm.

Date of Publication: 26 July 2018

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