SOUTH HOLLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report of: **Portfolio Holder for Housing and Health and Executive Director - Place**

To: **Policy Development Panel Wednesday, 6 November 2019**

Author: **Jason King, Housing Landlord Services Manager**

Subject   **Review of the revised Allocations Policy**

Purpose: **To update the Policy Development Panel on housing allocations following changes made to the Allocations Policy from April 2019.**

Recommendation(s):

That panel members note the content of report.

1.0   **BACKGROUND**

1.1   In 2018 the Policy Development Panel considered recommendations to review the Council's allocations policy. The review sought to address concern with the relatively low number of applicants on the register compared to other Lincolnshire authorities and the time elapsed from the previous policy review. The key areas reviewed were,
- How to apply for housing
- Local connection
- Sheltered accommodation qualifying age
- Offers of accommodation.

1.2   As of October 2019 there are 366 households with a live housing application on the Council's register. This represents a 22% increase on the 300 households previously reported to the panel. It should be noted that since April 2019 the Council has housed 122 households in Council properties and provided 56 nominations to Housing Associations for social accommodation. The current demand on the Housing Options Service has seen an increase of applicants assessed and accepted in the high band, creating a fluid demand.

1.3   As part of the updated policy it was agreed that applicants applying for housing would do so online. The online application process has been developed in a test environment and is ready to be delivered in a live environment. The online system is being delivered in conjunction with Northgate, the Council's current housing software provider. Following extensive engagement with the Northgate user group it was determined that the customer experience for users of the system in version 6.7.1 could be challenging, a further system update to be released at 6.8.1.1 will provide better user functionality.

1.4   The upgrade to Northgate software was completed in October 2019 and work has now recommenced to deliver online application functionality. Customers will access this service directly from the Council's website and we will be promoting interaction by email and other electronic media. Support and assistance will be made available to prospective applicants where applying online may be prohibitive.

1.5   Under the revised policy applicants can now demonstrate a local connection by having lived in the district for two out of the last five years. This was previously three out of the last five years. In the case of a connection through a family member, a connection arises where a family member has lived in the district for the last three years, this was formerly five years. It is difficult to calculate the number of additional applicants on the register due to the relaxation of local connection rules. Feedback from the service suggests that applicants who seek to live closer to family members, through preference rather than housing need, are more commonly refused entry to the register.

1.6   The qualifying age for sheltered accommodation was reduced from 62 to 55 under the revised policy, and this change appears to have seen the most significant impact. Since April 2019 there have been 40 sheltered properties let from the housing register. The increased pool of applicants has enabled the team to let properties without lengthy delays in finding a suitable applicant. Sheltered bedsit accommodation can on occasion present a letting challenge due to low desirability. However, the revised age criteria of 55 has enabled faster letting of these units.

1.7   Applicants were previously entitled to three offers of accommodation from the housing register (except in the case of homeless applicants where a main duty is owed). Under the revised policy applicants are now entitled to two offers. For general needs accommodation the current demand in Homelessness sees the majority of applicants eligible for one offer where acceptance rates remain consistently high. Historically the higher level of refusals were in sheltered accommodation. The increased pool of applicants for this type of accommodation appears to have positively impacted the number of properties accepted at the first offer.

2.0   OPTIONS

2.1   Note the updates provided in the content of the report.
2.2   Do nothing.

3.0   REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)

3.1   The feedback in the report is provided at the request of the panel following previous work undertaken on revising the Allocations Policy. The report is focussed on the changes made following the last update rather than the entire scope of the policy.

4.0   EXPECTED BENEFITS

4.1   It is expected that once the online housing application module is live this will bring benefits which support the Council's digital agenda. The upgrade of the module will enable the Council to create more robust digital records which demonstrate the probity undertaken in assessing an applicant's housing need. Whilst there is a marginal increase in the number of applicants on the register, the partial relaxation appears to have improved the letting of sheltered stock. If demand for homeless services reduces it is likely numbers will begin to increase on the housing register.

5.0   IMPLICATIONS

5.1   **Carbon Footprint / Environmental Issues**

5.1.1   Once applicants are able to apply for housing online this will negate the need for paper application forms.

5.2   **Corporate Priorities**

5.2.1   Your home: the council seeks to deliver aspirational housing services and be a landlord of choice. Improving access to housing services and providing efficient processes contributes to this priority.

6.0   **WARDS/COMMUNITIES AFFECTED**

6.1   All wards.

7.0   **ACRONYMS**

7.1   N/A.

Background papers:-	N/A.

Lead Contact Officer
Name and Post: Jason King, Housing Landlord Services Manager
Telephone Number   764671
Email: JasonKing@sholland.gov.uk

Key Decision: N

Exempt Decision: N

This report refers to a Mandatory Service.