

**AGENDA ITEM**

**REPORT TO CABINET**

**12 SEPTEMBER 2019**

**REPORT OF SENIOR  
MANAGEMENT TEAM**

## **CABINET DECISION**

### **Regeneration and Housing – Lead Cabinet Member – Councillor Nigel Cooke**

#### **TEES VALLEY LETTINGS PARTNERSHIP**

##### **SUMMARY**

The Tees Valley Lettings Partnership is made up of eight voluntary partners (the five Tees Valley Local Authorities, Beyond Housing, North Star and Home Group), the partners work collaboratively to let social and affordable housing properties as quickly as possible and in accordance with an agreed common allocation policy. The Partnership have recently undertaken a number of service reviews which have focused on ensuring that all partners deliver an efficient and effective property lettings service which addresses local housing need and that the ICT system used to deliver the service is responsive to both current and future customer needs.

Following the conclusion of above reviews, this report highlights a recent consultation exercise undertaken by the Tees Valley Lettings Partnership to ensure that it has a fit for purpose Common Allocation Policy. Members are asked to support the proposed changes to the Allocation Policy (as detailed in **Appendix A**) and note the work which is currently ongoing to introduce a new digital lettings platform which will significantly improve the customer journey/experience.

##### **REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)/DECISION(S)**

As noted within the body of the report, the 8 partners which make up the Tees Valley Lettings Partnership are committed to working collaboratively to ensure a fair and transparent Common Allocation Policy which addresses the housing needs of residents across the Tees Valley.

##### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Cabinet are asked to:

1. Note the recent consultation exercise recently undertaken to inform an updated Tees Valley Common Allocation policy and approve the proposed changes to this policy as detailed in **Appendix A**.

##### **DETAIL**

###### *Background*

1. The Council is currently a member of 'Compass: the Tees Valley Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings Partnership'. This partnership was established in 2009 and is presently made up of the five Tees Valley local authorities and four of the largest stock holding Registered Housing

Providers operating in the sub-region (Thirteen, Beyond Housing, Home Group and North Star). The partners adopted a 'Common Allocation Policy' with the aim of providing a one-stop shop for housing applicants in the Tees Valley and operate a single point of contact via 'Compass' an on-line web portal. Applicants apply for housing via 'Compass', vacant partner properties are advertised here and applicants 'bid' on those properties they are interested in.

#### *Establishment of the Tees Valley Lettings Partnership*

2. The Compass Tees Valley Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings Partnership as noted above has been in operation for 10 years and has recently been subject to a series of in-depth reviews by partnership members. As members are aware (as reported by Place Select Committee to Cabinet in February 2019) Thirteen have given notice to leave this Partnership. The remaining 8 parties remain committed to working collaboratively as a **Tees Valley Lettings Partnership** and have identified a number of improvements they wish to make to ensure properties are advertised/let in a timely and efficient manner, the customer 'journey' is improved and on-line portal used is responsive to customer needs. To secure these improvements the Partners have:
  - a) Reviewed the current Tees Valley Allocation Policy and identified the need for the policy to be updated; and
  - b) Commissioned a new Tees Valley Digital Lettings Platform to replace the 'Compass' on-line web portal.

#### ***Proposed changes to the Tees Valley Allocations Policy***

3. A review of the current Common Allocation Policy was informed by the need to; ensure our Allocation Policy reflect national changes in legislation (i.e. the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act), enables all partners to address local housing need and importantly responds to customer feedback. Following this internal review a number of proposed changes were highlighted which were the subject of a 6 week consultation exercise (undertaken between 3.6.19 to 12.7.19):
  - The consultation exercise was promoted via a range of mechanisms with the aim of maximising consultation replies, this included:
    - o Posting details of the ongoing consultation on the 'Compass' website and partner organisations websites;
    - o Making direct contact with a wide range of partner organisations across the Tees Valley including the VCSE sector, all registered housing providers with stock and/or those developing stock in the Tees Valley, local elected members in all five local authorities and internal colleagues within the partner organisations.
    - o Contacting residents direct via local resident's forums and on-line panels.
    - o The on-line questionnaire was also shared by local authority press teams and promoted through the use of social media.
  - 465 consultation responses were received (of which 51% were from residents of the Tees Valley).
  - **All** consultation proposals were supported by the majority of respondents (consultation 'agree' percentages ranged between 75.22% - 92.79%).
  - Feedback from this consultation exercise also raised an additional consideration which (subject to endorsement by Cabinet) will be incorporated within the updated policy. As part of the consultation exercise it was proposed that the 'High Housing Needs' band will include those suffering domestic abuse or leaving HM Forces. This this now been reconsidered and applicants in approaching in these circumstances with be dealt with in the 'Urgent Housing Needs'.

4. Cabinet are asked to support the proposed Tees Valley Common Allocation Policy changes as detailed in **Appendix A**.
5. Each of the 8 Tees Valley Lettings Partnership members are currently seeking approval for implementation of the policy changes. Once all approvals have been applicants will be contacted to explain the new, simplified banding structure.

#### ***Introduction of a new Tees Valley Digital Lettings Platform***

6. As noted previously Compass (the website/property advertising portal) has been in operation for 10 years and whilst changes have been made during this period, feedback from customers has suggested the site can be difficult to navigate and the application process is long and onerous. Responding to this feedback a new Digital Lettings Platform will be introduced. This new platform is bespoke and is being developed to ensure an improved and simplified customer journey. By way of an example the new portal will include a streamlined application process and allow customers to see relevant information about a property and its location (through street mapping) as well as details of facilities within the vicinity i.e. local schools, libraries, shops, GP's etc. before they considering noting their interest ('bidding').
7. The needs of vulnerable customers are at the heart of the new systems design, however Members can be assured that as/when service users require face to face support this will be provided.
8. Whilst Thirteen will in future operate a separate lettings portal (as part of a Thirteen digital transformation programme), both parties have considered how we can simplify, as far as possible the need for those seeking housing having to make 2 separate housing applications to:
  - (i) *Thirteen*: for properties advertised directly on their portal to be let in accordance with the Thirteen Lettings Policy) and
  - (ii) *The Tees Valley Lettings Partnership*: for local authority 'nomination' properties (including Thirteen properties) and wider Registered Provider properties to be let in accordance with the Tees Valley Allocation Policy.

As both Thirteen and the Tees Valley Lettings Partnership have procured the same ICT provider both parties are working together to ensure that from the customer prospective the application/lettings process is as streamlined as possible.

9. The Tees Valley Lettings Partnership is currently working through a detailed Implementation Project Plan (which includes customer testing) and it is anticipated that the new lettings platform will go live late October 2019. If this can be achieved it has been agreed with Thirteen that we will both exit the current 'Compass' system at the same time and adopt a joint Communication Plan with the aim of facilitating a smooth transition for service users/customers.

#### **COMMUNITY IMPACT IMPLICATIONS**

10. The introduction of an updated Common Allocation Policy and new digital lettings platform is aimed at directly supporting all residents of the Tees Valley who are seeking social/affordable housing. As noted within the report, vulnerable residents will be supported to ensure that they are able to register a housing application and are supported in securing appropriate accommodation.

#### **CORPORATE PARENTING IMPLICATIONS**

11. None.

## **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

12. The costs of procuring the new digital lettings platform have been split between the 8 Tees Valley Lettings Partners on an agreed costing schedule. The cost incurred by SBC have been meet within current resource allocations.

## **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

13. The proposed changes to the new Tees Valley Common Allocation Policy have taken into account the codes of guidance issued to local housing authorities in England, in exercising the functions under 167(1A) and 167(2E) of the Housing Act 1996 and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

## **RISK ASSESSMENT**

14. A risk assessment has been undertaken and is categories as low to medium risk. Existing management systems and daily routine activities are sufficient to control and reduce risk.

## **WARDS AFFECTED AND CONSULTATION WITH WARD/COUNCILLORS**

15. All ward members were notified and given the opportunity to respond to the recent Tees Valley Common Allocation Policy consultation exercise.

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

None

**Richard McGuckin**

**Director of Economic Growth and Development Services**

**Name of Contact Officer: Jane Edmends**

**Post Title: Housing Services Manager**

**Telephone No. 01642 526682**

**Email Address: [jane.edmends@stockton.gov.uk](mailto:jane.edmends@stockton.gov.uk)**