

Gateway to Homechoice Local Lettings Policy

To address the restrictions on allocating properties during the Covid-19 Public Health crisis

ISSUE DATE: May 2020

REVIEW DATE: 1st June 2020 (and then every 2 months)

Introduction

This is a Local Lettings Plan for the allocation and letting of rented social housing in Babergh/Braintree/Colchester/East Suffolk/Ipswich/Maldon/Mid Suffolk for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. **It sets out how we will let properties from May 2020 until Government advice changes.**

Background

- 1.1. The Partner Organisations (POs) in the 'Gateway to Homechoice' scheme are Local Authorities (LAs) or agents working on behalf of LAs that are exercising legal duties towards homeless households.
- 1.2. When the Government announced restrictions on movement to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, it also sent out guidance to LAs telling them to take action to make sure that no-one is forced to sleep rough.
- 1.3. At the same time, the POs are trying to work with people who are being discharged from hospital, displaced from temporary and/or supported housing schemes that cannot manage during the pandemic.
- 1.4. Some people approaching the LA may have symptoms themselves or be trying to self-isolate because they are in an NHS protected group.
- 1.5. LAs are also dealing with people where they are unable to remain in their accommodation because of a breakdown in their relationship with their family. This is sometimes as a result of domestic abuse.
- 1.6. While restrictions on movement and recommendations for social distancing continue, fewer properties become available and the landlords of the properties have to manage the process of void inspection and works, in a way that is safe for their staff and for the public.
- 1.7. The Partner Organisations therefore recognise that this is a time of extraordinary pressures that has not been experienced before.
- 1.8. At the beginning of the pandemic, choice based lettings were temporarily suspended in order to comply with Government guidance on social distancing. In particular:
 - Landlords using the scheme stopped or dramatically reduced work to make properties ready to let as this could not be undertaken safely on a routine basis;
 - Housing organisations were concerned for the safety of staff and members of the public when viewing and signing up to properties;
 - Completing a move during a period of lock-down could be difficult due to support services (such as removals) being unavailable.
- 1.9. On 27th April 2020, the Government published new guidance for social landlords on essential moves. This Policy takes that guidance into account.

2. Purpose of this Local Lettings Policy

- 2.1. This policy is intended to set out how properties that become available will be let during the Covid-19 public health crisis.
- 2.2. The Policy covers the period of lock-down, during which direct lets will be made but is also intended to set out how we expect to respond as conditions and guidance changes.
- 2.3. The Gateway to Homechoice Allocations Policy sets out the use of Local Lettings Plans in Sections 7.21 and 7.22. The Policy can be viewed on the scheme's website: www.gatewaytohomechoice.org.uk
- 2.4. This Policy meets the requirements of the Gateway to Homechoice Allocations Policy (Local Lettings) as follows:
 - To make best use of the housing stock and give priority for releasing a property in need.

3. Properties which become available during the lockdown period: Direct lets

- 3.1. There are very few vacant properties which are available for letting but if they do become available, they will be allocated, in line with Government guidance on Essential Moves (27/04/20), to those who meet one of the following criteria:
 - Accepted (main duty) homeless applicants;
 - There is no suitable temporary accommodation for a household and the PO would be breaching its duty under homelessness legislation if no accommodation is provided;
 - Applicants who the PO have assessed as meeting the criteria for Band B Options Advice, including applicants who are owed the relief duty and are currently residing in temporary accommodation;
 - Applicants who are fleeing violence or harassment (and who are in Band A);
 - Those with a critical health need to move; *or*
 - Others who the PO assess as having have an urgent need to move.
- 3.2. Properties assessed as being suitable for households in the above groups will not be advertised on the system but will be offered directly to an applicant who meets the criteria set out above and has been assessed as being eligible for a property of that size.
- 3.3. The property will initially be offered to people with a connection to the District or Borough where the property is located. There will be a temporary suspension of cross-boundary lettings. The record of a direct let being made will feature on the 'recent lets' section of the web-site.

4. Properties that we are able to advertise on Gateway to Homechoice and applicants can bid on following a change to lock-down conditions/Government guidance

- 4.1. If lock-down conditions and/or Government guidance changes, POs may choose to advertise a property but restrict it to people who fulfil one of the categories set out in

point 3.1 (above) The use of a Covid-19 lettings plan will be identified in the advertisement in this case.

- 4.2. When properties do become available and are advertised on the system, they will initially be offered to people with a connection to the District or Borough where the property is located. There will be a temporary suspension of cross-boundary lettings.
- 4.3. Properties may be advertised without the conditions set out in this Covid-19 Lettings Plan (i.e. in accordance with the current Allocations Policy) following the agreement of the PO and landlord/provider so long as they comply with Government guidance.

5. Monitoring and Reviewing the Plan

- 5.1. This local lettings plan will be reviewed at least every 2 months or if there is a relevant change in Government Guidance. Monitoring meetings will consider the local lettings plan and its impact to make sure that it does not discriminate on equality grounds.
- 5.2. This Policy is intended to make sure that the scheme is operated as consistently and transparently as possible. All of the lettings made under this policy will appear in the 'recent lets' section of the web-site.
- 5.3. Where possible all lettings under this local lettings policy will be identified as being let in accordance with the 'Covid-19 lettings plan' where this is not possible all the properties will be identified as 'direct lets'. We will ensure that this is reported on in our annual report.