

Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group – Select Move April 2014



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1. PREFACE

The Scrutiny inquiry into the Select Move Choice Based Lettings scheme was requested by Members of Chorley Council after concern was raised about the accessibility & user- friendliness of Select Move and also the perception that people from outside the sub region and without local connection were accessing properties in Chorley.

The scrutiny examined in detail how the scheme operates, exploring the profile of customers who use it. This included looking at how often customers use it and accessing their views about it, the work of the Registered Providers who participate in the scheme. Whether or not there is a consistency of approach was reviewed in particular.

The task group engaged with both partners and customers to ensure that all perspectives were considered and to ensure the scrutiny was balanced.

The findings were mainly positive and Select Move was demonstrated to be a fit- for - purpose, effective way for a number of partners over a sub-regional footprint, to work collaboratively to allocate social housing.

Notwithstanding the above, there are some important improvements which can be made to the scheme, including ensuring necessary safeguards for those who are not equipped to access digital services.

I would like to thank the Task Group Members for their deliberations, the officers and the external representatives and the residents of Chorley who made a contribution to this report. The representations we received have proved invaluable and enabled us to produce a set of recommendation that we feel will improve the present procedures and policies to better serve our residents of Chorley.



Councillor Graham Dunn (Chair)

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee asked the Task Group to undertake a scrutiny inquiry to look at the Select Move Choice Based Lettings scheme, of which the Council is a member, alongside 9 Registered Providers of social housing (hereafter referred to as RPs). The Select Move scheme is the method by which social housing in Chorley (in addition to Preston and South Ribble) is allocated.

Objectives

To investigate and evidence whether Select Move is meeting the needs to the satisfaction of the applicants, by reviewing

- 1) The application processes
- 2) The allocation processes
- 3) The standard of allocated properties

Desired Outcomes

1. To secure a choice- based lettings service that meets the needs of Chorley residents.
2. To identify areas of improvement on condition of property at handover.
3. To reduce waiting times and lists.

Members were keen to ensure that all seven equality and diversity strands were fully taken into consideration throughout the review and were keen to work effectively in partnership with the RPs to facilitate any improvements across the board.

Task Group Membership

Councillor Graham Dunn (Chair)
Councillor Alison Hansford
Councillor Hasina Khan
Councillor Steve Holgate
Councillor Paul Leadbetter
Councillor June Molyneaux
Councillor Steve Murfitt
Councillor Paul Walmsley

Officer Support:

Lead Officers

Lesley-Ann Fenton, Director Partnerships, Planning and Policy
Zoë Whiteside, Head of Housing

Support Officers:

Michael Coogan, Principal Strategic Housing Officer
Stuart Dewhurst, Housing Team Leader (Options)

Democratic Services

Dianne Scambler Democratic and Member Services Officer

Meetings

The meeting papers of the Group can be found on the Council's website www.chorley.gov.uk/scrutiny. This includes the inquiry project outline and other relevant information on policy and procedures.

Contribution of Evidence

The Task Group would like to thank all those who have provided evidence and contributed to the Inquiry. Section 4 contains the details of those involved

2. LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The Executive Cabinet is asked to consider the following recommendations:

1. That each RP review their processes for handing over properties at relet stage, including both recording the time taken to prepare a property ready for a let and also the level of assistance for new tenants. That all RPs look raise their offer to the same standard across all providers
2. That each RP review the provision for a decoration allowance for new tenants and review its level, increasing it to ensure it where necessary to ensure it is sufficient.
3. That the partnership consider the provision of surgeries or drop in sessions for customers to allow face to face support and demonstrations of how to perform certain tasks on the Select Move system.
4. That any provision for surgeries or drop-in include the rural areas and are promoted to ensure that older people are aware of them and able to attend.
5. That the partnership considers undertaking a process of proactive marketing to those who are not bidding regularly and offer to provide assistance. This should include promotion of any drop- in sessions, mailing out of the newsletter and assisting bidding on properties by proxy.
6. That the RPs within the partnership are encouraged to provide more details in their property adverts, including detail of any specific local connection provisions (for example in rural villages) and also the provision of photographs on the majority of adverts.
7. That the partners continue to work collaboratively to develop a database of adapted properties which will ensure that when an adapted property becomes available, it can be advertised with all of the relevant information to ensure it is appropriately allocated.
8. That the RPs within the partnership endeavour to include any properties which are to be direct matched, on the Select Move system, clearly specifying it is not available for other applicants, in order to enhance transparency and integrity in the scheme.
9. That the partnership lobbies Abris to implement the new system upgrade in order to improve the customer interface.
10. That there continues to be regular monitoring by the Council of the level of net migration into Chorley, to ensure the new policy achieves the overall aims of prioritising Chorley properties for those with a connection to the borough.
11. That the partnership ensures that any affordability policies or tests are consistent across RPs and that these policies do not wholly exclude groups of customers.

12. That the partnership ensures that as part of any affordability policy, there are provisions available which will help customers to improve their circumstances in order to pass any assessment of affordability threshold in order to secure a property and that these are consistently available across all RPs.

13. That the Council continues to work with RPs in order to enable new affordable housing of the right type and tenure is available so local housing need is met.

3. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Local authorities have a legal responsibility to ensure social housing is allocated to people in greatest need and these duties exist regardless of whether or not they still own social housing stock. For those authorities where a large scale voluntary stock transfer (LSVT) has taken place, and this applies to Chorley, the duties include assessing customers for social housing and ensuring that the legally defined categories of those in most need, namely 'reasonable preference categories' are given sufficient priority.

Select Move is a Choice Based Lettings Partnership that replaced traditional waiting list systems whereby each RP and local authority held its own waiting list and associated Allocations Policy and customers would have to apply to each one, in order to be considered for housing. Choice Based Lettings allocation systems were introduced towards the end of the last decade and were very much promoted nationally as good practice, enabling customers to have a choice of home and also ensuring transparency in the process of social housing allocation.

Chorley Council became a partner to the Select Move partnership in 2011 and prior to that date; a manual system of allocations was in place, which comprised a points-based policy, with customers being offered a property by officers as they moved to the top of the waiting list. There were penalties for customers who refused the offer of a property without justification.

Select Move is very much a partnership approach, based on the premise that all partners share the same Allocations Policy, same procedures and processes for assessing housing applications and jointly procure and manage the software necessary to administer the system. The partners share the costs of the software and work collaboratively to agree any system configurations and policy and procedural matters.

The Select Move system is a computer software product (provided by Abris Software) and customers predominantly access the system via the internet, with applications, bidding and correspondence between provider and customer taking place digitally.

Applications can also be made in hard copy, telephone or face-to-face. Support and advice is available. Applications are assessed in accordance with a published Select Move Allocations Policy and supporting evidence must be provided in order for officers to accurately make an assessment of their housing need. There is also a smart phone version of the site available.

The Allocations Policy sets out how applications will be assessed and each application is prioritised into a band. There are 5 bands, from band A to E and briefly these include the following categories (please see policy document for full details):

Banding Criteria

Band	Overview of qualifying criteria
A	Medical/Welfare grounds-immediate life threatening condition which is seriously affected by the condition of the current housing Hospital discharge /or to prevent hospital admission(e.g. elderly) Protection of vulnerable adults or children Care leavers Release adapted properties Exceptional need to move (e.g. domestic abuse) Statutory overcrowded Private sector with category one hazard (HHSRS) Leaving supported accommodation and ready for independent living
B	Statutory homeless Under occupying by two bedrooms or more Overcrowded by 2 bedrooms or more Medical grounds- urgent need to move Need to give or receive essential long term care Homeless prevention
C	Entitled to reasonable preference due to non-priority homeless, intentionally homeless or otherwise homeless Need to move due to hardship Applicant without ground level access or in upper floor accommodation with one child under age of 10 years, including pregnancy. Accommodation lacks basic facilities
D	An applicant employed or undertaking training Positive community contribution Need to give or receive support Under occupying and likely to face hardship Over occupying by 1 bedroom
E	No housing need i.e. customers that do not qualify for additional preference but would like to move to alternative accommodation

Select Move is a web- based system and properties which are available are advertised each week by the RPs on the website, with information about property type size and

location with photographs being shown (though often they are not added). Applicants express their interest by placing 'bids' using their unique account, rather than waiting to be allocated a property. A shortlist of interested applicants is then created and the RP which manages that particular property, then reviews the shortlist and allocates the property to the most appropriate applicant according to the policy. The scheme promotes choice and sustainable communities since tenants are more likely to stay in a property that they have chosen themselves. Available properties are advertised for a particular band, based on a quota which is published in the policy. The quotas for bands A-E are 40%, 30%, 20%, 10% and 0% respectively.

The figure below illustrates the customer view when looking at Select Move.



The current partnership consists of the three central Lancashire authorities of Chorley, Preston and South Ribble along with 9 RPs that collectively have stock across the three boroughs.

The partners are governed by a Steering Group that is responsible for the strategic overview of the scheme, with senior representatives from all of the partner organisations attending. An Operational Group also exists and meets regularly to discuss day to day matters and specific issues or casework.

The Task Group was established to investigate the impact of the Select Move scheme for customers, considering if it meets our customer needs and expectations, how the scheme operates and how policy is applied. The Task Group also considered what improvements could be identified which would further enhance the scheme. Some

concerns had been raised about issues of inward migration to Chorley of those without a local connection to Chorley, particularly given the volume and availability of new build accommodation in Chorley as a result of the affordable housing programme.

The social sector in Chorley represents 13% of the total stock, which is approximately 6200 homes in total.

The largest stockholding RP is Chorley Community Housing (CCH) with 52% of the total stock or 3,200 units. Places for People are the second biggest, with 36 % or 2,200 units.

During the course of this scrutiny exercise, the Select Move Allocations Policy was reviewed and refreshed, partly in response to the Localism agenda and the new statutory guidance issued regarding the allocation of social housing. However, one key driver for reviewing the policy was the need to ensure local connection was a priority factor for customers and Chorley Council were strong advocates of this, particularly given the scale of the affordable programme in the Borough and the demand these properties generated.

The revised policy was ratified by all the partners respective Executive Cabinets and Boards and was implemented in February 2014. Part of this process required all customers on the housing register to complete a short review form and for local connection information to be verified. This exercise has essentially cleansed the housing register and has resulted in a reduction in the overall number of customers registered on Select Move. However the exercise is not yet complete and once it is, there are indications that it will reduce the total number of applicants currently on the housing register.

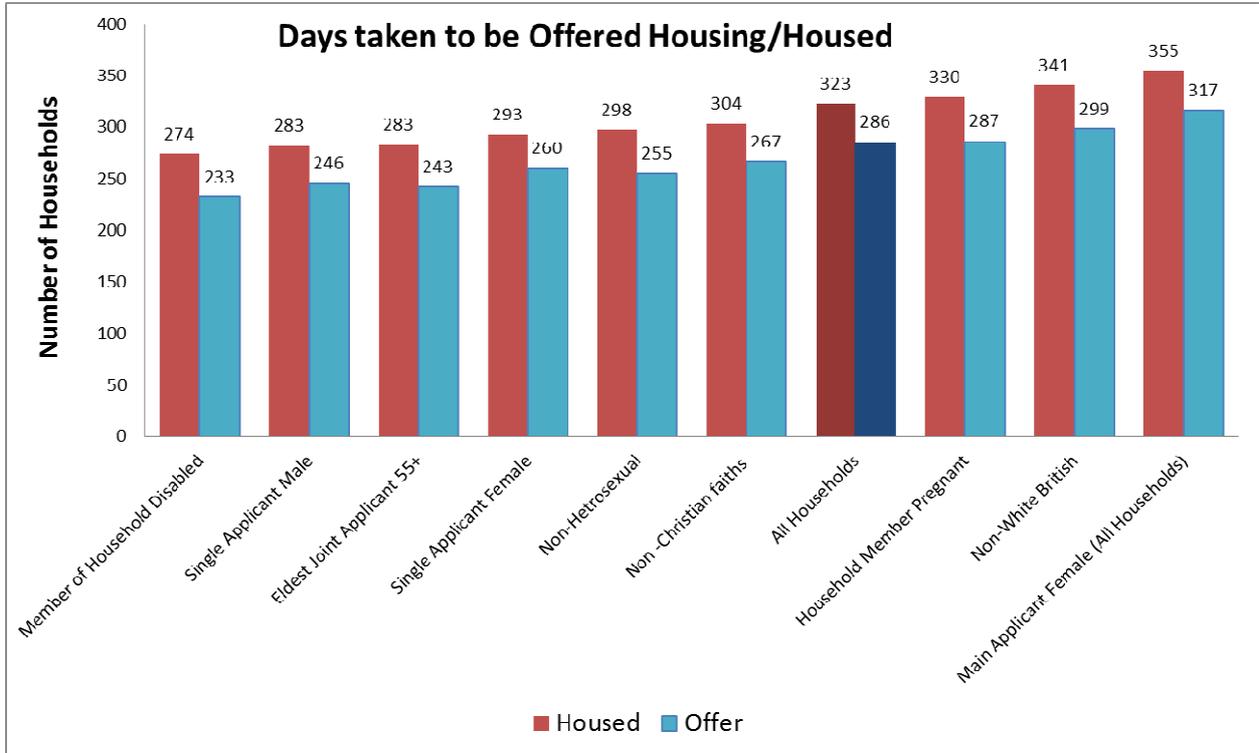
The current housing register breakdown for customers living in Chorley is:

	Band A	Band B	Band C	Band D	Band E	Total
Bedroom Need						
1 bed	14	75	60	126	335	610
2 bed	5	14	40	141	173	373
3 bed	2	7	10	44	42	105
4 bed	0	4	5	13	18	40
Total	21	100	115	324	568	1,128

The total number on the housing register is currently 1128. This figure includes all the applications currently held by all the partners (i.e. including those held by both the Council and also all of the RPs). As of the 14th February 2014, 54% of the customers on the register had completed the review process and as part of that, had their local connection verified. Chorley Council has completed all of its applications, resulting in a 67% reduction of applicants on the register. Whilst it is expected that a majority of these customers will have a local connection to Chorley, there remains some work to be done by RPs to complete this exercise and this is being undertaken at the time of writing.

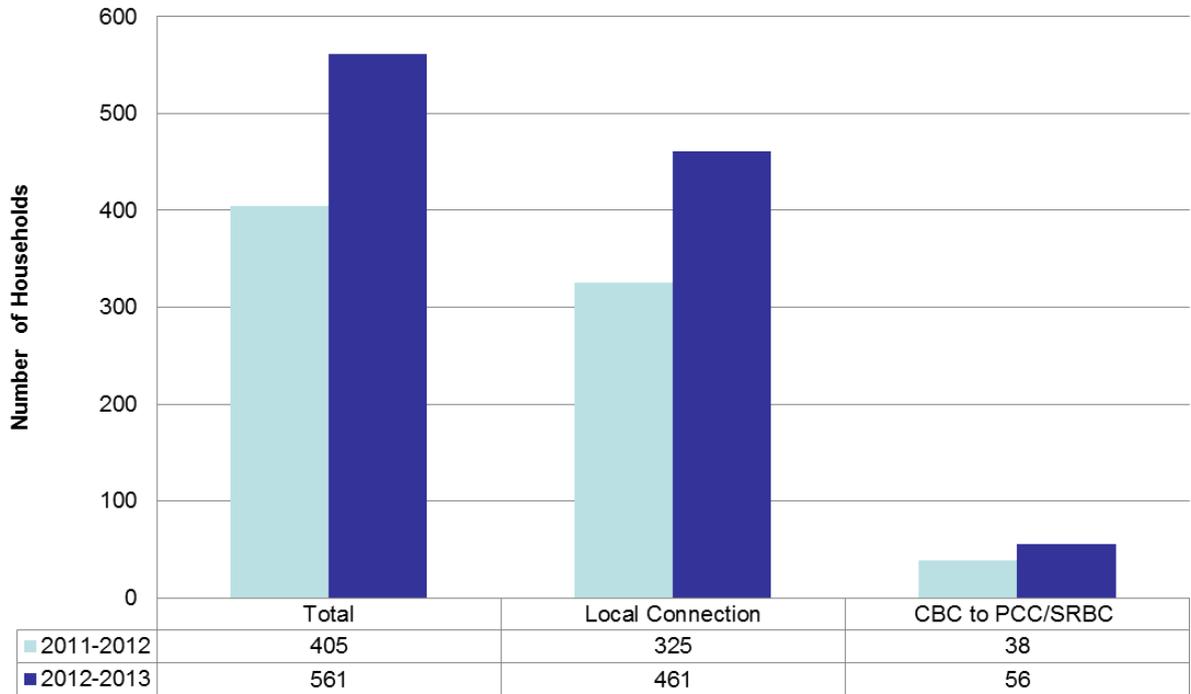
Days on Select Move before Housed

The Task Group were interested in finding out more about the length of time customers wait to be allocated a property. The figure below shows the number of days waited by customer profile and overall these figures are considered to be reasonable, given the size of the register and the relative size of the social rented stock in Chorley.



Chorley Select Move Lets

This table below illustrates the number of lets made in the past two years and illustrates the decline in net migration to Chorley of those without a local connection to the borough. Net inward migration was confirmed as 10.4% in 11/12 and 7.8% in 12/13. It was thus falling even before recent further changes in policy to ensure local connection.



4. METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

The Group were provided with 3 presentations from officers:

- 1) An overview of the Select move system, what Choice based lettings is and how it works,
- 2) Presentation of Statistical Information requested by members, including bidding behaviour, customer profiles and inward migration.
- 3) Findings of the Select Move Customer survey.

The evidence considered included statistical breakdown of those people registered on the Select Move lettings scheme, including information about those with the following characteristics:

- Ethnic origin of household
- Faith of main applicant
- Sexuality of main applicant
- Gender of Main & Sole Applicant
- Rural Households
- Ages of Oldest Joint applicant By Household size
- Member of the Household Pregnant
- Member of Household has Disability

Information was provided as to who has been on Select Move the longest and analysis of bidding history and analysis of bidding activity was provided.

Analysis of the total number of lettings made prior to the introduction of Select Move in comparison to after Select Move was implemented.

The levels of migration were also reviewed, including the percentage of net migration (i.e. the inward migration of customers securing property in Chorley without a local connection to Chorley minus those with a local connection moving outwards to Preston or South Ribble).

Presentation

The Task Group received presentations from:

Officers:

Michael Coogan, Principal Strategic Housing Officer
Stuart Dewhurst, Housing Team Leader (Options)
Zoe Whiteside, Head of Housing

The RT Hon Lindsay Hoyle MP for Chorley

Lindsay Hoyle MP provided written evidence to the Task Group, drawing on his contacts with his constituents.

Registered Providers

The 5 RPs with the largest stockholding in Chorley were invited to attend to meet with members from the Task Group on 7th November 2013. The following representatives attended:

Richard Houghton	Chorley Community Housing
Rachel Page	New Progress Housing Association
Steven Amos	Places for People Housing Association
Vicky Young	Contour Housing Association

Apologies were received from Paul Spencer, Housing Manager North West, Accent Housing Group.

The RPs were provided with an overview of the aims of the overview and scrutiny review in addition to a number of questions in advance. This was to enable the RPS to prepare and also stimulate debate at the meeting. The questions explored:

- provision for front line service for Select Move customers,
- what steps they were taking to improve the customer experience,
- processes and procedures regarding undertaking pre letting assessments and skipping of customers on the shortlists,
- Measures being put in place to respond to under occupancy,
- What steps are taken before letting to ensure properties are let a good standard.

Resident Representations: Customer Survey

A Customer Satisfaction survey was undertaken in order to obtain feedback on the processes relating to the Select Move lettings scheme. The survey was posted out, with pre-paid envelopes to 1790 households in Chorley, comprising of 1,442 active applicants and a further 348 customers who had successfully secured a new home using the Select Move system.

The survey questions were devised from discussions at the Task Group meeting and were posted the week commencing 18th November 2013 and the final ones received in January 2014.

The first survey to existing housing applicants generated a return of 16.7% (228 responses) and the second survey to those who had secured housing in the past 6 months generated a return of 18.9% (71 responses). The survey responses were collated and the findings studied.

Resident Representations: Customer Drop In

In addition to the customer survey, members of the Task Group were keen to meet customers in person, to give them an opportunity to hear from customers about their experiences and concerns, and also any ideas they had about making the service better.

The survey had asked customers if they would be interested to attend a drop in session and subsequently 38 customers indicated they would. Therefore as this was a greater level of interest than anticipation, it was decided to randomly select 50% of the customers to invite to meet the Task Group members, and the remaining 50% were contacted to thank them for their offer of assistance and provide an opportunity to share their thoughts or comments about letters of invitation were sent to these customers and 5 customers attended.

The drop in session was structured, with two panels of Task Group members established to meet the customers, and each panel supported by an officer. There was also a member of the Housing Options team available to provide individual advice and support to any customers asking specifically about their application. These discussions took place outside of the panels.

The drop-in sessions were very successful and enabled productive and informative discussions between customers and the Task Group members to take place.

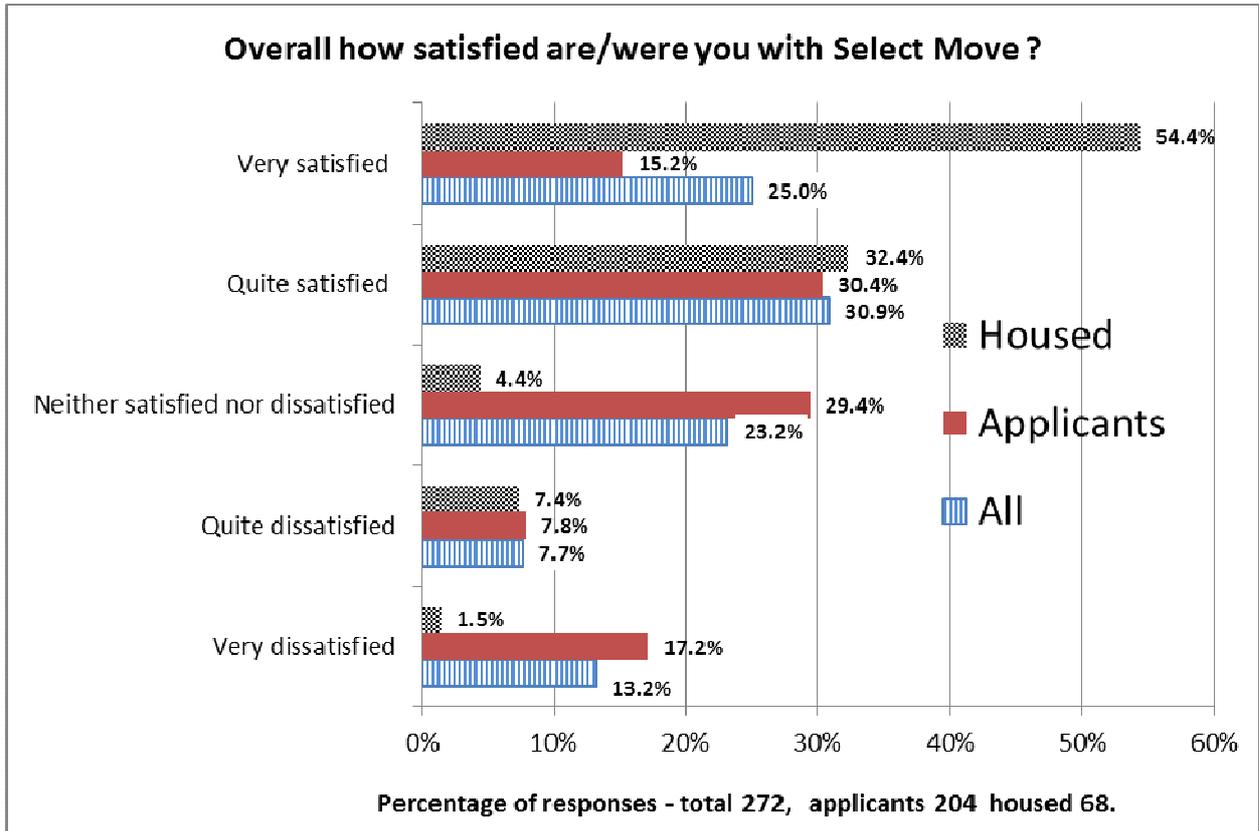
6. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Customer Satisfaction

It was found that overall satisfaction with Select Move was good, with 25% of all customers saying that they were 'very satisfied' with the scheme, the figure increasing to 54.4% for those who were successfully housed in the past 6 months.

The majority of customers are satisfied (55.9%) with Select Move and satisfaction in those housed (86.8%) is almost double that of current applicants (45.6%). Over 7 in ten respondents preferred Select Move to the previous system and customers housed were more likely to bid frequently than those on the waiting list, and in total 68.7% of respondents bid at least every month. 70.0% of those housed managed this within a year, with 34.3% being housed within 4 months of applying.

Lack of bidding was partially down to internet access/ability and with a preference for dealing with people, but it is also down to personal choice. There was an overwhelming response to the question we asked customers about returning to the previous system of allocations, with 82.6% saying 'no'.



Moving into a property

The task group examined each of the respective RPs processes for letting a property to a new tenant, including any assistance with decorating materials, choice of finishes when works are being undertaken (such as new kitchens or bathrooms) and generally customers views about the standard of accommodation at relet.

It was found that there were not major concerns about property standard, with 70% of customers satisfied with the condition of their property at letting. However, there was a variation in what RPs offered prospective tenants with regard to decorating material. Where a property is in a bad state, it would nearly always be decorated by the RP before handover but in the case of some properties needing some redecoration some RPS would give an allowance to new tenants, usually at a level well below the cost of a decent job.

Recommendation: That each RP review their processes for handing over properties at relet stage, including recording both the time taken to prepare a property ready for a let and also the level of assistance for new tenants. That all RPs will look to raise their offer to the same standard of the best across all providers.

Recommendation: That each RP review the provision for a decoration allowance for new tenants and review its level, increasing it to ensure it where necessary to ensure it is sufficient.

Accessibility of Select Move

Accessibility to the scheme was reviewed and it was concluded that the partnership as a whole needs to be more proactive in supporting customers to develop skills in using computer technology. Whilst 68.4% of respondents found Select Move easy to use, there is a minority who are not bidding regularly and who told us they were unable to bid or access the website.

Of our survey respondents, 42.9% of all respondents said that they bid every week and interestingly, 72.1% of those customers who had been housed in the last 6 months had bid every week. However, there is evidence to suggest that a sizeable proportion of customers on Select Move do not bid regularly, with the survey finding 21% of current applicants had never bid.

It was concluded that customers valued the information presented on the Select Move system and this includes both advert text and also photographs of the available properties. Of our survey respondents, 67.2% stated that a photograph on the advert was 'very important'. It was also found that customers preferred the adverts to state specifically and clearly if the property was restricted to a particular group or if the property was to be directly matched to a customer.

The survey suggested that a proportion of customers do not use Select Move online, either because they do not have access to a computer (28.3%) or because they do not know how to use a computer (26.7%). Of the customers who responded to the survey, 13.9% said that they were unable to bid or did not know how to.

Recommendation: That the partnership consider the provision of surgeries or drop in sessions for customers to allow face- to- face support and demonstrations of how to perform certain tasks on the Select Move system.

Recommendation: That any provision for surgeries or drop-in include the rural areas and are promoted to ensure that older people are aware of them and able to attend.

Recommendation: That the partnership considers undertaking a process of proactive marketing to those who are not bidding regularly and offer to provide assistance. This should include promotion of any drop- in sessions, mailing out of the newsletter and assisting bidding on properties by proxy.

Recommendation: That the RPs within the partnership are encouraged to provide more detail in their property adverts, including detail of any specific local connection provisions (for example in rural villages) and also the provision of photographs on the majority of adverts.

Recommendation: That the partners continue to work collaboratively to develop a database of adapted properties which will ensure that when an adapted property becomes available, it can be advertised with all of the relevant information to ensure it is appropriately allocated.

Recommendation: That the RPs within the partnership endeavour to include any properties which are to be direct matched, on the Select Move system, clearly specifying it is not available for other applicants, in order to enhance transparency and integrity of the scheme.

Local connection

The task group found that the number of steps have been taken in order to minimise the net migration of those without a local connection, into Chorley properties. These measures have proved successful and the very recent review of the Select Move Allocations policy will further enhance this.

Recommendation: That there continues to be regular monitoring by the Council of the level of net migration into Chorley by the council, to ensure the new policy achieves the overall aims of prioritising Chorley properties for those with a connection to the borough.

Affordability

The national welfare reform agenda and the introduction of changes for those claiming benefits has led RPs to consider what the costs of renting a home are and if prospective tenants can afford properties they are bidding for.

Understandably, RPs are concerned about the future viability of their business and so appear to be taking steps to ensure customers are able to meet the costs of running their new home. However, given the legal responsibilities placed on the local authorities under the homelessness and housing legislation (and these duties do not apply to RPs), it is in the Council's interest to work with RPs and ensure that any future policy does not prevent certain customers, such as those who are homeless or who have high priority for housing, from accessing accommodation.

The latest Statutory Guidance for social housing confirms that social housing is to go to those in 'greatest housing need' and therefore whilst RPs may seek to obtain a balance in their communities, including providing social housing for working households, this must not be to the detriment of those who are in housing need and whom need support in order to access training and employment.

Recommendation: That the partnership ensures that any affordability policies or tests are consistent across RPs and that these policies do not provide blanket exclusions for certain groups of customers.

Recommendation: That the partnership ensures that as part of any affordability policy there are provisions available which will help customers to improve their circumstances in order to pass any assessment of affordability threshold in order to secure a property and that these are consistently available across all RPs.

Recommendation: That the Council continues to work with RPs in order to enable new affordable housing of the right type and tenure is available so local housing need is met.

7. CONCLUSION

The Task Group was established to investigate and evidence whether Select Move is meeting the needs of, and satisfaction levels of applicants, by reviewing:

- a) The application processes
- b) The allocation processes
- c) The standard of allocated properties

This work was undertaken with the first desired objective to ascertain if Select Move is a choice based lettings service that meets the needs of Chorley residents. The Task Group panel conclude that Select Move does largely meet our customers' needs, as satisfaction is good, allocations are being made within a period we considered to be reasonable and also the majority of customers when asked if we should revert back to the old system, said that we should not. Choice and personal preference are key elements of the scheme and so these were found to have a bearing on how long a customer may wait until they secure a property (for example, some customers are prefer to wait for a particular street or area until they place a bid on a property).

There are some areas we need to improve and with the refreshed Allocations Policy and also the forthcoming system upgrade which promises to improve the customer interface and experience; Select Move will increasingly meet need. Further, the introduction of a smartphone friendly version of the website will further enhance access for customers.

Our second desired outcome was to identify areas of improvement on condition of property at handover and whilst we revealed no major concerns, there are some suggestions for our partners which will improve the customer experience.

Our third desired outcome was to reduce waiting times and lists and the policy refresh work which is currently underway at time of writing, in ensuring that qualification and local connection are fully assessed and verified and indications are that this will result in a distillation of the housing register. The new local connection provisions within the revised policy will ensure those with a local connection to Chorley are giving priority for all available homes in Chorley, minimising the levels of inward migration. This is important particularly given the volume of new affordable housing developments in Chorley.

8. GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Allocation

The letting of a social property by a Registered Provider or Council

Nomination

The putting forward of a household in housing need by the Council to be housed by a Registered Provider

Allocation policy

The policy which determines how social properties are let.

Skipping

The act of passing over a bidding applicant to a lower priority applicant on a short list

Affordability

Determines whether a household has sufficient means to meet its housing needs

Migration

The movement of a household from one Council area to another

Abritas

The company which develops and supplies the software Select Move uses along with the majority of similar Choice Based Letting Systems nationwide

Choice Based Lettings

The method of letting social properties through a proactive 'bidding' system to allow customer choice, rather than waiting to be allocated a property on a traditional waiting list

Registered Provider

A provider of social housing who is registered with the Homes and Communities Agency including the all major Housing Associations

Chorley Council

