

Report of Mike Camponi, Housing Manager, Leeds Homes

Report to Neil Evans, Director of Environment and Housing

Date: 1 December 2015

Subject: Homefinder UK National Mobility Scheme Review

Are specific electoral Wards affected? If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for Call-In?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number: Appendix number:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

Summary of main issues

Leeds has subscribed to the Homefinder UK property advertising and tenant mobility service for the last 14 months and the subscription is due for renewal following a planned review.

Recommendations

It is recommended that Leeds City Council continues with the Homefinder scheme for a further 12 month period at a cost of £2160 after which a further review will determine our future involvement.

1 Purpose of this report

- 1.1 To consider the value and performance of the service to date and seek approval to subscribe to Homefinder UK for a further 12 months.

2 Background information

- 2.1 Homefinder UK is a national mobility scheme which helps social housing tenants who wish to move to alternative social housing in other parts of the country. It also helps social landlords advertise low demand stock that is difficult to let.

- 2.2 It is linked to our existing national mutual exchange providers, House Exchange, who host a website for all social landlord tenants in Leeds seeking matches either locally, regionally or nationally. Homefinder UK extends the service to help social landlords with properties that are experiencing reduced demand because of welfare reform, and to help tenants to access national housing options across the country as well as mutual exchanges.
- 2.3 Leeds City Council subscribed to Homefinder UK in August 2014 at a cost of £2160 for 14 months. The subscription was at a reduced rate as a result of our existing membership of the national not for profit House Exchange service which shares the same platform. It is now due for renewal with no increase in the subscription charge. Homefinder is available to both Leeds City Council and its partner Housing Association tenants to register. The scheme was officially launched in Leeds in August 2014 with promotion in the Tenants Newsletter, the Leeds Homes flyer and website, through targeted customer information leaflets as well as staff training.
- 2.4 The scheme is largely funded by the founding authorities in London and we are advised that the Leeds subscription is heavily discounted in comparison although figures are not available to substantiate this.

3 Main issues

- 3.1 Nationally, Homefinder still has the original 14 funding Landlords participating (including Leeds) and a total of 30 landlords have now advertised properties. Participating landlords like Leeds have a number of social landlord partners under the same membership.
- 3.2 There have been 257 properties advertised in total across the UK and 25 lets have come through Homefinder. This is the official total although Homefinder think the figure is likely to be higher as landlords do not always notify them of successful outcomes.
- 3.3 Homefinder now has over 5000 tenants registered from over 100 different landlords and 1,250+ of these have joined since April 2015 illustrating its successful expansion and potential.
- 3.4 Leeds has advertised 44 low demand properties on Homefinder broken down as follows;

Property Type	Number of Leeds props advertised on Homefinder
Sheltered Bedsit	12
1 Bed Sheltered Flat	7
1 Bed High Rise Flat	4
2 Bed High Rise Flat	16
2 Bed House	4
3 Bed House	1

- 3.5 Properties that have not been let after the initial CBL advert are re-advertised simultaneously on Leeds Homes and Homefinder until a suitable customer is found. There has been some interest in LCC properties but no lettings have yet been made, either because the current tenant withdrew their notice or because the offer was made to an applicant through the normal lettings policy.
- 3.6 So far there has been one successful tenant move from Leeds to London using Homefinder. There have been other tenants who have been offered properties out of Leeds though none have taken up the offer.
- 3.7 There are currently 144 Leeds tenants registered on Homefinder compared with 61 in December 2014 indicating a steady increase in the number of applicants registering.
- 3.8 With more options and variation in properties available plus a continued increase in applicants it is anticipated that there will be opportunities for more success over the next 12 month period.
- 3.9 Homefinder works in partnership with the national mutual exchange provider, House Exchange, to which LCC has subscribed since 2009. All tenants registering on Homefinder are now automatically registered on House Exchange to widen their opportunities for rehousing. The annual subscription to

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
No. of exchanges	354	435	440	524	578	406	210 (half year)

- 3.10 In March 2015 the government introduced the “Right to Move” which allows social tenants greater flexibility in moving throughout the UK for employment purposes. Through Right to Move, local authorities may have to free up stock for tenants wanting to move to other parts of the UK to take up employment. It is proposed that local authorities may have to make a minimum percentage of their stock available for this purpose. Homefinder is a quick and easy way for potential tenants to find properties in Leeds and may help LCC fulfil its obligation through Right to Move.
- 3.11 The Housing Advisory Board recently gave their approval to the introduction of a new mobility incentive scheme for tenants and the Homefinder service is complimentary to the promotion of overall tenant mobility.
- 3.12 **Pros and Cons of Homefinder UK**
- Pros**
- Continued commitment by LCC of mobility options for applicants throughout the UK to move to Leeds.
 - To continue to offer social tenants in Leeds the ability to move to other parts of the UK.

- Continued use of Homefinder to advertise low demand properties
- To be part of the expansion of Homefinder over the next 12 months
- The recent increase in more choice and variation of available properties in Leeds will hopefully see further bidding on LCC properties in the next 12 months.
- As Homefinder becomes more established and its recent eased access for tenants' registration, there is likely to be a further increase in registrations and more interest from tenants wanting to move to Leeds.

Cons

- Low take up in initial 12 months resulting in poor value for money.
- No lets of low demand properties in Leeds so far.
- Only one tenant has moved out of Leeds

4 Corporate Considerations

4.1 Consultation and Engagement

- 4.1.1 No formal consultation has taken place but internal feedback from Housing Leeds and external Registered Providers in Leeds has produced support.
- 4.1.2 Councillor Gruen expressed his support for this service last year following a constituent enquiry.

4.2 Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration

- 4.2.1 The proposal in this report has no adverse implications for the Council's Policy on Equality and Diversity, or Cohesion and Integration.
- 4.2.2 An EIA screening document has been completed and is included in the associated documents

4.3 Council policies and Best Council Plan

- 4.3.1 The proposal promotes the vision of the Council's Tenancy Strategy 2013-2015 to create more opportunities for people to live independently in quality, affordable housing.
- 4.3.2 The scheme supports the following best council objectives for 2013 – 17:
- Ensuring high quality public services – promoting mobility improves the housing offer by increasing the choices available to social landlord tenants looking to move to more appropriate housing. The scheme will hopefully improve the economic well-being of local people by releasing housing stock to those in need.
 - To be fair, open and welcoming with an economy that is both prosperous and sustainable so all our communities are successful. This service will support the council's desired outcomes of improving quality of life for residents and

contribute to the economy by welcoming tenants from outside Leeds to take up employment or training opportunities.

- Becoming an efficient and enterprising council – the service will help deliver efficiencies by mitigating the adverse impact of benefit changes, both on individuals affected by Housing Benefit changes and to the council as a social landlord in terms of rent loss due to long term void properties and under occupation.

4.4 Resources and value for money

- 4.4.1 There are no specific resource implications related to this report other than the additional charge to the Leeds Homes budget.
- 4.4.2 Leeds Homes will monitor the service closely to ensure value for money is being achieved from the costs incurred. Savings can be achieved through the timely letting of long term void properties as part of the scheme.

4.5 Legal Implications, Access to Information and Call In

- 4.5.1 There are no specific legal implications related to this report
- 4.5.2 This report is not subject to Council call-in procedure.

4.6 Risk Management

- 4.6.1 The proposal is assessed as posing a low risk to the council as there will be an opportunity to reduce our involvement after six months as the subscription is payable twice yearly.
- 4.6.2 The council has also identified a risk of increased transfers from external social landlords, which could impact on sustainability. This will be mitigated by conducting enhanced tenancy checks prior to making offers.

5 Conclusions

- 5.1 Whilst the first year's membership has been disappointing, continuing with Homefinder for a further 12 months has potential benefits for Leeds. As it becomes more established with more landlords and their tenants registering across the country, there is increased possibility of LCC being able to let its low demand properties through Homefinder. The prospects for our tenants who either want or need to move out of the city will improve and may even release some high demand stock.
- 5.2 The Leeds Homes Team has reviewed procedures on how we use Homefinder resulting in more and varied properties being advertised with more tenants being successfully registered.
- 5.3 The recent announcement that Homefinder will allow tenants of non-participating landlords to register should also increase tenant registration between September and December this year.

5.4 With the Government's Right to Move initiative introducing obligations for local authorities to set aside stock for cross boundary tenant moves, Homefinder will allow LCC to make properties available to tenants wanting to move to Leeds for employment reasons. At the same time we can demonstrate that our tenants are being given the opportunity to move out of Leeds for the same reason.

5.5 With the increase in properties that Leeds are advertising on the site and any social landlord tenant not having to wait to be verified by the landlord, the next 12 months has the potential to see further mobility both in and out of Leeds through the scheme.

6 Recommendations

6.1 It is recommended that Leeds City Council continues with the Homefinder scheme for a further 12 month period at a cost of £2160 after which a further review will determine our future involvement.

7 Background documents¹

7.1 None

¹ The background documents listed in this section are available to download from the Council's website, unless they contain confidential or exempt information. The list of background documents does not include published works.