

DECISION NO:*For Member Services use only*

Concurrence No: 066446

Action under delegated authority of Chief Executive**Action under delegated authority of Director of Finance and Cabinet Member for Finance****Action taken by Chief Executive in consultation with Cabinet Member(s)****X**Subject: **Virement from capital contingency to allow an upgrade to the HomeOption website and online housing register application form**

Signature and designation of officer(s) taking action:

 Chief Executive 26/03/2021
Date

 Director of Finance 26/03/2021
Date

 Head of Finance 24/03/21
Date

Name of Cabinet Member(s) Consulted:

I have been consulted and concur with the proposals set out below:

 Councillor S. Monaghan
 Cabinet Member for Housing and Community Services

 Signature: 29/03/2021
Date:

 Councillor P. Mason
 Cabinet Member for Finance and Business Services

 Signature: 26/03/2021
Date:

Name of any member who has declared a conflict of interest in relation to this decision: _____

THIS DOCUMENT WILL BE PUBLISHED ON THE COUNCIL'S WEBSITE

The report overleaf sets out the decision to be taken, the reasons for the decision, and the details of alternative options, if any, considered and rejected. Officer decisions are available for public inspection, both at the Borough Offices and on the Council's website. Officer decisions are kept for a period of six years at the Borough Offices and for six months on the website after the decision is made. Background papers are available for four years.

RECOMMENDED that: a virement from the 2020/21 capital contingency budget to procure an upgrade to the HomeOption website and online housing register application form be agreed.

Purpose

To recommend that approval be granted for a virement from the capital contingency budget to enable the Council, in partnership with other HEHOC (Herts and Essex Housing Options Consortium) members, to procure an upgrade to the HomeOption website and online application form, provided by Locata Housing Services.

Background

As part of the HEHOC group, the Council procures a Housing IT system from Locata Housing Services. The Council uses Locata's Choice Based Lettings module to receive and manage applications to join the Council's Housing and Transfer Register. Applications are submitted to the Council using an online form on the HomeOption website, the customer can then manage some aspects of their application via the website.

The system is also used to advertise vacant properties, allow housing register applicants to bid online and manage the nomination process with the registered provider.

The upgrade improvements would include bringing the HomeOption website in line with the Government's Digital Standard, improving the security of customers' online accounts and enabling customers to manage more aspects of their application themselves online thus reducing the need for contact with the Council.

The HomeOption website is now outdated and does not meet current government accessibility requirements (the Digital Standard). The Locata Housing System is very widely used by local authorities and the HEHOC consortium, which Broxbourne Council is a part of, is the only scheme that has not implemented this upgrade.

The current system is not responsive and does not work equally well across all devices. For instance, customers cannot easily complete a new application when using a mobile phone.

Locata has an upgraded version available that will allow customers to:

- interact with a more user friendly and responsive system and manage more aspects of their application online
- submit applications from any device
- upload supporting documents at any time – currently only possible when the initial submission is made
- label and categorise supporting documents as they upload
- create a more secure online account using an email address and password rather than the current system which uses an email address and date of birth.

A new website would be more user friendly and easier to navigate so applicants will be able to easily find the information they need. This will reduce the volume of calls

the Housing Advice Service receives from clients about the application process, how to access their accounts and the outcome of the bidding process.

The upgrade will make it easier for customers to self-serve by more easily accessing information about their application, any bids they have placed, provide details about a change of circumstances, complete the annual review and upload the required evidence and documents at any stage. This will also help to reduce the workload of the Housing Register team.

The functionality of the updated software has been assessed in accordance with the Council's design principles used when developing digital customer journeys. Although, it does not integrate into the CXM back office system, it does meet the other principles and achieves the outcomes detailed in the Housing Services Transformation Blueprint. The capacity for integration can be investigated once the upgrade is in place.

Financial, Legal and Risk Management Implications

Financial

The cost to upgrade the HomeOption website is £1,460 per partner (with the total cost to HEHOC being £8,750). The cost to upgrade the online form is £2,850 per partner (with the total cost to HEHOC being £16,875).

The total cost to Broxbourne Council is therefore £4,310.

There is currently £61,000 in the 2020/21 capital contingency budget.

There is also an increase in the annual maintenance costs of £1,666 per year which can be met from within existing revenue budgets.

Legal

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report. The upgrade will enable the Council to more efficiently fulfil legislative requirements relating to maintaining a housing register.

Risk

There is a risk to the Council's reputation from continuing with the current HomeOption website and online form as these do not meet the government's Digital Standard.

The current version of the software being used could also cease to be supported by Locata Housing Services.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

The alternative is to continue with the current website and online form, however for the reasons outlined above this is not advisable.

Contribution to the Council's Objectives and Environmental Sustainability Priorities

This project contributes to the following corporate objective:

Deliver affordable homes for local residents and reduce homelessness.

Conclusion

The improvements that will be achieved by upgrading the HomeOption website and online application form are set out above. It requested that approval be granted to procure the upgrade funded by a virement from the capital contingency budget.

Contact Officer: Lee Anne Hill

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Date 20
January 2021

Action reported to the Cabinet on:
