

EAST HERTS COUNCIL

THE COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 21 OCTOBER 2008

REPORT BY EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR HOUSING AND HEALTH

6. REVIEW OF CHOICE BASED LETTINGS AND HOUSING REGISTER AND ALLOCATIONS POLICY

WARD(S) AFFECTED: ALL

'D' RECOMMENDATION - that (A) the findings of the Choice Based Lettings be considered; and

(B) the Executive be recommended to approve the revisions in the Housing Register and Allocations Policy as detailed in the appendix.

1.0 Purpose/Summary of Report

1.1 This report reviews the impact that the new Choice Based Lettings Scheme has had on Housing Register applicants, our partner organisations and the allocation of social housing in East Herts since its implementation in April 2008.

1.2 To present to Members for consideration recommended changes to the current Housing Register and Allocations Policy that have been hi-lighted by this review.

2.0 Contribution to the Council's Corporate Priorities/Objectives

2.1 **Promoting prosperity and well-being; providing access and opportunities**

Enhance the quality of life, health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities, particularly those who are vulnerable.

Fit for purpose, services fit for you

Deliver customer focused services by maintaining and developing a well managed and publicly accountable organisation.

Leading the way, working together

Deliver responsible community leadership that engages with our partners and the public.

3.0 Background

- 3.1 The Council introduced Choice Based Lettings as a way of allocating all the social housing to which it has nomination rights in April 2008. The Council is in a partnership with five other local authorities, Broxbourne, Epping Forest, Uttlesford, Brentwood, Chelmsford and the scheme is branded under the banner of HomeOptions. The partnership also includes housing associations that have stock and nomination rights with the local authorities. The partnership has a five year contract with Locata to provide a bespoke management system.
- 3.2 As part of the Service planning process it was agreed the Councils Housing Service would conduct a review of the operation of the scheme six months after its launch. This review has been carried out by the Housing Service with the assistance of the main housing associations and a range of significant partner organisations that use the scheme. The main findings of the review are discussed in this report.
- 3.3 The review has hi-lighted the need to amend some parts of the Housing Register and Allocations Policy and these recommended amendments are also discussed within this report.

4.0 Report

- 4.1 The Government's aim is that social housing tenants should have more choice and control over where they live. They believe that this is the best way to build communities that are stable, viable and inclusive. They have set a target that by 2010 all local authorities should have adopted a Choice Based Letting system.
- 4.2 Choice Based Lettings was launched in East Herts in April 2008. The scheme works by advertising, every two weeks, the empty social housing properties that are available to let in a freesheet and on the internet. The scheme is available to both new social tenants and also to existing housing association tenants wishing to transfer tenancies; they are referred to as 'Homeseekers' under the scheme. Applicants can express their interest in a property by registering a bid using the internet, text, telephone, or by coupon. The majority of bids 87% have been received by internet. Since the introduction of

the scheme in April 2008 247 properties have been advertised and 7,284 bids have been placed by prospective tenants.

- 4.3 To review the scheme officers in the Housing Service looked at the following issues:
- the views of the housing associations whose properties are let through the scheme
 - the views of agencies who support and advocate on behalf of prospective tenants
 - access to the scheme for vulnerable clients and rural communities
 - the effect on the existing Housing Register and Allocations Policy
 - current National Guidance and future good practice

4.4 Views of Housing Associations and Advocacy Agencies

The Housing Service wrote to all the housing associations with a significant amount of social housing in the district and also a number of support and advocate agencies that the Housing Options Team regularly engage with inviting them to a meeting on 9 September 2008. Those who were unable to make the meeting were asked to forward any comments regarding the CBL scheme so that they could be included in the review. A list of organisations who contributed to the review is included at paragraph 5.0. The opportunity was taken to review all aspects of the scheme from initial registration, the assessment of an applicant, the bidding process, and the offer of accommodation and suggested future improvements.

- 4.5 The feedback received during the review process was extremely positive with all the organisations saying that both their staff and applicants found the scheme easy to use and that they felt that it was an open and transparent system. They particularly like the system of feeding back on lettings made as they felt that this enables applicants to make more realistic choices when they bid for homes. In addition two agencies advised that applicants, that under the old scheme would have had very little chance of being offered a property, had been successful under CBL. These 'successes' were in the stock that is generally more difficult to let and as such would have involved a lot of work for the Housing Options Team to find a suitable applicant and may therefore have remained empty for a considerable period of time.

- 4.6 Riversmead Housing Association reported an actual increase in their turnaround or void times for empty homes of approximately two weeks. South Anglia are unsure at this time of the impact of CBL

on void times. The Housing Service and the housing associations are reviewing individual systems and joint working practices to see where processing time can be reduced. However it was agreed that there has been a significant reduction in refusal rates and that this may have a mitigating effect on rent loss. Both Riversmead and South Anglia housing associations intend to install a computer into their reception areas that both future tenants and current social tenants will be able to use to access CBL.

4.7 Vulnerable Clients

The issue of vulnerable applicants and their access and ability to use the scheme was also discussed. A Choice Based Letting Scheme (CBL) requires 'active participation' by applicants and there could be concerns that the interests of the potentially disadvantaged might not be protected. The Housing Options Team are always willing to help any applicant that does not understand the scheme and those vulnerable applicants that do not have any relatives, advocates or agencies that can support them can be flagged on the computer system as requiring monitoring and/or additional assistance. There are currently 7 vulnerable clients being supported by the team and they are contacted when a potentially suitable property is due to be advertised. In addition the Housing Options Team have identified and targeted high risk groups and written to them individually. For example they recently wrote to all applicants over 60 with high points who have not bid and asked them whether they were aware of the scheme and if they required assistance to access it. Approximately half responded and the Housing Options Team have individually discussed the system with each of them. This exercise will shortly be carried out with all general needs applicants who have over 100 points and have not bid.

4.8 Rural Communities

East Herts has a significant number of applicants in rural communities and when the scheme was being devised great care was taken to ensure that the advertising and bidding process is widely available. The freesheet is circulated to the libraries, including the mobile library service, CABs and sent to a number of agencies that request it. It can also be sent free to applicants, for instance those that are house bound and do not have internet access either directly themselves or via a close relative. Applicants can also choose to have the freesheet sent to their home address for a period of six months for a small charge that covers costs. Internet access is also available for free to residents in the libraries and at the Council offices and will soon be available at Riversmead and South Anglia's offices.

4.9 Amendments to the Housing Register and Allocations Policy

The internal review has identified some areas of the Housing register and Allocations policy that require amendments to ensure the best use of the vacant homes that become available and the most advantageous use of this resource. In addition, since June 2008, both of our stock transfer housing associations have been part of the Council's Common Housing Register and therefore the majority of existing social housing tenants in East Herts requiring a transfer are on the Council's Housing Register and can bid for alternative accommodation through CBL.

4.10 There are five significant amendments to the policy:

- The addition of supplementary points for homeless applicants that are in either our own hostels or women's aid for each month, after 3 months of being accepted for a housing duty, where they have been unsuccessful in the bidding process. Under the old system applicants that were homeless but did not have high points, maybe because they had a low medical priority, would be made an offer of accommodation to move them on from the hostel in recognition of it being unsuitable long-term accommodation and also to keep applicants moving through the homeless process. Under CBL this discretion is not available and so the recommendation is to have an option to supplement the points that can be awarded.
- A revision of the definition of Local Connection and the associated award of points to ensure that it is compliant with homelessness legislation and not open to legal challenge. Also the reduction in Local Connection points where the only connection with East Herts is through employment.
- Increasing the number of points for medical priority. This is to ensure that sufficient weighting is given to reflect the preference for rehousing that should be given to these applicants and also to reflect cumulative need where more than one applicant in a household has a medical condition that is exacerbated by the current housing situation.
- The expansion of the award of Social Points to include applicants needing a management transfer from their existing housing association home to another for example due to violence.
- Delay the award of 20 Transfer points until applicants have held the assured tenancy or introductory tenancy of their current home for one year. This is to prevent applicants accepting a less than suitable bid and then immediately

placing themselves back onto the Housing Register as a transfer applicant and being able to bid again. In addition a number of housing associations now give Introductory Tenancies to new social tenants for example, South Anglia and Paradigm housing associations and these tenants are not eligible to transfer their tenancy until they have successfully conducted it for one year and it is made into an assured tenancy. This therefore provides an equitable service for all new social tenancies in the District.

- 4.11 A copy of the proposed revised Housing Register and Allocations Policy is attached at Appendix 'A6' (Pages 6.9 - 6.35). These amendments to the policy have been hi-lighted.
- 4.12 The Housing Service is currently drafting a memorandum of Understanding for consultation with our partner housing associations. The document will agree levels of service between ourselves regarding the Housing Register, the operational working of Choice Based Lettings and agree methods for the resolution of disputes.
- 4.13 Current National Guidance and Future Best Practice
The Review group also discussed future policy direction and best practice. The Housing Options Team are part of the Home Options User Group, whose membership includes the five other local authorities and also local RSLs, that meets every two months with Locata to discuss possible enhancements to the system as well as day to day issues. There is also a National User Group supported by Locata that one member of the User Group attends. The system has proved to be reliable and easy to use and its significant reporting abilities has enable the Housing Options Team to collect and report information on applications where they were previously unable to do so for example on ethnicity.
- 4.14 The recent Housing and Regeneration legislation reflects the Government's wish that local authorities link up individual schemes into sub-regional or regional ones. This emphasises their key themes of increased mobility within the housing sector and linking this to employment opportunities and worklessness. They have also included further aims that local authorities should extend their schemes to cover all social housing, shared ownership, low cost home ownership and private rented accommodation. The long term aim is to widen housing choice and options so that people can chose housing that extends beyond the boundaries of their local authorities.

5.0 Consultation

5.1 The following organisations were invited and attended the CBL Review Group; Riversmead , South Anglia, Aldwyck and Paradigm housing associations; Vale House Stabilisation Unit and the YMCA. The following organisations were invited but unable to attend but sent positive feedback; Hertfordshire Probation Service, CAB and Women's Aid.

5.2 In addition the revised Housing Register and Allocations Policy has been sent to partner RSLs, CAB, Shelter, YMCA, the Probation Service and others. Their views have been taken into account when drafting the recommended amendments; any further comments received will be tabled at the meeting.

5.3 All applicants that contact the Housing Options Team and receive a service are sent a pro-forma asking for their views on how well they feel their service request was dealt with. This is monitored by the Health and Housing Business Support Team. The scheme has only just begun and it is the intention to discuss results and feedback at team meetings. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the scheme has been very well received by those using the scheme, both potential future tenants and existing ones, to express an interest in vacant housing association homes.

6.0 Legal Implications

6.1 The Housing Register and Allocations Policy can be subject to legal challenge. Housing Officers keep up to date with recent case law and other related legislation to minimise challenges.

7.0 Financial Implications

7.1 The Council has a budget provision of £41,600 for 2008/09 for Choice Based Lettings. This provision is for the maintenance and running of the system with Locata, the printing and distribution costs of the magazine and user guides, and a provision for the cost of the freephone number. Currently none of the housing associations in East Herts advertising and letting their properties through CBL pay any contribution towards these costs. The average unit cost per advert, for the design, printing and distribution is currently £48.

7.2 This report has no additional financial implications.

8.0 Human Resource Implications

8.1 The introduction of Choice Based Lettings and the Common Housing Register has increased the work load of the Housing Options Team. There are two main reasons for this. Since the introduction of the Council's Common Housing Register, the Housing Options team have begun managing applications from existing East Herts housing association social tenants requiring a transfer. This has resulted in approximately an additional 1,000 applications onto the Register. In addition the Choice Based Letting System has 'publicised' and raised the public's awareness the work of the Housing Options Team and many more people are contacting the team to discuss their housing options.

9.0 Risk Management Implications

9.1 An efficient and equitable system is necessary to allocate housing to applicants.

Background Papers

None

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