

Report to Housing Scrutiny Panel

Date of meeting: 22 January 2008

Portfolio: Housing – Councillor D Stallan

Subject: Choice Based Lettings – Update

Officer contact for further information: Roger Wilson ext. 4419

Committee Secretary: Adrian Hendry, ext.4246



Recommendations:

That the Housing Scrutiny Panel notes the progress made on the Choice Based Lettings Scheme since its implementation on 19 November 2007.

Report

1. On 19 November 2007, Housing introduced its new Choice Based Lettings Scheme, which was necessary to meet the requirements of Government that such a scheme be in place by 2010 at the latest. The implementation of the scheme proved very successful with the Council being in a position to go live in the first phase. Staff worked closely with the external Choice Based Lettings Agency Locata to ensure that the first editions of the free-sheets and Scheme User Guides were produced to a high standard and the Website was fully operational.
2. Under the scheme, all vacant social rented properties are now advertised to applicants on the Housing Register in a two-weekly publication, website, and other media giving details of location, type, rent, service charge, council tax band and landlord of the available accommodation. Applicants would apply for a property by “expressing an interest” in up to a maximum of three properties for which they have an assessed need, either in person, by post, telephone, text, email or Internet.
3. At the end of the two weekly cycle, the Council analyses the “expressions of interests” received and allocates each property following a prioritisation and selection process in accordance with its own Allocations Scheme. In general terms, the property would be offered to the applicant in the highest band, who has been registered the longest, who had “expressed an interest” for the specific vacancy. The results of the “expressions of interest” on each property advertised is then published in the next periodic publication, setting out the number received on each property, as well as the Band and registration date of the successful applicant. This helps applicants to see how long the successful applicant has been waiting and gives greater transparency in the allocation of accommodation, as each applicant would be able to clearly understand how the scheme works.
4. The Council is working in partnership with the following five authorities:
 - Brentwood Borough Council
 - Chelmsford Borough Council
 - Broxbourne District Council
 - Uttlesford District Council
 - East Herts District Council

5. Two other partner authorities being Uttlesford District Council and Brentwood Borough Council also implemented their schemes in the first phase on 19 November 2007. We will be joined by the remaining three Councils in the second phase in 2008.

6. Arrangements are being made for a press launch including the Housing Portfolio Holder and the Director of Housing being photographed handing over the property keys to the first applicant being allocated a property through the scheme.

7. At the time of writing the report, three two-weekly cycles have been completed. An Information Bulletin for the period 19 November 2007 to 11 January 2008 is attached as an appendix to the report.

8. As can be seen, 132 advertisements were placed in the free-sheets (with some properties being advertised on more than one occasion) with 3,593 expressions of interest being made, being an average of around 27 expressions of interest for each property advertised. Some smaller properties attracted low interest with larger properties attracting up to 130 expressions of interest. Almost 90% of applicants expressing an interest in properties did so over the Internet. The Information Bulletin also shows the number of expressions of interest made by applicants in each priority Band. The total number of applicants participation in the scheme during the first three cycles was 588 being 16% of all applicants on the Housing Register.

9. The Panel are asked to note the planned improvements to the Choice Based Lettings Scheme which are set out in the following table.

Planned Improvements	Target Date
Chelmsford Borough Council and East Herts District Council joining the scheme	April 2008
Broxbourne District Council joining the scheme	July 2008
Undertaking a survey of all applicants who have not yet participated in the scheme to determine the reason and in particular to ensure that vulnerable applicants are not being disadvantaged	March 2008
The Housing Scrutiny Panel to undertake a six month review of the scheme	June 2008
To explore the possibility with the external Choice Based Lettings Agency Locata, of introducing a facility whereby applicants can make automated expressions of interest	March 2008

10. All Scheme Managers have been given lists of all older residents who are on the Housing Register. When visiting these residents they will ensure they fully understand how to participate in the Choice Based Lettings Scheme.

Consultation

11. No consultation undertaken.

Resource implications:

Budget provision: £40,000 per annum

Personnel: Within existing resources

Land: None

Community Plan/BVPP reference: N/A

Relevant statutory powers: Housing Act 1985 and 1996

Background papers: Cabinet and Portfolio Holder reports on request

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications: N/A

Key Decision reference: N/A