

Report to Housing Scrutiny Panel

Date of meeting: 3 July 2008

Portfolio: Housing – Councillor D Stallan

Officer contact for further information: Roger Wilson ext. 4419
Committee Secretary: Adrian Hendry

Subject: Choice Based Lettings – 6 month Review



Recommendations/Decisions Required:

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

Report

Background

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 is 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 were joined by two of the remaining three councils in the second phase in March 2008. Broxbourne District Council is expected to “go live” in July 2008.

Information Bulletin – Analysis of Expressions of Interest

6. An Information Bulletin for the period 19 November 2007 to 19 May 2008 is attached as Appendix One to the report.

7. As can be seen, 252 properties have been allocated during the period. Some properties are advertised on more than one occasion as they are difficult to let (particularly those designated for older persons’ use) which has resulted in 469 advertisements being placed in the free-sheets. With 15,433 expressions of interest being made, this is an average of around 33 expressions of interest each time a property is advertised. Most properties, apart from the difficult to let older persons properties referred to, attract in excess of 100 expressions of interest. Almost 86% 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. Around 36% of Applicants participated in the scheme during the first 6 months.

8. At its meeting on 22 January 2008, the Panel agreed that a survey be undertaken of all applicants on the Housing Register on their views on the new Scheme. Two surveys have been undertaken. Firstly, a questionnaire has been sent to all those who have participated in the HomeOption Scheme and a separate survey form sent to all those that have yet to express and interest in any property. The results have raised a number of issues as follows:

Survey of Applicants who have not Participated in the HomeOptions Scheme

9. Around 2,660 survey questionnaires were sent to those who had not participated in the scheme, with responses being received from 726 applicants (27%). A copy of the results and a list of comments received to some of the questions are attached at Appendix Two.

10. It is of some concern that 220 applicants stated that they were not aware of the HomeOption Scheme. Based on this sample, this infers that there is potential for around 800 applicants (20% of all applicants on the Housing Register) not being aware of the Scheme. The survey also shows that a large number of applicants have not kept their Scheme User Guide, do not know their housing application registration number, have not seen one of the free-sheets and have not looked at the website.

11. One of the main reasons for undertaking a separate survey of those not participating was to explore if there were any vulnerable people who may be having difficulty using the Scheme. All those applicants who have stated their housing reference number on the survey form (68 applicants) will be contacted and be given every assistance in participating in the Scheme. Furthermore, a letter will be sent to all those who have not participated to date offering assistance and explaining again about the Scheme. In addition, a summary leaflet of the Scheme User Guide will be produced with an associated poster which will be placed in public areas around the District, and an item will be placed in the tenants magazine Housing News which is sent to all tenants and applicants setting out the results of the survey, giving details of how they can get assistance in participating in the Scheme.

12. The Panel is reminded that a great deal of effort has been made in making provisions for vulnerable people who may have difficulty in using the Scheme. All Scheme Managers have been given lists of all older residents who are on the Housing Register. When visiting

these residents, they are ensuring they fully understand how to participate in the Choice Based Lettings Scheme. In addition, two events were arranged for external agencies that support vulnerable people, so they had a full understanding of the scheme. When any new applicant joins the Housing Register, they are given an information pack which gives detail of the scheme and how assistance can be obtained.

Survey of Applicants who have Participated in the HomeOptions Scheme

13. Around 1,140 survey questionnaires were sent to those who have participated in the scheme, with responses being received from 340 applicants (30%). A copy of the results and a list of comments received to some of the questions are attached at Appendix Three.

14. As can be seen, 97.9% stated that the Scheme User Guide was easy to follow, with 96.1% saying that they had enough information about the HomeOption Scheme. Generally, the survey results show that those participating in the HomeOption scheme found it easy to use and understood how it works.

15. The Housing Scrutiny Panel is asked to review progress made on the Choice Based Lettings Scheme since its implementation on 19 November 2007.

Consultation

16. No consultation undertaken. The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation will be provided with the report for information at their next meeting on 22 July 2008.

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, Portfolio Holder reports, Scheme User Guides and Free-sheets on request

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

Key Decision reference: N/A