

Epping Forest District Council

**HOUSING DIRECTORATE STRATEGY ON
ALLOCATIONS**

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This strategy relates to the Council's duties in respect of the Housing Register, garage waiting lists, tenancy surrenders where vacant possession is given, the allocation of properties and garages, offers of tenancies and mutual exchanges.
- 1.2. The Council does not have a statutory duty to keep a Housing Register but has chosen to do so.
- 1.3. The Council does have a statutory duty to have an 'allocations scheme' for determining priorities for allocating social housing. It is required to ensure that a summary of the scheme is available on request, free of charge, and that a copy of the full scheme is available for inspection. Registered social landlords (RSLs) with accommodation in the District and Town and Parish Councils must be consulted on changes to the allocations scheme.
- 1.4. Major changes must be notified to applicants on the Housing Register which is undertaken through the tenants' magazine Housing News. This must be done 'within a reasonable period of time', with the effect of changes being explained to applicants.
- 1.5. The Council may only allocate social housing in accordance with its published scheme. Under the provisions of the Homelessness Act 2002 social housing must not be allocated to certain categories of applicant. Certain other categories of applicant must be awarded reasonable preference for accommodation. The allocations scheme must include a statement of the Council's policy, either to offer housing applicants choice of accommodation or to give them the opportunity to express a preference about the accommodation to be allocated to them. The Council's HomeOption choice based lettings scheme (details of which are set out in section 8 of this strategy) ensures all applicants have choice of accommodation.
- 1.6. This strategy sets out how the allocations service will be delivered and monitored. The service will be provided by the Housing Options Section within the Council's Housing Directorate.
- 1.7. The Council holds the Investors in People Award. The Housing Directorate holds ISO 9001:2000 quality management system accreditation and has achieved Charter Mark status in customer excellence.
- 1.8. This strategy was formulated in consultation with representatives of the Tenants and Leaseholders' Federation and the Council's Housing Scrutiny Panel. It was formally approved by the Council's Housing Portfolio Holder on xxxxxx.

2. Background to the Service

- 2.1. The Housing Allocations Scheme is reviewed annually by the Cabinet to ensure that it remains equitable, relevant and responsive to change.

- 2.2. It allows housing applicants to express a choice about the localities in which they would like to live through the HomeOption choice based lettings scheme, where applicants express an interest in vacant Council properties advertised in a free-sheet or on the website.
- 2.3. The Housing Allocations Scheme includes a banding system which is used to broadly prioritise housing applications, with applications being shortlisted for each property for which they have expressed an interest within date order in each band.
- 2.4. The scheme provides for applications for housing from persons not currently resident in the Epping Forest District. However, due to very high demand for vacancies in the general needs housing stock, the Council is usually only able to assist such applicants who are over 60 years of age and willing to accept small units of accommodation in sheltered or grouped housing schemes for older people for which there is less local demand.
- 2.5. The Council subscribes to the HomeSwapper national mutual exchange scheme where tenants can seek a mutual exchange.
- 2.6. The Housing Options Section offers housing advice and assistance, details of which are set out in the Housing Service Strategy on Housing Advice.
- 2.7. The Council owns around 3,000 garages which are let on an individual basis. Waiting lists are maintained by the Home Options Section and are prioritised in date order, from which vacancies are allocated.
- 2.8. Tenancy surrenders, where vacant possession is being given, form part of the allocations process for both properties and garages. This process is managed through the Housing Directorate's integrated Open Housing Management System (OHMS), computer system.

3. Coverage

3.1 In summary, allocations encompasses –

- tenancy surrenders where vacant possession is being given on properties and garages
- allocations and offers of vacant properties through the HomeOption choice based lettings scheme
- allocations and offers of tenancies for vacant garages
- signing up of applicants for new tenancies
- administration of the Housing Register, nominations for properties owned by registered social landlords, the HomeSwapper Mutual Exchange Scheme and garage waiting lists.

4. Relationship with other Documents

4.1. This Strategy forms part of the Council's overall Housing Strategy and the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan.

- 4.2. The Council has adopted a Housing Charter, and Service Standards which set out the promises made to its customers, and gives full details of the services that they can expect to receive. The performance against the standards are reported annually to the Tenants and Leaseholder's Federation and the Housing Scrutiny Panel.
- 4.3. The Council follows the guide set out in the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice in Rented Housing.
- 4.4. The Council follows advice from central government set out in circulars including the Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities and Allocation of Accommodation Code of Guidance to Local Housing Authorities.
- 4.5. The Housing Directorate produces its Housing Allocations Scheme and a summary leaflet, which sets out the Council's policies on these matters.
- 4.6. An application pack for the Housing Register is provided including: a summary of the Housing Allocations Scheme, entitled "Moving Home with the Council" which includes advice on mutual exchanges, the formal application including guidance notes, and an information booklet.
- 4.7. All applicants are also sent a HomeOption Scheme User Guide which gives detailed information on how to participate in the Council's HomeOption choice based lettings scheme and also suggests other housing options. In addition, a fortnightly free-sheet is available for all applicants on the Housing Register which advertises all available Council and housing association vacancies in which applicants can express an interest.
- 4.8. Information for tenants in respect of tenancy surrenders, complaints and appeals procedures, as well as the right to assign by way of mutual exchange, is contained in a booklet, Your Rights and the Conditions of Your Tenancy.
- 4.9. The booklet, Renting a Garage, explains how to apply for a Council garage.
- 4.10. The following Government guides are made available
- Assured and assured short-hold tenancies – a guide for landlords
 - Letting your home
 - Letting Rooms in Your Home –a guide for landlords and their tenants
 - Assured and assured short-hold tenancies – a guide for tenants
- 4.11. Information about these services is also available on the Council's website at www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/housing.

5. Aims and Objectives

5.1. The Aim of the Council's Strategy on Allocations is:

"To comply with legislation governing the allocation of social housing, operating in an efficient, fair and transparent way, optimising the use of available resources to meet housing need as far as possible."

5.2. The aims of this strategy will be met by:

- a) Reviewing the Housing Allocations Scheme annually, including monitoring both the ethnicity of applicants on the Housing Register and those who have been re-housed.
- b) Maintaining a Housing Register, utilising the OHMS computerised system.
- c) Assessing and prioritising applications for accommodation in accordance with the Housing Allocations Scheme; requiring applicants to complete and supply appropriate documentation to support their applications, referring medical submissions to the Council's Medical Advisers, arranging for applications for re-housing for welfare or hardship reasons to be considered by the Housing Options Manager in conjunction with one of the Council's Medical Advisers and a Housing Options Officer, making home visits and requesting special reports as necessary, and arranging special needs or occupational therapy (O.T.) assessments in appropriate cases.
- d) Notifying housing applicants of decisions affecting their application and of their statutory rights, advising them of their priority Banding, making applicants' files available to them on written request, and notifying applicants on the Housing Register of major changes to the Housing Allocations Scheme
- e) Recording property and garage surrenders on the OHMS system and monitoring the progress of voids, including the receipt and return of keys.
- f) Allocating vacancies and offering tenancies based on property short-lists in accordance with the Allocations Scheme, and arranging for prospective tenants to view vacant Council properties before they are ready for letting, signing up applicants for Council tenancies and issuing decorating vouchers.
- g) Making available, free of charge, copies of the Allocations Scheme in either full or summary version.
- h) Making information available to applicants on how to join the computerised HomeSwapper national mutual exchange scheme free of charge.
- i) Monitoring RSL vacancies in the District and making nominations.
- j) Offering advice and financial incentives to the Council's tenants transferring from any larger to smaller Council accommodation.
- k) Maintaining date order waiting lists for garages and offering vacant garages to applicants at the top of each list.
- l) Working with partner agencies such as the Learning Disabilities Local Action Group, Domestic Violence Forum, Children and Young Peoples Strategic Partnership, Single Accommodation for Epping Forest (SAFE) project, and In Touch Support.
- m) Monitoring staff performance against set targets.

6. Statutory Requirements

- 6.1. Part II of the Housing Act 1985 governs the provision of housing accommodation and related development by a district council and the periodical review of housing needs in the area.
- 6.2. Part IV of the Housing Act 1985 regulates the provision of information to tenants about the express terms of their tenancies and related matters, and provides for assignments by way of mutual exchange.
- 6.3. The Landlord and Tenant Act 1985 sets out a number of provisions relating to tenancies and leases.
- 6.4. The Protection from Eviction Act 1977 governs the period of notice required from tenants surrendering Council housing tenancies.
- 6.5. Part VI of the Housing Act 1996 as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002 governs the allocation of social housing. This is supported by the Allocation of Accommodation Code of Guidance to Local Authorities to which local housing authorities must have regard. The Immigration and Asylum Act 1996 is relevant to classes of applicant disqualified from applying for social housing.
- 6.6. The requirements of the Race Relations Act 1976, Sex Discrimination Act, Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the Code of Practice in Rented Housing apply to the allocation of accommodation.
- 6.7. The Homelessness Act 2002 gives a housing applicant certain rights to information relating to the assessment of their application and decisions made. It also provides for the right to request a review of certain decisions.
- 6.8. Personal information held by the Housing Options Section is protected by the Data Protection Act 1998 which, together with the Housing Act 1996, allows individuals to access any information held about them.
- 6.9. The provisions of the Rent (Agricultural Act) 1976 are relevant to some Housing Register applicants.
- 6.10. Under the terms of the Children Act 1989, an authority responsible for social care may request the help of a housing authority in discharging its duties towards a 'child in need'. A local housing authority must comply with any such request if it is compatible with its own functions and does not unduly prejudice the discharge of its own functions.
- 6.11. The Human Rights Act 1998 is most likely to be engaged for housing needs issues in respect of Articles 6, 8 and 14. These relate to the right to a fair trial (review and appeals procedures), respect for private and family life, home and correspondence (confidentiality) and discrimination (equal opportunities).
- 6.12. The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 sets out the responsibilities of the Council as an employer in respect of the health and safety of staff.

7. Client Consultation, Information & Involvement

- 7.1. Consultation in respect of major changes to the Housing Allocations Scheme is undertaken with RSLs, Town and Parish Councils, Citizens Advice Bureaux and the Tenants and Leaseholders' Federation prior to consideration by the Cabinet.
- 7.2. Housing Register applicants may be informed on an individual basis of changes that affect them with items of general interest being publicised in the tenant's magazine Housing News which is sent on a quarterly basis to tenants and, when appropriate, all housing applicants, to keep them informed of important issues.

8. General Principles

HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme

- 8.1. In November 2007, the Council introduced the "HomeOption" choice based lettings scheme which has proved to be very successful. Under the scheme applicants are able to express and interest in advertised social housing vacancies. The Council are part of the Herts and Essex Housing Options Consortium (HEHOC) which includes the following partner authorities:
- Chelmsford Borough Council
 - Broxbourne Borough Council
 - East Hertfordshire District Council
 - Brentwood Borough Council
 - Uttlesford District Council
 - Epping Forest District Council
- 8.2 Currently, each authority within the Consortium operate their own local Allocations Scheme.
- 8.3 The implementation of a Choice Based Lettings Scheme was necessary in order to meet the requirements of Government that such a scheme be in place by 2010 at the latest.
- 8.4 Under the scheme, all vacant social rented properties are 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 apply for a property by "expressing an interest" either in person, by post, telephone, text, email or Internet. Limits to the number of "expressions" per applicant are in place, which include restricting "expressions" for properties to those households, which only have an assessed need for a particular property type.
- 8.5 At the end of the two weekly cycle, "expressions of interests" received are prioritised for each property in accordance with the 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.

- 8.6 Applicants refused inclusion on the Housing Register or dissatisfied with certain decisions in respect of their housing applications have a statutory right to request a review of the decision. Reviews will be conducted by the Assistant Director of Housing (Operations) or the Housing Options Manager, subject to their not having been involved in the original decision. If applicants are dissatisfied with a decision following the statutory review they will be able to take their case on a non-statutory basis to the Housing Review and Appeals Panel, comprising five elected Members.
- 8.7. Any applicants dissatisfied with the way in which the service has been delivered can make a Complaint under the Council's Compliments and Complaints procedure.
- 8.8. The performance of the Housing Options Section will be monitored under the quarterly performance management meetings chaired by the Director of Housing.

9. Future Developments

9.1. The following analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis) forms the foundation for future action:

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Successful choice based lettings scheme • Efficient and tested processes • Good relations with RSLs and others • Annual review of the Housing Allocations Scheme • Strong performance monitoring • Wide variety of publications • Ethnic monitoring of applicants and allocations • Easy access to staff by telephone, e-mail and in person • Detailed information on service on the Council's Web-site • Better opportunities for tenants to mutual exchange through the new (free) HomeSwapper service • Charter Mark, ISO & IIP accreditations 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shortage of sites to provide the required amount of affordable housing
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extending the opportunity for applicants to move to other areas under Choice Based Mobility "housingmoves" scheme • Increased flexibility for applicants under the Government's proposals "fair and flexible" which may bring changes to certain rules • Increased cross boundary working through HEHOC • Implementation of new service standards • Updated Equality Impact Assessments following changes in legislation 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disposal of housing stock through RTB and increased demand, far outstrips RSL new build • Possibility of serious assault on staff due to increased anti-social behaviour

10. Action Plan

Action	Lead Officer	Timescale	Resource Implications
Implement the "housingmoves" Choice Based Mobility Scheme	Assistant Director of Housing (Operations)	December 2009	Existing Resources
Implement the revised Service Standards for the Housing Options Section	Housing Options Manager	December 2009	Existing Resources
Review Housing Allocations Scheme in accordance with the Government's new "fair and flexible" proposals	Assistant Director of Housing (Operations)	March 2010	Existing resources
Review the Equality Impact Assessment and ensure it is compliant with the new legislation	Assistant Director of Housing (Operations)	March 2010	Existing Resources
Consider cross-boundary working through HEHOC	Assistant Director of Housing (Operations)	March 2010	Existing Resources
Make necessary preparations for the Government's short notice inspections	Assistant Director of Housing (Operations)	April 2010	Existing Resources

Action	Lead Officer	Timescale	Resource Implications
Consider de-designating further difficult to let properties from older people's use on housing estates	Assistant Director of Housing (Operations)	April 2010	Existing Resources
Introduce on-line housing applications as part of the OHMs upgrade	Housing Options Manager	January 2011	Existing resources

11. Resourcing the Strategy

11.1. Housing Options staff delivering this Strategy in 2009/2010 is approximately 8.75 FTE which includes the staffing levels detailed in paragraph 12.2, and other officers time spent on the service. The projection for the number of staff required to deliver the Strategy the and the following three years is detailed in the following table:

Staff Resource Projections				
Posts	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Housing Options Staff (FTE)	8.75	8.75	8.75	8.75

11.2 The following table details the estimated proportion of Housing Options staff time spent on the service for 2009/2010:

Staff Resources Breakdown	
Posts	FTE
Assistant Director of Housing (Operations)	0.25
Housing Options Manager	0.5
Asst Housing Options Manager (Allocations)	1.0
Housing Options Officers	3.0
Assistant Housing Options Officers	4.0
Total	8.75 FTE

12. Key Targets and Performance Monitoring

12.1 The Council will monitor performance and compliance with this Strategy through quarterly performance management meetings chaired by the Director of Housing with the Assistant Director of Housing (Operations) and the Housing Options Manager, to ensure that a number of targets, which include the following are met:

Key Targets & Performance					
Performance Indicator	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
	(Target)	(Target)	(Target)	(Target)	(Target)
Average time taken in days to re-let local authority housing	40	35	30	28	28
Percentage rent loss from void properties	1.9%	1.6%	1.3%	1.2%	1.2%
Number of properties not let after 3 weeks with the Housing Options Section	10	8	6	4	4
Average re-let time in days from when keys received in the Housing Options Section	15	13	11	9	9
Number of applications not registered	0	0	0	0	0

13. Reviewing the Strategy

13.1. This strategy will be reviewed in consultation with the Housing Scrutiny Panel and the Epping Forest Tenants and Leaseholders' Federation by December 2012.