

Report to Housing Scrutiny Panel

Date of meeting: 25 March 2010

Portfolio: Housing – Councillor D. Stallan

Subject: HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme – Progress Report

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Committee Secretary: Mark Jenkins (01992 56 4607)



Recommendations/Decisions Required:

That the Housing Scrutiny Panel reviews progress made on the HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme, and considers the Housing Register Activity Report, both for the period January 2009 to January 2010.

Report:

1. At its meeting on 21 January 2010, the Panel considered the updated Housing Service Strategy on Allocations. The Panel asked for a progress report on the HomeOption choice based lettings scheme, including all of the provisions being made to support vulnerable applicants, hence the need for this report.

2. The Choice Based Lettings Scheme was introduced in November 2007, which was necessary to meet the requirements of Government that such a scheme be in place by 2010 at the latest. The scheme is administered by the external Choice Based Lettings agency Locata Housing Services (LHS). Under the scheme, all vacant social rented properties are advertised to applicants 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” 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 a member of the Herts and Essex Housing Options Consortium (HEHOC) which jointly operates the Choice Based Lettings Scheme and consists of following six authorities:

- Brentwood Borough Council
- Chelmsford Borough Council
- Broxbourne District Council
- Epping Forest District Council
- Uttlesford District Council
- East Herts District Council

HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Information Bulletin

5. The HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Information Bulletin for the period 16 January 2009 to 22 January 2010 is attached as an appendix to the report.

6. As can be seen, 477 properties (including RSL lets) have been allocated during the period. Some properties have been advertised on more than one occasion as they are difficult to let (particularly those designated for older persons' use) which has resulted in 607 advertisements being placed in the Free-sheets. With 42,374 expressions of interest being made, this is an average of around 70 expressions of interest each time a property is advertised. Most properties, apart from the difficult to let older person's properties referred to, attract in excess of 200 expressions of interest. Almost 90% of applicants expressing an interest in properties did so over the Internet.

7. Around 65% of applicants have participated in the scheme during the period. LHS confirm that, nationally, this is a high participation rate. Some applicants may not participate for a variety of reasons including:

- Joining the register to accumulate time on the list, should they want Council accommodation in the future.
- Homeless applicants who are under a deferment period.
- Applicants who wish to move to smaller accommodation and may be biding their time until a property becomes available that meets all of their aspirations.

Housing Register Activity Report

8. The Housing Register Activity Report for the same period, which is also attached, shows the number of expressions of interest made by all applicants, the number of lets and refusals (excluding RSL properties) and number of applicants in each of the six priority Bands. At the time of writing there are 4,853 applicants on the Housing Register 714 (15%) of which are existing Council and RSL tenants who are seeking to transfer.

Surveys of Applicants in 2008

9. In 2008, two surveys of all housing applicants were undertaken. The first survey was of those who were not participating in the Scheme. 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) were contacted and given every assistance in participating in the Scheme. Furthermore, a letter was sent to all those who had not participated to date, offering assistance and explaining again about the Scheme. Two events were arranged for external agencies that support vulnerable people.

10. A second survey of those who have participated in the scheme was also undertaken, with 97.9% stating that the Scheme User Guide was easy to follow, and 96.1% saying that they had enough information about the HomeOption Scheme. Generally, the survey results showed at that time that those participating in the HomeOption scheme found it easy to use and understood how it works.

11. A further survey will be undertaken later this year.

Support Currently Provided to Vulnerable Applicants

12. The Allocations Team within the Housing Options Section offers a great deal of support to vulnerable applicants including:

- Post-survey actions in 2008, as set out in Paragraph 9 of the report.
- A list of all vulnerable applicants is maintained. The list is compiled by referrals made by Scheme Managers, other Housing Directorate staff and external agencies.
- All Scheme Managers are given lists of older tenants they visit who are on the Housing Register. When visiting these residents, they are ensuring the residents fully understand how to participate in the Choice Based Lettings 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.
- Articles are included in the tenants' magazine, "Housing News" on how the scheme operates, explaining that applicants can seek assistance from staff.
- Statistics show that 65 applicants (2.05%) received assistance from staff in the 2009 calendar year.
- A letter is sent to all those who are not participating in the scheme for more than 6 months asking them if they wish to remain on the Housing Register, but more importantly, asking if they require any assistance in participating in the Scheme.
- Applicants are given the opportunity to receive the HomeOption Free-sheet through the post by subscription.
- In the past year, computer access to the Scheme has been provided in receptions at the Area Housing Office (South) at the Broadway, Loughton and at the Limes Farm Office in Chigwell. Arrangements are being made to provide the service at the Civic Offices, Epping.
- Staff are able to refer applicants to Supporting People's support provider "In Touch Support" for assistance with a range of housing-related support matters, including participating in the HomeOption scheme.
- All Housing Options staff are trained in providing support to vulnerable applicants.

13. In addition to the above, HEHOC is considering the option of authorities printing off its own Free-sheets locally which could result in a substantial reduction in costs. A proportion of the savings could be used to send free-sheets through the post to all those applicants who have been identified as being vulnerable.

Future Development of the HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme

14. Following the successful implementation, HEHOC has been discussing the way forward on developing the scheme. A number of improvements have been identified which are currently being considered, including:

- Adding a consultation module to the HomeOption Website in order to seek the views of users on the Scheme
- Producing a single housing application form for all HEHOC member authorities in order to streamline the application process
- Offering the service to Private Sector Landlords which would bring additional income and increase the number of housing options available to applicants
- Providing an on-line housing application registration
- Updating the Consortium's Equality Impact Assessment in accordance with the new "toolkit"
- Adding the HomeSwapper national mutual exchange scheme with which the Council participates to the HomeOption website
- Charging partner Registered Social Landlords for including their properties on the Scheme

15. It is hoped that the above developments will be put in place in the near future depending on the amount of officer time available and the commitment of all the HEHOC members.

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

Reason for decision:

To submit a report on progress with the HomeOption Choice Based Lettings in accordance with the request of the Housing Scrutiny Panel.

Options considered and rejected:

Not to submit a report on progress with the HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme.

Consultation undertaken:

The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation will consider the report at its meeting in April 2010.

Resource implications:

Budget provision: N/A

Personnel: N/A

Land: N/A

Community Plan/BVPP reference: N/A

Relevant statutory powers: Housing Act 1996

Background papers: None

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

Key Decision reference: (if required) N/A