

Report to Housing Scrutiny Panel

Date of meeting: 19 July 2011

Portfolio: Housing – Councillor Mrs M McEwen

Subject: HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme – Progress Report

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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 December 2010 to May 2011.

Report:

1. As part of its Work Programme, the Panel considers an annual report on the “HomeOption” Choice Based Lettings scheme.
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 on the website, a two-weekly publication 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 on the website and 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. As the LHS computer system only stores information for a six month period, it is only possible to report statistics for a six-month period at this time. However, this will be resolved in future years when a full 12 months performance will be reported. The HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Information Bulletin for the period 28 November 2010 to 28 May 2011 is attached as an appendix to the report.

6. As can be seen, 214 properties (including Housing Association 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 282 advertisements being placed on the Website and in the Free-sheets. With 21,038 expressions of interest being made, this is an average of around 75 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 93% of applicants expressing an interest in properties did so over the Internet.

7. Around 70% of applicants registered on the Housing Register have participated in the scheme during the six-month 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 of three months following notification of the Council's homelessness decision. The three-month deferment is in place to balance the needs of homeless applicants against those on the Housing Register
- 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 Housing Association properties) and number of applicants in each of the six priority Bands. As at 30 June 2011 there were 5,514 applicants on the Housing Register.

Surveys of Applicants - May 2011

9. In May of this year a survey of all housing applicants was undertaken in order to seek their views on the Choice Based Lettings Scheme. It was considered important to seek the views of applicants who were either participating or not participating in the scheme.

Applicants not Participating in Choice Based Lettings

10. One of the surveys was of those who were not participating in the Scheme. The main reason 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. Overall 360 forms were returned from those not participating. The table below shows the questions asked and responses received:

Question	Yes	No	No Response
Are you aware of HomeOption, our choice based lettings scheme?	263 (73%)	81 (23%)	16 (4%)
Have you received and kept your HomeOption Scheme User Guide?	204 (57%)	143 (40%)	13 (3%)
Do you know your housing application registration number?	198 (55)	153 (43%)	9 (2%)
Have you looked at the HomeOption Website?	125 (35%)	229 (64%)	6 (1%)
Do you want your application to stay on the Housing Register?	336 (93%)	17 (5%)	7 (2%)

11. Applicants were also asked why they had not participated and invited to tell us what help they need. All those applicants not participating, will be sent a letter explaining again about the Scheme, and will be contacted to offer assistance if it is felt appropriate.

Applicants who are Participating in Choice Based Lettings

12. The other survey was of those who have participated in the scheme. Overall 421 responses were received from those participating. The table below shows the questions asked and responses received:

Question	Yes	No	No Response
Did you find the Scheme User Guide easy to follow?	399 (95%)	19 (4%)	3 (1%)
Did you get enough information about the Scheme	375 (89%)	34 (8%)	12 (3%)
Was the Website easy to use?	310 (74%)	21 (5%)	90 (21%)
Did the Website give enough feedback on properties that had been already let?	263 (62%)	45 (11%)	113 (27%)
Did you ask a member of our staff for help?	84 (20%)	225 (53%)	112 (27%)

13. Applicants who had participated were asked generally how satisfied they were with the service, 408 responded to this question. The level of satisfaction was as follows:

Very Satisfied 152 (37%)
 Quite satisfied 152 (37%)
 Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied 64 (16%)
 Quite unsatisfied 19 (5%)
 Very unsatisfied 21 (5%)

14. All applicants who stated that they were either quite or very unsatisfied and can be identified, will be contacted and offered further assistance if it is felt appropriate.

15. A total of 5,438 forms were sent out to all Housing Register applicants. 781 were returned representing a response rate of 14.4%.

Support Currently Provided to Vulnerable Applicants

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

- 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 details 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.
- 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.
- Computer access to the Scheme is currently provided in receptions at the Area Housing Office (South) at The Broadway, Loughton and at the Limes Farm Office in Chigwell. In the near future, new Kiosks are being installed at these offices and also the Civic Offices, Epping which will give access to Choice Based Lettings and a range of other Council services
- 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.

Development of the HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme

17. During 2010/2011, a number of improvements have been achieved as follows:

- HEHOC agreed to discontinue the distribution of the Free-sheet which has resulted in a substantial reduction in costs. The saving to the Council alone is in the region of £18,000 per annum. The Free-sheet has been replaced with a new smaller Property List which is printed off locally and made available at a number of locations in the District
- A consultation section has been added to the HomeOption Website in order to seek the views of users on the Scheme
- Progress has been made with investigating the provision of a housing application form on-line
- The Consortium's Equality Impact Assessment in accordance with the new "toolkit" is currently being updated
- The HomeSwapper national mutual exchange scheme with which the Council participates has been added to the HomeOption website
- The HomeOption website now explains to applicants the Council's recently introduced penalties, for refusals of offers of suitable accommodation
- Charging partner Housing Associations a fee for including their properties on the Scheme is being considered with a consultation exercise being undertaken in the coming months

18. The Housing Scrutiny Panel is asked to review progress made on the HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme.

Reason for decision:

To submit a report on progress with the HomeOption Choice Based Lettings in accordance with the Housing Scrutiny Panel's Work Programme.

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.

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