

Epping Forest District Council

**HOUSING SERVICES 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 must be consulted on changes to the allocation scheme. Major changes must be notified to applicants on the Housing Register. This must be done 'within a reasonable period of time', with the effect of changes being explained to applicants.
- 1.4. 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.
- 1.5. This strategy sets out how the allocations service will be delivered and monitored. The service will be provided by the Housing Needs Section within the Council's Housing Services.
- 1.6. EFDC's Housing Services qualified for an Investors in People Award in 2001. This was extended to all Council Services in 2002 and renewed early in 2005. Housing Services was also accredited for the ISO 9001:2000 quality management system by Lloyds Register Quality Assurance in 2002 and this was renewed in 2005, now being valid until 2007. Housing Services also achieved Charter Mark status in January 2005.
- 1.7. 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 XX XX XX.

2. Background to the Service

2.1. Between 1st January 2005 and 31st December 2005, the Housing Needs Section :-

- received around 2500 new applications for the Housing Register (including requests for alternative accommodation from existing social housing tenants); this is a 25% increase on the number of applications received two years ago
- let 497 vacancies in the Council's housing stock; 25% more lettings than two years ago
- made 129 nominations for RSL vacancies; as opposed to 75 two years ago, an increase of 58%
- received around 500 applications for garage tenancies; 25% up on two years ago
- let 264 garages; down 25% on two years ago
- processed 70 tenancy assignments by way of mutual exchange; just over 14% more than two years ago.

2.2. The Mutual Exchange Scheme reflects good housing management practice as well as legislation governing the assignment of social housing tenancies by way of mutual exchange.

2.3. The Housing Allocations Scheme is reviewed annually to ensure that it remains equitable, relevant and responsive to change.

2.4. It allows housing applicants to express a choice about the localities in which they would like to live, the type of accommodation they would like to be offered and whether they would prefer to be the tenant of an RSL or the Council. This is a prelude to a Choice Based Lettings Scheme (CBL), in which applicants 'bid' for advertised social housing vacancies, which is scheduled for implementation in April 2007 (See 8.6. to 8.8.) All local housing authorities are required by government to have such a scheme in place by April 2010.

2.5. The Housing Allocations Scheme includes a banding system which is used to broadly prioritise housing applications, with applications being dealt with in date order within each band.

2.6. 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 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.

- 2.7. All officers in the Housing Needs Section offer general as well as specialist housing advice. Information can be made available to accommodate special needs if necessary.
- 2.8. The Council owns around 3,000 garages which are let on an individual basis. Date order waiting lists are maintained, from which vacancies are allocated. With the exception of garages at Limes Farm, Chigwell, this work is undertaken by the Housing Needs Section.
- 2.9. Tenancy surrenders, where vacant possession is being given, form part of the allocation process for garages and properties. This process is computerised, using the allocations module of Anite's Open Housing Management System (OHMS), the computer system used by other sections within Housing Services. Some letters are generated by the system but many are not; standard templates being used for routine correspondence, for instance, notification of assessments by one of the Council's Medical Advisers.

3. Coverage

3.1 In summary, allocations encompasses –

- tenancy surrenders where vacant possession is being given on properties and garages
- allocation of vacant properties and garages
- offers of tenancies for vacant properties and garages
- signing up of applicants for new tenancies
- administration of the Housing Register, nominations for properties owned by registered social landlords, the Mutual Exchanges Scheme and garage waiting lists.
- notifications of updates for the Housing Revenue Account.

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. This strategy accords with the *Council Plan* which sets out the Council's plans for the delivery and development of its services.
- 4.3. Every year, following consultation with residents, the Council publishes a *Best Value Performance Plan* which explains the Council's current performance and how it intends to improve its services on a continuing basis.
- 4.4. The Council has adopted a *Housing Charter*, which sets out in simple, clear and precise terms its general approach to all its housing services.

- 4.5. The Council follows the guide set out in the Commission for Racial Equality's *Code of Practice in Rented Housing*.
- 4.6. The Council follows advice from central government set out in circulars and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities* and *Allocation of Accommodation Code of Guidance to Local Housing Authorities November 2002*.
- 4.7. The booklets produced by Housing Services entitled, *Housing Allocations Scheme*, and *Mutual Exchanges Scheme*, set out in full the Council's policies on these matters.
- 4.8. The following are included in the application pack for the Housing Register: a summary of the *Housing Allocations Scheme*, entitled *Moving Home with the Council Housing* (this includes advice on mutual exchanges); the formal application, including guidance notes; and an information booklet, *Where to Live*. These are all produced by Housing Services.
- 4.9. The following booklets, also produced by Housing Services, offer more general advice: *Mobile Homes*; *Private Rented Accommodation*; *Shared Ownership Schemes*; *Housing Associations for Elderly Needs*; *Housing Associations for General Needs Accommodation*.
- 4.10. 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, the Conditions of Your Tenancy, and How to Complain*.
- 4.11. The booklet, *Renting a Garage*, explains how to apply for a Council garage.
- 4.12. The following guides are available from Housing Services but produced by the O.D.P.M.
- *Assured and assured shorthold tenancies – a guide for landlords*
 - *Letting your home*
 - *Letting Rooms in Your Home – a guide for landlords and their tenants*
 - *Assured and assured shorthold tenancies – a guide for tenants*
- 4.13. Information about the Council's Housing 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 the ethnicity of applicants on the Housing Register and of those who have been rehoused
- b) Maintaining a Housing Register, utilising the OHMS computerised system
- c) Assessing 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 rehousing for welfare or hardship reasons to be considered by the Housing Needs Manager in conjunction with one of the Council’s Medical Advisers and a Housing Needs Officer; making home visits and requesting special reports as necessary; arranging special needs or occupational therapy (O.T.) assessments in appropriate cases; requiring applicants to renew their requests for rehousing annually
- d) Notifying housing applicants of decisions affecting their application and of their statutory rights; making applicants’ files available to them on written request; notifying applicants on the Housing Register, in writing, 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 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 claims forms for decorating vouchers
- g) Making available, free of charge, copies of the Allocation Scheme and the Mutual Exchanges Scheme, both in full and summarised versions.
- h) Making available at housing offices and Waltham Abbey Town Hall, registers of social housing tenants interested in effecting mutual exchanges and processing mutual exchange applications within time limits and in accordance with the Mutual Exchanges Scheme
- i) Monitoring RSL vacancies in the District and making nominations
- j) Offering financial incentives to the Council’s tenants transferring from 3 or 4 bedroom properties to 1 bedroom or studio

accommodation and giving general advice on availability of accommodation, rent levels etc

- k) Maintaining date order waiting lists for garages and offering vacant garages to applicants at the top of each list
- l) Working with other interested parties, such as the Learning Disabilities Local Action Group, the Domestic Violence Forum, the Children and Young Peoples Strategic Partnership, the Single Accommodation For Epping Forest (SAFE) project, and the referral panel for the Floating Support Scheme (for people with a history of substance abuse or mental ill health)
- m) Monitoring staff performance against set targets
- n) Annually updating the Housing Needs Assessment Module to facilitate projections for the requirement of additional social housing in the District.

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. It also empowers the local housing authority to pay tenants' removal expenses.
- 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 Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's *Allocation of Accommodation Code of Guidance to Local Authorities November 2002*, 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. Notwithstanding the above, the requirements of the *Race Relations Act 1976* apply to the allocation of social housing, as do those of the *Sex Discrimination Act 1975* and the *Disability Discrimination Act 1995* and the *Code of Practice in Rented Housing*.
- 6.7. The *Homelessness Act 2002* gives a housing applicant certain rights to information relating to the assessment of their application and decisions made in respect of it. It also provides for the right to request a review of certain decisions.

- 6.8. Personal information held by the Housing Needs Section is protected by the *Data Protection Act 1998* which, together with the *Housing Act 1996*, allows individuals to access the information held about them.
- 6.9. The provisions of the *Rent (Agricultural Act) 1976* is 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 *Local Government & Housing Act 1989* sets out the framework for the funding of the allocations service i.e. in respect of the Housing Revenue Account and the General Fund.
- 6.12. 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).
- 6.13. 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. To a large extent, allocations functions are regulated by statute, which includes consultation with RSLs in respect of major changes on the Housing Allocations Scheme. However, this authority also consults with parish and town councils and the three Citizens Advice Bureaux in the District. In addition, the Tenants and Leaseholders' Federation are consulted on all housing policy matters prior to referral to the Housing Portfolio Holder and the Cabinet.
- 7.2. Housing Register applicants may be informed on an individual basis of changes that affect them and items of general interest are included in a newsletter, *Housing News*, which is sent, usually quarterly, to tenants and, when appropriate, all housing applicants, to keep them informed of important issues.

8. General Principles

- 8.1. One of the aims of the Council Plan is to address housing need. In order to achieve this the Council is seeking, through formal Alterations to the Local Plan, in June 2006, a provision that will require, 40% affordable housing on development sites comprising 15 units or more, or of half a hectare or more in size. The current requirement is for 30% affordable housing on sites comprising 25 units or more, or 1 hectare.

- 8.2. Underpinning this will be annual reviews of the Housing Allocations Scheme and the monitoring of the effectiveness of financial incentives to Council tenants willing to move to smaller accommodation.
- 8.3. Key workers will be identified and advised of initiatives to assist them, which includes a scheme where up to five key workers from health, education or the Police will be allocated with Council accommodation each year.
- 8.4. The Council will continue to work closely with RSLs and other agencies to resolve housing problems. Part of this process will be a monitoring of vacancies arising in RSL stock within the District and working with the Learning Disabilities Local Action Group, the Domestic Violence Forum, the Children and Young Peoples Strategic Partnership, the Single Accommodation For Epping Forest (SAFE) project and the referral panel for the Floating Support Scheme.
- 8.5. The current Housing Allocations Scheme allows housing applicants to express a choice about the localities in which they would like to live, the type of accommodation they would like to be offered and whether they would prefer to be the tenant of an RSL or the local authority. The allocations process also includes accompanied viewing arrangements, whereby prospective tenants are met at properties by a technical officer, so that queries concerning repairs and related matters can be answered straight away.
- 8.6. The Council will further extend applicants' choice by introducing a CBL Scheme, whereby tenants will 'bid' for advertised social housing vacancies, by April 2007. To this end, it has formed a partnership that includes Chelmsford Borough Council, Broxbourne Borough Council, East Hertfordshire District Council, Brentwood Borough Council, Uttlesford District Council, and the main RSLs that operate in these six authority areas. This partnership, called the Herts and Essex Housing Options Consortium will enable the cost of advertising vacancies and receiving bids to be shared by the 6 authorities, introducing CBL across West Essex and East Hertfordshire. It has also enabled a grant of £96,000 to be received from the ODPM.
- 8.7. The consortium will appoint a Project Manager to oversee the project. The post will be funded by the grant from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.
- 8.8. Housing applicants will only be able to bid for vacant properties in accordance with each individual local housing authority's criteria.
- 8.9. The Council will ensure that general information is available to housing applicants electronically as well as through more traditional media and keep them informed on important issues. Details of tenants wishing to mutual exchange accommodation will be posted on the Council's website, as well as being available from certain Council Offices.
- 8.10. Housing applications will be processed effectively and allocations monitored to ensure that they are equitable.

- 8.11. Tenancy surrenders where vacant possession is being given form part of the allocation process. The process is computerised and this facilitates monitoring. Other housing officers are notified of on a weekly basis of changes to the Housing Revenue Account to enable all Service records to be updated.
- 8.12. Housing Needs staff offer general as well as specialist advice on housing options and their training needs are identified through the Council's annual Staff Development Review process.
- 8.13. Actions agreed as a result of the following have been incorporated into service practices -
- the Housing Needs Service Review and Best Value inspection in November 2001
 - the Voids & Lettings Review conducted by senior and middle housing managers during the first part of 2001
 - the Service review of Housing Services, completed in March 2004.
- 8.14. 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 Head of Housing Services or the Housing Needs 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 5 elected members.
- 8.15. Complaints will be dealt with, and appropriate action taken, in accordance with corporate procedures.
- 8.16. Performance on lettings, including garages, will be monitored quarterly by the Head of Housing Services.

9.1. Best Value Considerations

- 9.1. The allocations service underwent a best value inspection, jointly with the homelessness service, in November 2001, which resulted in a one star and 'likely to improve' rating. The pre-inspection assessment of 'the 4 Cs' as they related to allocations are briefly summarised below:

Challenge – 'a solid foundation with strong structures, experienced workforce and a clear knowledge of major issues'

Compare – 'sensible staffing numbers whilst at the same time offering a range of services which is at least comparable to, if not greater than, the other responding authorities'

Consult – 'there is a need to focus on the initiatives most likely to lead to an improvement in the Service'

Compete – ‘the Council works well with organisations from other sectors, both voluntary and private, to partnerships aimed at helping to meet housing need in the District’.

9.2. The Housing Needs Section responded to the findings of the Best Value Review by making changes to its services, though they largely related to homelessness issues.

10. Future Developments

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

<p>Strengths</p> <p>Well trained staff Well tried processes Good relations with RSLs and others Annual review of 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</p>	<p>Weaknesses</p> <p>Current performance relies on overtime amounting to around 4 hours each week Insufficient ITC support because of recruitment problems Staff at some risk of assault pending corporate decisions on safety measures Lack of Housing Corporation funding and land to provide the required amount of affordable housing</p>
<p>Opportunities</p> <p>Introduction of CBL through cross-boundary partnership</p>	<p>Threats</p> <p>Continuing high work-loads 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</p>

11. Action Plan

Action	Lead Officer	Timescale	Resource Implications
Mutual exchange information available on website	Housing Needs Manager	01/04/06	Existing resources

Review Housing Allocations Scheme and effect changes as necessary	Housing Needs Manager	01/01/07	Existing resources
Introduce on-line housing applications	Housing Needs Manager	01/01/07	Existing resources
Introduce CBL	Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations)	01/04/07	Existing resources
Investigate the possibility of using a private company for medical assessments	Housing Needs Manager	01/09/06	Existing resources
Review staffing structure following introduction of CBL	Housing Needs Manager	01/09/07	Existing resources

12. Resourcing the Strategy

12.1. The Allocations Service is funded from the Housing Revenue Account.

12.2. Staffing resources in the medium term will be:

	Staff Resource Projections		
	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Staff to provide the service (FTE p/a)	8.5	8.5	8.5

Staff Resource Breakdown	2004/05
Posts	FTE
Housing Needs Manager	0.5
Assistant Housing Needs Manager	1.0
Housing Officers	3.0
Housing Assistants	4.0
Total	8.5

12.3. The Council has a robust system for training new staff and for ensuring that the training needs of existing staff are met. New staff undergo a rigorous induction programme during their first 12 months of employment. Existing staff participate in the annual Staff Development Review Scheme. Their training needs are recorded in the Training Needs Schedule which enables Human Resources staff to plan an appropriate in-house training programme. In addition to this, it is open to staff to attend seminars, conferences and external training courses on specialist subjects, such as Choice Based Lettings.

12.4. £332,320 (including £40,000 for consultants costs on Choice Based Lettings) of the Housing Revenue Account budget will be set aside for resourcing allocations work in the financial year 2006/07.

13. Key Targets and Performance Monitoring

13.1. Generally, monitoring reports will be computer generated or produced from spread sheets.

13.2. Best Value and Local Performance Indicators will be included within the Best Value Performance Plan, which is published annually, a summary of which is provided to every household in the District.

13.3. Monitoring of performance will form part of the Housing Services' Performance management System and quarterly meetings will be held between the Head of Housing Services, the Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations) and the Housing Needs Manager to monitor performance and agree a quarterly Action Plan to continuously improve performance.

13.4. The key Best Value and Local performance indicators for the service are as follows:

Key Targets & Performance				
Performance Indicator	2005/06 Target	2006/07 Target	2007/08 Target	2008/09 Target
BV 164 Does the local authority follow the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice for Rented Housing	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
H14b % of total lettings (LA & RSL homes) to homeless households	20%	22%	24%	26%

14. Reviewing the Strategy

14.1. This strategy will be reviewed in consultation with the Epping Forest Tenants and Leaseholders' Federation by April 2008.

