

Report to Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel

Date of meeting: 24 July 2012

Portfolio: Housing – Councillor D Stallan

**Subject: HomeOption Choice Based Lettings
Scheme – Progress Report**

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Recommendations/Decisions Required:

That the Housing Scrutiny Panel reviews the Information Bulletin setting out progress made on the HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme, and considers the Housing Register Activity Report, both for the period 1 June 2011 to 1 June 2012.

Report:

1. As part of its Work Programme, the Housing Scrutiny 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 at that time 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 Property List, 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 City 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 1 June 2011 to 1 June 2012 is attached as an appendix to the report.

6. As can be seen, 380 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 415 advertisements being placed on the Website and in the Property Lists. With 35,777 expressions of interest being made, this is an average of around 86 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 200 expressions of interest. Almost 96% of applicants expressing an interest in properties did so over the Internet.

7. Around 58% of all applicants registered on the Housing Register have participated in the scheme during the last year. 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 lets and refusals and number of applicants in each of the six priority Bands. As at 1 June 2012 there were 6,219 applicants on the Housing Register.

Allocation of Accommodation – Government Guidance

9. In January of this year, the Department for Communities and Local Government issued a consultation paper on “Allocation of accommodation: guidance for local housing authorities in England”. The Housing Scrutiny Panel considered the proposals, one of which was the introduction of an eligibility criteria for applicants both joining and remaining on the Housing Register. As part of its response, the Panel welcomed the proposal which could result in large numbers of applicants being excluded from the list. As already mentioned, the attached Information Bulletin shows that there are 6,219 applicants on the Council’s Housing Register with 2,637 applicants whom have never bid. Furthermore, 4,286 applicants have not bid on properties since November 2011. Although the final Government Guidance has not yet been published, this could suggest that a more restricted eligibility criteria could be a way forward.

Surveys of Applicants

10. In May 2011, a survey of all housing applicants was undertaken in order to seek their views on the Choice Based Lettings Scheme. The results were reported to the Housing Scrutiny Panel in July 2011. It was considered important at that time to seek the views of applicants about the scheme. Those who were participating felt they were getting enough information about the scheme, found the website easy to use, with the majority being either very or quite satisfied. It was not considered appropriate to consult with applicants in 2012, particularly as many existing applicants could be removed from the list if the eligibility criteria referred to earlier is implemented.

Support Currently Provided to Vulnerable Applicants

11. 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, they ensure 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 have been included in the tenants’ magazine, “Housing News” in the past 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.
- Access to the Scheme is provided electronically by way of a “kiosk” currently provided in receptions at the Area Housing Office (South) at The Broadway, Loughton and at the Limes Centre in Chigwell. The kiosks also give access to a range of other Council services
- Staff are able to refer applicants to Supporting People’s floating support provider

Family Mosaic for assistance with a range of housing-related support matters, including participating in the HomeOption scheme.

- All Housing Options staff are very experienced in providing support to all applicants.

12. 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 next 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