

# **Report to Housing Scrutiny Panel**

**Date of meeting: 21 October 2014**

**Portfolio: Housing – Councillor D Stallan**

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

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**Committee Secretary: Mark Jenkins ext 4607**



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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 September 2013 to 31 August 2014.**

## **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 and a two-weekly Property List 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 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 Housing 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 the 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 September 2013 to 31 August 2014 is attached as an appendix to the report. This represents the 12 month period following the latest Housing Allocations Scheme coming into force.

6. As can be seen, 345 properties (including Housing Association allocations) have been allocated to homeseekers on the Housing Register during the period.

7. A further 49 properties were allocated direct to homeless applicants and an additional 11 properties to applicants leaving supported housing. Such applicants are no longer included on the Housing Register and are provided with one direct offer of suitable accommodation.

8. Some of the 345 properties allocated from the Housing Register have been advertised on more than one occasion as they are difficult to let (particularly those designated for older persons' use). This has resulted in 427 advertisements being placed on the Website and in the Property Lists. With 24,307 expressions of interest being made, this is an average of around 70 expressions of interest from homeseekers 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 97% of homeseekers expressing an interest in properties did so over the Internet.

9. Around 71% 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 Register, should they want Council accommodation in the future.
- 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**

10. The Housing Register Activity Report for the same period, which is also attached, shows the number of lets and number of homeseekers in each of the three priority Bands. It should be noted that there were 82 (23%) properties refused during the period.

11. Following the introduction of the Local Eligibility Criteria under the latest Housing Allocations Scheme which came into force on 1 September 2013, the numbers of homeseekers has substantially reduced. As at 31 August 2014 there were 1,563 homeseekers on the Housing Register compared to 6,219 in June 2011. Under the revised Scheme, a new Supplementary Waiting List was created to enable applicants over 60 years of age who do not meet with the Residency Criteria, or have a housing need, to bid on properties in sheltered accommodation and to receive an offer (if no homeseekers on the Register are interested) as such properties are often difficult-to-let. As at 31 August 2014, there were 210 applicants on the Supplementary Waiting List.

### **Support Currently Provided to Vulnerable Applicants**

12. The Housing 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 Council staff and external agencies.
- The Council's Relocation Support Officer provides assistance to vulnerable people to join the Housing Register, submit bids on properties and importantly assists with the practicalities of moving home.
- 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" and a computer terminal 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 Essex County Council'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.

13. 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.