

Report to Communities Select Committee

Date of meeting: 6 September 2016

Portfolio: Housing – Councillor Syd Stavrou

Subject: HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme – Progress Report

Officer contact for further information: Roger Wilson extension 4419

Committee Secretary: Mark Jenkins extension 4607



Recommendations/Decisions Required:

That the Communities Select Committee reviews the attached Information Bulletin setting out progress made on Housing Allocations and the HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme for the period 27 July 2015 to 27 July 2016.

Report:

1. As part of its Work Programme, the Communities Select Committee 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 Internet, telephone, text, or email.
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 27 July 2015 to 27 July 2016 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, 259 properties (including Housing Association allocations) have been allocated to Home seekers on the Housing Register during the period.

7. A further 22 properties were allocated direct to homeless applicants and an additional 10 properties allocated to applicants leaving supported housing, which represents around 12% of all Housing Register lets. Such applicants are not included on the Housing Register and are provided with one direct offer of suitable flatted accommodation. 21 properties were let to homeless applicants (generally families) under non-secure tenancies on a temporary basis whilst investigations are on-going, which avoids placing them in costly bed and breakfast accommodation. There are currently 61 homeless applicants to whom the Council has accepted a full duty who are awaiting direct offers of accommodation.

8. Almost 97% of Home seekers expressing an interest in properties did so over the Internet. The remaining 3% either telephoned, received help from staff at the computer in reception or used text.

9. Around 84% 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.

10. As at 27 July 2016 there were 1,374 Home seekers on the Housing Register, the number of lets and number of Home seekers in each of the three priority Bands are shown in the table attached as an Appendix. Under the Scheme, there is a Supplementary Waiting List which enables 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 27 July 2016, there were 164 applicants on the Supplementary Waiting List.

Support Currently Provided to Vulnerable Applicants

11. 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 Housing 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

12. The Communities Select Committee is asked to review progress made on the HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme.

Consultation undertaken:

The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation will consider the report at its next meeting on 31 August 2016 with any comments being reported orally.