

Task Group:	Housing Initiatives Task Group	Agenda Item
Date:	9 June 2009	8
Title:	ALLOCATIONS POLICY/CHOICE BASED LETTINGS SCHEME	
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Summary

1. This report advises the Task Group of the need to re-consider the council's allocation's policy and choice based lettings scheme, in light of last years Audit Commission inspection/report and the publication of the Government's Code of Guidance "Allocation of Accommodation: Choice Based Lettings.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Task Group give officers permission to:-

1. Review the Council's allocation policy
2. Explore with our Choice Based Lettings partners the possibilities of expanding choice within the current scheme.

Background Papers

Allocation of Accommodation: Choice Based Lettings – Code of Guidance for Local Housing Authorities – Available on line at www.communities.gov.uk website

Audit Commission Report

Situation

1. At present the Council allocates properties via HomeOption, the choice based lettings scheme (CBL), applicants are prioritised using a points based system. The current points system is complex and can be open to interpretation. Consequently it can lack transparency making it difficult for applicants to understand.

2. The current points scheme can also by the way it is structured give a perverse incentive to applicants to become homeless as a way of being re-housed more quickly. There is currently little incentive for potentially homeless people to consider alternative housing options and consequently applicants who have genuine housing need and have been on the register for sometime can regularly lose out to people who have only just joined the register
3. The alternative to a points based system would be a banding system, where applicants are placed in bands according to housing need by specific criteria. Applicants are then prioritised within the band by date of application. Banding systems are generally speaking simpler for applicants to understand and simpler for housing authorities to operate.
4. The Audit Commission not only criticised the Council's current allocations policy for its complexity and lack of transparency for applicants but also for the lack of choice it offered. It felt that an opportunity had been missed when setting up the scheme within the CBL consortium and that cross boundary 'bidding' and one point of access would have provided people with real choice.
5. Currently, as with all local authorities, anyone can apply to go onto Uttlesford's Housing Register and then "bid" on Uttlesford properties advertised within the CBL consortium freesheet. However if they see a property within another consortium members advertised properties that they would like to "bid" on, they can only do this by applying to each individual authority and being assessed under each different assessment policy. This increases the workload for authorities and causes confusion for applicants. From June 2008 to June 2009 the number of applicants applying to the register from outside of the district has risen from 172 to 329.
6. Schemes such as those preferred by the Government and the Audit Commission have been set up in many areas. The models can differ depending on the partner authorities. The Gateway HOME CHOICE scheme recently adopted by authorities within the Greater Haven Gateway has 10 members with one application form, one banding assessment policy and the ability for applicants to express interest across borders. It still allows for some local lettings policies and by monitoring inward and outward migration to adjust the lettings availability on some properties.
7. Other regional models, such as one in Derbyshire, again have authorities with joint allocation policies and banding assessment policies which allow applicants to make one application to enable them to bid on properties within the region. However the scheme allows for the member authorities to allocate first to those with a local connection, secondly to those with a regional connection and only then to those with no connection.

Targets

What we would like to achieve is:

1. An allocation policy that is simpler to administer and clearer for applicants to understand. One that is less open to interpretation that takes account of peoples needs but does not encourage potential homelessness as a route into social housing. That is equality impact assessed to ensure that it meets the equality and diversity needs of all applicants and potential applicants and the wider community.
2. To consider with our CBL partners ways of providing greater choice and ease of access within the HomeOption Scheme but without jeopardizing the position of local applicants. To involve members in looking at how cross boundary working is implemented in other regions, by arranging an information gathering visit to an authority recommended by the Audit Commission as an example of good practice.