

Appendix V

Allocations Scheme - Briefing Paper

Introduction

This paper outlines how the Council's allocations policy currently allocates properties through the Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme. The Council currently uses a points system to prioritise applicants on the Housing Register, who are then able to express an interest on properties. It will then briefly explain a similar policy of a Local Authority using a banding system for CBL.

Current policy

The Council is governed by the Housing Act 1996 to have an allocations policy for determining priorities and the procedure to be followed for allocating housing accommodation. The Housing Services department currently maintains a Housing Register, although it is not legally obliged to do so.

The Council introduced CBL in October 2007 after draft Government guidance was published and a project was carried out with a consortium of neighbouring Local Authorities. This system enables applicants to express their interest in available properties, which are advertised in a fortnightly publication and on a website.

Except for in certain circumstances, the majority of vacant Council-owned properties are allocated through CBL. In addition, when the Council is required to make nominations to properties owned by Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) in the district, these properties will also be allocated through the scheme.

Each application is awarded points, according to their circumstances, by reference to the 'Points System' which will establish the degree of priority. Applicants who, in the opinion of the Council, have sufficient income/assets to enable them to either purchase a property or privately rent suitable accommodation will generally be awarded 0 points.

The current points system 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.

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Any vacancy within the district is offered to the applicant who has registered an interest in that property and who is in the highest priority. This is generally based on number of points, but may also include date of application, if applicants have the same amount of points. In certain circumstances, i.e. breaches of tenancy conditions, applicants may be bypassed.

Local lettings plans are in place when allocating to rural housing developments, as well as properties that have been adapted for tenants with specific needs and older persons housing. Some rural housing is developed under the rural exception site policy and is specifically for applicants with a connection to that locality, so any allocation needs to reflect this.

A code of guidance for local authorities was issued in 2008 indicating that prioritising applicants through a banding scheme is a much simpler system. The guidance also states that the points based approaches can lack in transparency and be confusing for applicant, whilst a banding scheme is easier for both applicants to understand and for the local authority to operate.

Banding Schemes

New draft guidance relating to social housing allocations – ‘Fair and Flexible’ – has recently been out for consultation. This document indicates that local authorities still using a points-based system should consider changing to a banding system. The type of system suggested should include ‘broad’ bands, which applicants can easily be grouped into to reflect the priorities of the Council’s allocations system.

Officers have carried out research into CBL banding systems being used by other local authorities, all of which operate on a similar system of between four and six bands, depending on the local authorities’ priorities. A good comparative example of a banding system is currently being used by Epping Forest District Council (EFDC), who is a member of the same consortium as the Council (Banding scheme attached).

EFDC operate a system based on six ‘bands’, Band 1 representing applicants in the highest priority and Band 6 representing those in the lowest. Once applicants have been placed in their relevant band, depending on circumstances, they are then prioritised by date of application. EFDC’s allocation scheme also allows priority for applicants who have been resident in the district for over 1 year.

This type of banding schemes ultimately allows more transparency for applicants and has the flexibility for applicants with a local connection some additional priority. The current point system operating at the Council can be difficult for applicants to understand, whilst being time consuming for Officers dealing with individual applicant queries.