

COMMITTEE:	CABINET
DATE:	6th March 2002
SUBJECT:	CHOICE BASED LETTINGS – HOMECHOICE
REPORT OF:	Anita Aldridge, HomeChoice Project Co-ordinator
Ward(s):	All
Purpose:	To update Members on Eastbourne's HomeChoice scheme and seek approval for implementation of changes to Allocations Policy.
Contact:	Anita Aldridge, HomeChoice Project Co-ordinator Telephone extension 5331.
Recommendations:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To adopt policy as outlined in appendix 1 for the purposes of implementing the HomeChoice pilot. 2. To delegate authority to the Director of Housing, Health and Community Finance, in conjunction with the Cabinet spokesperson to undertake fine tuning of the policy prior to full implementation.

1.0	<u>BACKGROUND</u>
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1.1	<p>In response to section 9 of the Housing Green Paper – Choice in Social Housing, Eastbourne Borough Council along with 91 other local authorities applied to the DTLR to operate a CHOICE BASED LETTINGS SCHEME.</p> <p>The DTLR were particularly interested in applications from Authorities who would come up with innovative ways of enabling applicants to have access to information on what accommodation is available. All vacancies will be advertised on the Internet through EBC's Web site with the ability to request application forms and apply for accommodation via this method.</p> <p>We wanted to create a system that was completely transparent and to promote enhanced access to the services offered by the Housing Department.</p> <p>Eastbourne was one of only 27 authorities granted pilot status. We were awarded £280,500 for the implementation of a scheme offering more choice to</p>
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1.2	<p>The Homelessness Bill 2001 (currently at Committee stage in the House of Lords) will update the Housing Act 1996 Part VI (allocations) and part VII (homelessness). The HomeChoice policy includes likely changes such as priority being given to certain groups of young people, and the abolition of a temporary two year housing duty to homeless households.</p> <p>Any allocations policy will continue to have to meet perimeters set out in current and future legislation.</p> <p>Currently properties are allocated to local households with a housing need when they reach the top of the waiting list. Although Officers endeavour to offer a suitable property within the applicants' area of choice this is not always possible and often results in a refusal leading to a longer void time.</p>
2.0	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>NATURE OF PILOT SCHEME</u></p>
2.1	<p>Council and Housing Association accommodation will be advertised using various methods such as the local paper, the Internet and a Property Shop initially based in the Housing Advice Centre, moving to 1 Grove Road.</p>
2.2	<p>We will set eligibility criteria for each vacancy e.g. a target group depending on the nature of the property and the demand for it.</p> <p>Applicants will react to the advertisement and apply for a property if they fit the eligibility criteria.</p> <p>The applicant with the greatest priority according to the eligibility criteria is selected.</p> <p>The successful applicant's eligibility is rechecked and they are interviewed.</p> <p>Details of the number of applicants per vacancy, their category and waiting time will be announced with the new vacancies advertisement.</p>

2.3	Eventually, Private Landlords will be encouraged to advertise their properties through the Property Shop. Details such as the Mutual Exchange Register, the HOMES scheme, the Cash Incentive Scheme and the Under-occupation Scheme will also be advertised at this site. Links with areas with low housing demand will be developed to offer applicants greater opportunity to move to another area with a shorter waiting list. These alternative routes to accommodation will promote the Corporate Aim of A Place for Everyone.
3.0	<u>OBJECTIVES</u>
3.1	The advantages to our customers are clear in that they will be empowered to make real choices in where they live. People may choose to consider accommodation with a shorter waiting time, perhaps in a different area rather than remain in unsatisfactory housing. There will be far greater clarity in what we are able to offer from our stock. Our customers tell us they are often unsure how the allocation process works. It will open up different tenures to people who may have only considered one type of tenure previously.
3.2	Advantages to the Council will be in modernising the way we allocate our accommodation. Void times will be reduced, as people are unlikely to refuse properties they have specifically chosen, therefore rent loss will reduce.
3.3	Estate Profiles/Lettings Plans will encourage people to be committed to their environment, which will enhance social inclusion and community participation.
3.4	We will have a greater opportunity to develop information on customer aspirations and build on current data for future Housing Strategy and Development Programmes.

3.5	<p>Monitoring and evaluation will take place continually throughout the pilot period. We will compare numbers of applications, allocations, void times and refusals with data from the same period the previous year. It is anticipated that properties will be let more swiftly and refusals minimised as the client will have applied to the property. This will therefore maximise rental income.</p> <p>Quarterly reports required by the DTLR will also be presented internally. A final report in March 2003 will publish successes and make suggestions for the future.</p>
4.0	<u>PROJECT PLAN</u>
4.1	<p>We are currently tailoring an IT system to the specific requirements of our policy. The system was purchased at a cost of £1,500 from Market Harborough; a Pilot authority into their second year of choice based lettings. This system will work alongside the Orchard management package currently used.</p> <p>“Testing” of the scheme from April to July 2002 will allow development of the process prior to going LIVE in July.</p>
5.0	<u>STEERING GROUP</u>
5.1	<p>Several consultation groups have been involved in developing the draft policy and have concentrated on ensuring equality of access to all service users, particularly vulnerable groups. Several key members of these groups will go on to become a steering group. The role of the steering group will be to regularly monitor and evaluate the scheme, highlighting successes and suggesting adjustments as necessary. Regular reports such as void and relet times will be circulated to the group. These reports will be presented to Scrutiny Committee.</p>
6.0	<u>IMPLICATIONS FOR ALLOCATIONS POLICY</u>

6.1	<p>The implementation of the HomeChoice scheme will necessitate adjustments to the current allocations policy. The current categories of Urgent and Live will be altered to ensure that people from all the housing registers, including the homeless, have access to advertised properties. The previous Deferred category will be updated to Wanting to move.</p> <p>The Council will retain the flexibility and discretion to offer assistance to vulnerable groups in specific accommodation. Households accepted as homeless will also have access to choice.</p>
7.0	<p><u>Consultations</u></p>
7.1	<p>Stakeholders, Members, Advocacy Workers and Tenant Representatives have been consulted and although several concerns were raised such as confidentiality and ensuring everyone is able to access the service, generally it was approved as a good idea and a major improvement to the way things are done now.</p>
7.2	<p>Callers to the Housing Advice Centre were asked for their opinion of the HomeChoice scheme and 96% said they thought it was a good idea.</p>
8.0	<p><u>Human Resource Implications</u></p>
8.1	<p>A temporary arrangement includes the secondment of the Lettings and Advice Manager for the set up of the scheme. This arrangement will cease 31st March 2002.</p>
8.2	<p>Current officer's working time will be channelled into assisting people with their choices. Currently much time is spent dealing with enquiries, as customers do not feel in control of their housing futures.</p>

9.0	<u>Environmental Implications</u>
	None
10.0	<u>Financial Implications</u>
10.1	The DTLR has agreed funding of £280,500 with the scheme ending in March 2003.
10.2	It is anticipated that as a result of fewer refusals of accommodation, void rates and relet times will be minimised and rent collection maximised.
11.0	<u>Youth Implications</u>
11.1	The Homeless Bill will give additional priority to young people; in particular those leaving care.
12.0	<u>Anti Poverty Implications</u>
12.1	We will continue to target the supply of affordable housing in the town to those with the greatest need.

13.0	<u>Summary/Conclusion/Options</u>
13.1	<p>1 To adopt policy as outlined in appendix 1 for the purposes of implementing the HomeChoice pilot.</p> <p>2 To delegate authority to the Director of Housing, Health and Community Finance, in conjunction with the Cabinet spokesperson to undertake fine tuning of the policy prior to full implementation.</p>
<p>Anita Aldridge</p> <p>HomeChoice Project Co-ordinator</p>	
<p>Appendix a. Homechoice policy</p>	
<p>Background Papers:</p> <p>Pilot application</p>	
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