



## CABINET REPORT

<b>Report Title</b>	<b>Choice Based Lettings review</b>
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**AGENDA STATUS: PUBLIC**

<b>Cabinet Meeting Date:</b>	25 <sup>th</sup> November 2009.
<b>Key Decision:</b>	No
<b>Listed on Forward Plan:</b>	Yes
<b>Within Policy:</b>	Yes
<b>Policy Document:</b>	Yes
<b>Directorate:</b>	Housing Directorate
<b>Accountable Cabinet Member:</b>	Councillor Sally Beardsworth
<b>Ward(s)</b>	All Ward Councillors

### 1. Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to inform members of the outcome of the review of the first year of the Choice Based Lettings scheme.

### 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 To note the review and outcomes of the first year of the Choice Based Lettings scheme.
- 2.2 To note the list of potential improvements to the scheme a number of which will be brought to a future cabinet for approval.
- 2.3 To note that further changes to the Council's Housing allocation scheme may be required following revised statutory guidance from government due later this year.
- 2.4 To agree to consult key stakeholders, Registered Social Landlords, and partner agencies on the proposed contents of the amendments to the Housing Allocations scheme.

### **3. Issues and Choices**

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#### **3.1 Report Background**

3.1.1 The system of allocating affordable housing is complex and poorly understood nationally and locally. The demands and pressures locally and nationally for affordable housing continue to grow due to the current economic climate. This leads to the perception that the housing allocations system is inflexible and unfair and the mistaken view that much housing goes to those who have no legitimate right to it. It is therefore, important that all Councils should challenge these myths and misunderstandings.

3.1.2 Northampton Borough Council's Choice Based Lettings scheme has to achieve the following requirements:

- Providing support for those in greatest housing need, including people who have experienced homelessness
- Ensuring allocations policies comply with equality legislation
- Promoting greater mobility for existing tenants
- Making better use of the existing stock
- Supporting people in work or seeking work
- Delivering policies which are fair and considered to be fair

3.1.3 Central Government has over time prescribed which customers should be provided with reasonable preference when allocating affordable housing. These categories are:

- People who are statutorily homeless
- People occupying insanitary or overcrowded housing or otherwise living in unsatisfactory living conditions
- People who need to move on medical or welfare grounds, including grounds leading to disability
- People who need to move to a particular locality in Northampton where failure to meet that need would cause hardship

#### **The Review**

3.1.4 Central Government introduced a national target for all Council's in England to introduce a Choice Based Lettings scheme before 2010. Northampton achieved this target and introduced its own Choice Based Lettings scheme on the 31<sup>st</sup> July 2008.

3.1.5 Northampton Borough Council's Choice Based Lettings scheme is a mechanism that gives customers more choice over where they live. In turn this should enable greater commitment to their new home, area and build viable and settled communities. This will reduce homelessness; and customers will stay in their homes longer if they have more choice about the home they live in.

3.1.6 Since the launch of the Northampton Borough Council's Choice Based Lettings scheme in July 2008, over 1,400 properties have been allocated in its first year of operation, with very high customer satisfaction rates.

3.1.7 The housing allocation's policy of placing customers in priority Bands from Emergency, Band A, Band B, Band C and Band D allows customers to understand the housing allocation policy and process and replaces the previous complicated and confusing points based lettings approach to ensure a more transparent framework is now provided. The existing allocations scheme is attached to this report as Appendix A for guidance.

3.1.8 Northampton Borough Council has now conducted a 12-month review of the operational effectiveness of the Choice Based Lettings scheme introduced on the 31<sup>st</sup> July 2008. This review considered the outcome of the customer consultation of 100% of customers currently on the Housing Register and a further customer consultation of 100% of the customers re-housed through the Choice Based Lettings scheme.

3.1.9 Appendix C identifies the main findings of the review and are as follows:

To date

- 1,430 properties have been allocated through the Choice Based Lettings scheme
- 70,192 bids have been submitted by customers for these properties
- The average number of bids for each property advertised is 49 (ranging from zero bids to over 300 for specific properties) This is comparable to other local authorities with a similar size of stock
- 92.45% of bids submitted are via the web site
- There are 7,175 households on the Housing Register
- The Council is complying with best practice principles when allocating accommodation and there is no discrimination on grounds of age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion or disability
- BME households are disproportionately represented on the housing register compared to overall population figures in Northampton. This is common nationally.

3.1.10 Northampton Borough Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee also conducted an Appreciative Enquiry during 2009, and the findings of this enquiry provide the framework for this report. The main findings of this Appreciative enquiry are the need to undertake surgeries across Northampton for customers, appoint Choice Officers to provide support and guidance to customers who are vulnerable or unable to submit bids, advertise properties in the local newspaper ensuring the newspaper displays the Northampton Borough Council logo, to provide a text support service for customers, to ensure the Choice Based Lettings web site has the relevant community languages translation service available, that additional support is provided to customers with mobility needs, to produce weekly rather than fortnightly bidding cycles, to produce quarterly newsletters for customers providing information on various new initiatives to offer solutions to customers being re-housed and offering guidance on who has been housed to breakdown myths and barriers to re-housing and finally to provide daily feedback on which priority band customer has been housed.

3.1.11 The Housing Solutions service has also compared the operational effectiveness of the Choice Based lettings scheme against the recently

published Communities and Local Government consultation paper on the statutory guidance on social housing allocations for local authorities in England “Fair and Flexible” report. The findings of this analysis is that Northampton Borough Council’s Choice Based Lettings scheme and Housing Allocations policy complies with this recently published consultation document and the only weakness of the Northampton Borough Council scheme compared to this document is the feedback to customers of what type of priority needs customer has been housed and the average waiting time for re-housing from each priority needs band. These issues have now been addressed and will be implemented on the 1<sup>st</sup> December 2009.

3.1.12 Analysing best practice examples nationally and discussing Northampton Borough Council’s current Choice Based Lettings scheme with local and regional partners completed the review.

### **3.2 Issues**

3.2.1 The statutory framework that governs the deliver of the Choice Based Lettings scheme and the Housing Allocations scheme allows Northampton Borough Council some flexibility to allocate accommodation to identified needs. However, the delivery of the Housing Allocations scheme is determined mainly by legislation and case law with limited flexibilities outside of this framework.

### **3.3 Choices (Options)**

3.3.1 It is clear that much has been achieved since the introduction of the Choice Based Lettings scheme but even greater achievements are required in the next 12 months to further increase customer and stakeholder satisfaction. The following is a list of potential enhancements to the Choice Based Lettings scheme that Cabinet will consider in February 2010:

- Potential weekly Choice Based Lettings scheme adverts moving from fortnightly
- Producing weekly newsletters for customers and no longer advertising in the Chronicle and Echo newspaper to reduce the cost of the scheme
- Community Language translation services on the Choice Based Lettings web site
- Linking the Choice Based Lettings scheme web site with Northampton Borough Council’s employment creation and education/training development work for customers
- Under-occupation scheme re-launched to address greater needs
- Developing a sub-regional Choice Based Lettings scheme with Daventry District Council and Leicester City Council
- The introduction of a regular text messaging information service to customers
- The introduction of weekly out of hours surgeries for customers taking place between 6 to 8pm at the Guildhall
- Introduction of Mutual Exchanges on to the Choice Based Lettings scheme web site
- Linking the Home Improvement and Disabled Facilities Grant work with the Choice Based Lettings scheme

- Publication of a quarterly newsletter to all customers on the Housing Register breaking down the myths and false perceptions, but also providing news on new initiatives and possible options to provide solutions to customers re-housing needs.
- Conducting six monthly customer satisfaction surveys in place of the current annual satisfaction surveys
- Designing an accessible housing register that sits within the Choice Based Lettings scheme to have a single data base for Northampton of all adapted and accessible housing.
- Northampton Borough Council may need to develop closer links with sub-regional Choice Based Lettings schemes in London and the South East as part of the Growth Agenda for Northamptonshire, to ensure the maximum provision of the new accommodation is obtained.
- Develop clear and comprehensive service standards in partnership with customers
- Produce Annual lettings plans with targets and performance information
- Design an in house family mediation service to prevent homelessness
- Undertake a new Equality Impact Assessment following the completion of this work
- 100% for the reasons for refusal needs to be inputted on to the IT to allow consistent reporting by Officers to elected members
- That Band C is removed from the Choice Based Lettings Allocations scheme and these 39 customers are merged within Band B currently consisting of 3678 customers
- Consider suspending applicants from the housing register where they fail to disclose personal data.

#### **4. Implications (including financial implications)**

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##### **4.1 Policy**

The review of the Choice Based Lettings scheme complies with the published Homelessness Strategy and the Housing Strategy.

##### **4.2 Resources and Risk**

The Choice based lettings scheme replaces the previous system of allocating properties and is fully resourced from within the Housing Solutions service. There is a potential risk in terms of the impact on void performance but this has not proved to be an issue during the first year of operation.

##### **4.3 Legal**

The review of the Choice Based Lettings scheme complies with the 1996 Housing Act, the 2002 Homelessness Act, the 2004 Housing Act, and the 2008 Housing and Regeneration Act, the 2002, 2008 and 2009 Code of Guidance on the Allocation of Accommodation.

##### **4.4 Equality**

The Choice Based Lettings scheme and the proposed improvements promote and comply with Equalities Bill, that is currently being considered by Parliament,

develops and takes forward the Equalities Standard work, and adopts national best practice principles and examples in the equality and diversity arena.

#### **4.5 Consultees (Internal and External)**

The following Directorates and Divisions within the Council have been consulted:

Director of Finance and Resources

Director of Housing

Head of Legal Services

Human Resources

Customer Services

#### **4.6 How the Proposals deliver Priority Outcomes**

Housing, Health and Wellbeing

#### **4.7 Other Implications**

None

### **5. Background Papers**

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**5.1** Northampton Borough Council's Housing Allocations scheme Appendix A

**5.2** The Communities and Local Government consultation paper Fair and Flexible Draft statutory guidance on social housing allocations for local authorities in England Appendix B.

**5.3** Executive Summary of the Statistical Analysis of the Choice Based Lettings scheme Appendix C. The Head of Housing Needs and Support holds the main report if Elected Members wish to view the full analysis.

**Fran Rodgers Head of Housing Needs and Support**