



## CABINET REPORT

<b>Report Title</b>	<b>Choice Based Lettings review and revised allocations policy changes</b>
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**AGENDA STATUS:** Public

<b>Cabinet Meeting Date:</b>	9 <sup>th</sup> June 2010.
<b>Key Decision:</b>	Yes
<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 To inform members of the outcome of a review of the first two years of the Choice Based Lettings scheme and to propose improvements to the scheme.
- 1.2 To consider the Tenant Services Authority new regulatory framework and how this framework affects the operational activities of the Choice Based Lettings scheme.
- 1.3 To consider the Communities and Local Government new statutory guidance "Fair and Flexible" and how this statutory guidance impacts upon the operational activities of the Choice Based Lettings scheme and the Housing Allocations scheme.
- 1.4 To consider the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Communities and Local Government best practice guidance "Allocations and Local Flexibility" and how this best practice guidance impacts upon the operational activities of the Choice Based Lettings scheme and the Housing Allocations scheme

## **2. Recommendations**

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2.1 That Cabinet notes the outcome of the review of the Choice Based Lettings scheme

2.2 That Cabinet agrees to the operational changes to the Choice Based Lettings scheme and agrees the changes to the Housing Allocations policy contained in Appendix F.

## **3. Issues and Choices**

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### **3.1 Report Background**

3.1.1. Affordable housing plays an important role in providing accommodation for a wide range of households, including some of the most vulnerable in society. Its contribution to wider public policy concerns such as the creation of socially cohesive communities, educational performance, health improvements and economic opportunities is well accepted nationally and local within Northampton.

3.1.2 Central Government introduced a national target for all Council's in England to introduce a Choice Based Lettings scheme by 2010. Northampton achieved this target and introduced its own Choice Based Lettings scheme on the 31<sup>st</sup> July 2008. 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 then reduce homelessness; as customers will stay in their homes longer if they have more choice about the home they live in.

3.1.3 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. The proposed housing allocations scheme is attached to this report as Appendix A for guidance.

3.1.4 Northampton Borough Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee conducted an Appreciative Enquiry during 2009/2010, and the findings of this enquiry provide the framework for this report and the proposed service improvements.

3.1.5 The Housing Solutions service have compared the operational effectiveness of the Choice Based lettings scheme against the recently published Communities and Local Government on the statutory guidance on social housing allocations for local authorities in England "Fair and Flexible" and the changes to the Housing Allocations scheme and operational effectiveness of the Choice Based lettings fully comply with this statutory guidance. The proposed changes following the introduction of this statutory guidance to the Housing Allocations scheme are contained in Appendix A and are highlighted in bold.

- 3.1.6 The Housing Solutions service has also compared the operational effectiveness of the Choice Based lettings scheme against the recently published Tenant Services Authority new regulatory framework and how this framework affects the operational activities of the Choice Based lettings scheme. Appendix B highlights how the Choice Based Lettings scheme at Northampton Borough Council complies with these regulatory standards.
- 3.1.7 The Housing Solutions service has also compared the proposed new Housing Allocations scheme and the proposed changes to the Choice Based Lettings scheme with the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Communities and Local Government Best Practice guide published in March 2010, (the proposed changes to our current policies and practices are contained below.) Please note Northampton Borough Council has been referred to within this publication as a best practice example in this area of work and can be found on pages 30 and 46.

## **3.2 Issues**

- 3.2.1 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 sometimes 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, and provide clear and transparent priorities and opportunities under the scheme.
- 3.2.2 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
- 3.2.3 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

## **Challenges**

- 3.2.4 The existing challenges facing the Choice Based Lettings scheme are the growing numbers of customers seeking affordable housing due to the economic climate. There are now over 8,200 households on the housing register with 31 new households joining the Choice Based Lettings Housing Register each day. Consequently by the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2011, there are likely to be over 10,000 households on the Housing Register seeking accommodation from 1,350 affordable housing vacancies each year. It is clear that accessing appropriate affordable housing will be essential to meet increasing demand, maintain the economic stability of the local economy and reduce tensions between and within the communities of Northampton.
- 3.2.5 This will be achieved by producing six monthly newsletters and providing feedback information on who has been housed and the timescale for re-housing in each priority needs bands. This information can also include information whether particular accommodation is likely to be available and how long they are likely to wait for accommodation, by making available general information about how often property of that type/size/location and accessibility and the general estimated waiting times for each property type.

## **Choice and Options**

- 3.2.6 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 increase further customer and stakeholder satisfaction and to keep the Northampton Borough Council Choice Based Lettings scheme ahead of most other schemes nationally through these developments.

## **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. The potential changes to the Choice Based Lettings scheme and the published Housing Allocations scheme relate to refinements to the scheme rather than fundamental changes and these changes follow the guidance issued by central Government.

### **4.2 Resources and Risk**

None

### **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 the Equalities Act, and takes forward the Equalities Standard work, its also adopts

national best practice principles and examples in the equality and diversity arena. There are areas that require attention in terms of access to the Choice Based Lettings scheme web site for customers whose first language is not English and customers with sight impairment or dyslexia.

#### **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**

Appendix A: Northampton Borough Council's Proposed New Housing Allocations scheme

Appendix B: The Tenant Services Authority Regulatory Framework for Housing Allocations

Appendix C: The Communities and Local Government Fair and Flexible statutory guidance on social housing allocations for local authorities in England Appendix C

[www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/allocationsstatutoryguidance](http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/allocationsstatutoryguidance)

Appendix D: The Chartered Institute of Housing and the Communities and Local Government Departments Best Practice Guidance Allocations and Local Flexibility

Appendix E: Statistical Analysis of the Choice Based Lettings scheme.

Appendix F: Service Improvements to the Choice Based Lettings Framework identified through the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Appreciative Enquiry

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