

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Environment and Prosperity Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting: 5th July 2011
Report of: Strategic Housing Service
Subject/Title: Cheshire Homechoice – Allocation Policy Review
Portfolio Holder:

1.0 Report Summary

- 1.1 Cheshire Homechoice (CHC) is the Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Partnership between Cheshire East Council and the Registered providers that allocate Social Housing in Cheshire East. It uses a system of advertised properties and expressions of interest alongside the Allocation Policy to determine how social housing is allocated.
- 1.2 CHC has been operating effectively for 12 months. However there are some areas of the allocation policy that need improving or reviewing in the light of lessons learnt and proposed government changes through the Localism Bill.
- 1.3 A review of the Allocation policy is being undertaken by a policy review group set up by CHC which will take account of views of partners and customers.. The policy review is scheduled for completion by December 2011.

2.0 Recommendation

- 2.1 To consider the contents of this report

3.0 Reasons for Recommendation

- 3.1 This report has been prepared to provide information on the reasoning behind the policy review

4.0 Wards Affected

- 4.1 All wards are affected

5.0 Local Ward Members

- 5.1 All ward members

6.0 Policy Implications including - Climate Change - Health

- 6.1 Health - There is a considerable amount of evidence which demonstrates the savings to health and social care of social housing being allocated to those most in need.

7.0 Financial Implications

7.1 None

8.0 Legal implications (authorised by the Borough Solicitor)

8.1 Under Part V1 of the Housing Act 1996 local authorities are required to have an allocations policy and procedure in place to allocate social housing and under Part V11 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by Homelessness Act 2002) to make provision for homeless households.

9.0 Risk Management

9.1 The review of the common allocations policy will ensure that there is a consistent approach to the allocation of social housing across the partnership.

10.0 Background

10.1 **Lessons learnt report** – Recently Cheshire Peaks and Plains Housing Trust, Plus Dane Group, Wulvern Housing and Cheshire East Council Homechoice team were consulted on what has worked and what has not under Cheshire homechoice. They agreed what the main lessons learnt were.

10.2 What worked well –

- the whole process has been quicker and easier for partners and the majority of clients
- increased ability for people to move from supported accommodation into independent living and a speeding up of this process
- those with high medical needs have been rehoused with high priority
- transparency and accessibility for clients
- one system for whole of Cheshire East
- the star system is easier to explain and understand

10.3 What hasn't worked as well and how we aim to address this

- Allowing priority for housing to be awarded under the heading of medical or welfare without any guidance on how to assess the relative weight of the whole range of medical and welfare issues that are presented has given rise to confusion. We anticipate that providing examples and further clarification based on trends that have been identified throughout the last 12 months should address this.
- We will be addressing the issue whereby those whose high banding priority has enabled them to override others who it would be reasonable to expect would have a greater housing need by tightening up the current anomaly of cumulative banding. This is where an applicant who has more than one reason for being given priority accumulates a doubling up or tripling of weighting that leads to a relatively unfair priority. For example where there is a medical factor that gives rise to a welfare factor both are weighted and could enable the applicant to be given higher priority than someone with a more serious medical problem.
- Dealing with Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) can be difficult as there is no facility for taking account of different levels of seriousness. At present all serious

ASB leads to automatic suspension from the list but there are no sanctions available for less serious ASB. Introducing a reduced preference facility in such cases would be an improvement.

- There are lettings in certain areas within Cheshire East that stipulate tenants need to demonstrate a connection to the local area or the community which the property is in. The type of connection needing to be demonstrated is not clear enough at present and is causing difficulties in deciding between prospective tenants. For example, do we offer a property to someone who works in the area or to someone whose children go to school in the area?. Feedback from Parish Councils suggests we should include contributions in volunteering with voluntary sector and faith groups to the benefit of the community
- Certain types of property are in short supply and there is a high demand for them e.g. family homes. There can be single people or couples without dependant children who remain in these properties. There needs to be a facility to prioritise rehousing those tenants to free up properties and achieve the best use of housing stock. The banding system needs to be able to award the appropriate level of priority to enable the people in high demand properties to move to a property more appropriate to their needs.

11.0 **The Localism Bill** is currently going through the House of Lords. It is not expected that any significant changes will be made to it therefore the policy review will include making provision for compliance. Whilst the Bill impacts on a number of areas this report only covers those that relate to housing allocations policy. The Localism Bill Consultation document included:-

- Providing for a new form of flexible tenure for social housing tenants. This will be addressed in the Cheshire East Council Tenancy Strategy.
- Giving local authorities the power to limit who can apply for social housing within their areas. Although we acknowledge we have the power to limit applications for social housing there are several reasons why we don't want to restrict the Housing register.
 - ❖ The Strategic Housing Service is planning to utilise CHC as an enhanced housing options hub. The benefit of using CHC as a single point of contact means that people in housing need will be able to see all options available to them. We anticipate that this will include adaptations and support options to keep them in their current home as well as displaying a range of alternative accommodation types such as Extracare, affordable housing or property in the private rented sector. This will promote even greater choice and discourages dependency on social housing.
 - ❖ A further benefit of allowing people with lower levels of housing need to apply ensures social housing estates do not become areas of concentrated deprivation making these areas harder to manage and harder for residents to aspire to be socially mobile.
 - ❖ There have been concerns raised that not restricting the waiting list would raise the expectations of some applicants when it is clear that social housing would not be an option. Instead Cheshire Homechoice would become a housing options system with social rented/affordable rent being just one option and the system could generate a housing

options report for individuals which would state they are not eligible for social housing, but would be eligible to express interest in the other products. We would be able to collate a lot of useful information which would influence future development for other affordable housing products and provide a better service.

- Improving the ability of social tenants to move to different areas. There would be no change to policy required as there is an opportunity within the current policy to do this. A local connection or a medical or welfare need to move to a certain area can be cited as a reason for priority when applying to transfer.

12.0 The Housing Consultants report into Homechoice allocations policy.

A housing consultant was asked to review the policy and suggested the following amendments to ensure the policy meets government requirements, is legally compliant and not open to challenge.

- Provide greater clarity on serious unacceptable behaviour that would warrant exclusion or reduced preference
- Introduce reduced preference because of a range of more minor factors including former arrears and no local connection
- Further clarification needed on how discretion applied
- Giving additional preference through a local lettings policy for those who bid with a specific community connection if applied to fairly large settlements of up to 3000 residents could lead to a large proportion of overall lettings going to applicants not owed reasonable preference which could be challenged.

13.0 Feedback from customers

- There have been very few formal complaints about Homechoice and those received have been more about procedure rather than policy. A review of procedures will be undertaken following the policy review
- 80% of review requests relate to additional information being provided to support medical or welfare needs priority. The review group will look at how best to highlight the need to provide relevant information to support initial assessment.

The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting the report writer:

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