



## Community & Regeneration Scrutiny Committee

### Briefing Paper

Report of: Sally Horne  
Principal Strategic Housing Officer  
Date: 8<sup>th</sup> October 2009  
Open

## Update Report on the Provision of Choice Based Lettings for the Allocation of Properties from the Housing Register

### 1. Summary

- 1.1 The report provides Members with an update on the delivery of the Choice Based Lettings (CBL), highlighting how the system has impacted upon service delivery since it was introduced in September 2008 and outlining future work.

### 2. Background

- 2.1 On 18<sup>th</sup> July 2007, Full Council approved the recommendation that Wyre Forest participate in the South Housing Market Area Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings Scheme (now more commonly known as Home Choice Plus) and delegated authority to the Head of Planning, Health and the Environment to finalise and agree the Wyre Forest CBL scheme in order for it's implementation in December 2007.
- 2.2 This decision was made against the context, that the Government required all Councils to adopt a CBL model by 2010 and had awarded the South Housing Market Area Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings partnership funding to assist in the implementation.
- 2.3 There are currently 6 authorities in the Home Choice Plus Partnership. These are Bromsgrove District Council, Malvern Hills District Council, Stratford-on-Avon District Council, Worcester City Council, Wychavon District Council and Wyre Forest District Council. It is expected that Redditch Borough Council (who already operate a similar Choice Based Lettings scheme) will be joining the partnership following the 12 month review of the Home Choice Plus Scheme.

- 2.4 The Home Choice Plus Scheme has the following six guiding principles:
- Keep it simple and accessible
  - Retain local branding for partners
  - Ensure local flexibility
  - Provide for cross tenure needs encompassing a housing options approach
  - Ensure it is cost efficient
  - Ensure it provides good reporting facilities
- 2.5 In line with these guiding principles, the Home Choice Plus Partnership agreed a joint allocations policy and banding structure that allows applicants to access six local authorities housing registers and properties in an accessible and transparent manner but also allows authorities to award housing to those in highest need with a local connection. The allocations policy which explains the banding and eligibility for the scheme is in Appendix 1 of this report.
- 2.6 The Home Choice Scheme replaced the Housing Register Points system in Wyre Forest on September 30<sup>th</sup> 2008. This report raises the key findings following nearly 12 months of the system being operated in Wyre Forest and highlights future work for the authority as part of the Home Choice Plus Partnership.

### **3. Key Issues**

- 3.1 Since the launch of Home Choice Plus on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2008, there have been 2,353 applications for the Wyre Forest housing waiting list. Of this total 1,850 households are new (register) applicants and 503 are applicants already housed seeking a transfer. There are currently 1,964 applicants actively seeking housing, 94 closed or cancelled applications, 16 households whose application has been suspended or waiting to be registered and 277 households who have been housed since the Home Choice Plus scheme went live.
- 3.2 96% of the 277 lettings were let through Wyre Forest Community Housing, 2% were let through Waterloo and 2% were housed outside of the district.

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- 3.3 79% of the 277 lettings have been to new applicants and 21% to transfer applicants. Of these 277 lettings;

<b>Banding</b>	Total	Family	Couple	Single	Elderly
Priority	57	39	0	12	6
Gold Plus	164	44	10	66	44
Gold	18	3	2	7	6
Silver Plus	2	1	0	1	0
Silver	2	1	0	1	0
Bronze Plus	27	1	2	18	7
Bronze	7	1	1	3	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>65</b>

- 3.4 Two households from outside the area have been rehoused in Wyre Forest since the launch of Home Choice Plus. Within the same period six households in Wyre Forest have been housed outside of the district.

- 2 households in Gold Plus have been housed in Wychavon
- 1 household in Gold has been housed in Wychavon
- 1 household in Silver Plus has been housed in Worcester
- 1 household in Bronze Plus has been housed in Worcester
- 1 household in Bronze in Malvern

<b>Banding</b>	Total	Family	Couple	Single	Elderly
Gold Plus	2	0	0	0	2
Gold	1	0	0	1	0
Silver Plus	1	0	0	0	1
Bronze Plus	1	0	0	0	1
Bronze	1	0	0	0	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>

- 3.5 The analysis in 3.2 and 3.3 show that generally households in the highest need, within the district are being allocated housing through Home Choice Plus. There is some movement of households between the districts but the number of households moving into Wyre Forest is limited compared to other districts that have seen higher numbers of households being allocated properties from outside their district boundaries.

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- 3.6 The analysis in 3.2 shows that some of the households in the lower bands are being housed. There are particularly significant numbers in Bronze Plus who have obtained housing (when compared to the other categories). When analysed further, the majority of people rehoused through Bronze plus are households who are eligible for sheltered housing.
- 3.7 Communities and Local Government (CLG) has issued a consultation paper upon the proposed statutory guidance on social housing allocations for Local Authorities in England. Within that document, CLG state that Local Authorities must continue to support those in greatest housing need, provide settled homes for people who have experienced homelessness and promote greater equality. CLG strongly support sub regional choice based lettings schemes as a way of promoting greater choice, mobility and wider options for tenants. However as part of this guidance, CLG are keen that local authorities involve, consult and raise awareness with local communities about their allocation policies. The paper also continues CLG's emphasis on cross boundary moves being utilised as a way of assisting people gain employment whilst also recognising the importance of local connection to an area.
- 3.8 Therefore, as part of a planned review, the Home Choice Plus partners will be consulting with a sample of households on the register and talking to partner Registered Social Landlords and other relevant partners about the allocation policy. The partnership will also be reviewing all the connected policies and procedures such as the Equality Impact Assessment, the Accessibility Strategy and the allocations system. It is anticipated that this review will be completed by March 2010 and any amendments to the Allocation Policy will be brought to Members after that date. A copy of the timetable for this work is attached at Appendix 1.
- 3.9 To date, anecdotal evidence from a range of partner organisations has been positive, with many feeling that the new system is more transparent and gives the customer a more realistic view on what housing is available to them. The majority of the organisations involved have not expressed concerns about customers experiencing difficulties accessing Home Choice Plus but the review will pay particular attention to whether elderly and households from the BME community are accessing the system effectively. There are a number of households on the system who have registered but not bid and as part of the review, these households will be written out to, to find out if they are experiencing any difficulties in accessing the system and what support is needed to ensure that customers can bid for properties.

**4. Options**

- 4.1 This report provides Members with an update on the Home Choice Plus scheme following its implementation in Wyre Forest on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2008. The report gives Members the opportunity to comment upon the scheme and the planned review.

**5. Consultation**

- 5.1 Wyre Forest Community Housing is regularly consulted through the Home Choice Plus partnership and through monthly update meetings between the Council's Housing Strategy Team and Wyre Forest Community Housing's Housing Needs Department.
- 5.2 Other partners consulted include the Hub staff, Waterloo HA, Wyre Forest Citizens Advice Bureau, Connexions, Stonham, Bromford and Wyre Forest Night Stop.

**6. Related Decisions**

- 6.1 Cabinet Report 28th June 2007: Cabinet approved the introduction of a Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme in Wyre Forest and gave delegated authority to the Head of Planning, Health and the Environment with the Cabinet member for Housing, Health and Rural Affairs to finalise, agree and implement the scheme.

**7. Relevant Council Policies/Strategies**

- 7.1 Housing Strategy Action Plan 2004-2007
- 7.2 The County Homelessness Strategy 2007-2011

**8. Implications**

- 8.1 Resources: There are ongoing resource implications through annual software charges of £9,500 which is shared with Community Housing. As part of the review, officers will be looking at how the system can be used to pay for itself, so for example, asking partners to pay to advertise properties as they do in other local authority areas.
- 8.2 Equalities: An equalities impact assessment has been undertaken by the Home Choice Plus Partnership and an Accessibility Strategy has been written. The planned review will look at the accessibility of the system and consider how we can ensure equality of access for all groups of people.

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- 8.3 Partnership working: The Home Choice Plus partnership consists of the 5 Worcestershire authorities and Stratford upon Avon and is operated in partnership with the majority of Registered Social Landlords who have properties in those areas.
- 8.4 Human Rights: There are no implications.
- 8.5 E-Government: The system helps Wyre Forest meet the E-Government agenda by advertising and allowing bids on properties on the internet, interactive TV and on the Telephone.
- 8.6 Best Value: Due to the partnership arrangements, best value has been achieved on the software costs, staff resource and everyday running of the system.

### **9. Wards affected**

- 9.1 All wards of the district are affected by Home Choice Plus.

### **10. Appendices**

- 10.1 Home Choice Plus Partnership

### **11. Background Papers**

- 11.1 Home Choice Allocation Policy

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**Appendix 1: Timetable for Home Choice Plus Review**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Detail</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Lead</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Customer experience	Survey and Focus groups	Sept – December 2009	Kate Bailey	Develop survey based on Bromsgrove (by October) Distribute survey and RIU to analyse results (by November) Organise focus groups and feed in results (by December)
Allocation policy and legal compliance	Code of guidance Allocation of social housing Equalities Bill	September 2009	Elaine Salter	Utilise work undertaken by SDC to compare policy to guidance to update policy and incorporate allocation consultation and equalities bill as appropriate.
Accessibility procedure	Review accessibility procedure in light of responses to customer survey	December 2009	Sally Horne	
Partner experience	Stakeholder focus groups including smaller RSL,s, voluntary orgs etc	November 2009	tbc	Hold stakeholder focus groups / send questionnaire to review partner experience of Home Choice Plus

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<b>Activity</b>	<b>Detail</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Lead</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Data interrogation and outcomes from allocation policy to ensure it meets our objectives	Covering mobility issues and supporting cross boundary moves and outcomes from this including gaining employment, support etc	January	tbc	Interrogate reports from system to ensure allocations have matched policy objectives for rehousing from bandings, cross boundary etc
Review of the Equality Impact Assessment	Review actions and progress against these and then update in line with allocation policy changes	February	Amanda Glennie	Review in light of customer surveys, allocation report outcomes and changes to legislation through code of guidance etc.
Allocation Policy approval	Amended allocation policy to be taken through relevant committees for agreement	March	Strategic leads	Ensure any allocation policy changes are agreed by District Councils after consultation with customers and stakeholders and following review.
Application form and customer information	To be reviewed once allocation policy completed	March	tbc	Ensure application form and information given to customers matches changes to policy / website etc
Website review	To be reviewed and updates agreed once customer satisfaction survey completed	February – March	tbc	Ensure information up to date and comprehensive

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<b>Activity</b>	<b>Detail</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Lead</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Reports	Developing and standardising reports with Arbritas (£600 per day)	January – March	Amanda Mobbs	Arrange training date with Arbritas to write suite of reports for SHMA information and ensure filed separately and not amendable.
User group, stakeholder & customer issues	Ensure standardised process for various housekeeping tasks including scanning etc – develop an operational procedure manual to ensure consistency	November onwards	Liza Handley	Establish user group and work through issues to develop consistency in housekeeping functions as agreed with the HC+ steering group (operational).