

**Review of the Home-Link Scheme & the Council's Lettings Policy
(Report by the Head of Housing Services)**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In February 2008 the Council introduced a choice based lettings scheme, branded Home-Link. This changed the way in which housing association properties in the district were let, from a system where officers allocated properties to households on the Housing Register based on their areas of choice, to one where the applicant is able to express an interest, or bid, for specific vacant properties. Through this scheme properties available for letting are openly advertised so that applicants on the Register are able to see what is available and, within certain criteria, make choices as to what they would like to bid for.
- 1.2 The Home-link scheme was introduced in partnership with the six other councils that form the Cambridge sub region and attracted funding from central government to help with the set up costs of the scheme. Each partner reviewed their individual Lettings Policies and agreed a common priority system as part of the scheme so that Register applicants across the sub region have their overall priority for housing assessed in the same way. Cabinet approved the adoption of Huntingdonshire's new Lettings Policy in July 2007 and this was introduced in February 2008 when the scheme went live. This changed the priority assessment from a points based system to a broader brush priority band system. All applicants on the Register are now prioritised under this banding system.
- 1.3 At the time of agreeing the new Lettings Policy and approval to implement the Home-Link scheme, Cabinet recommended it receive a report on the progress of the Home-Link scheme within 12 months of its implementation. The Home-link partnership has carried out a review of the scheme over the last few months and this report highlights the findings.

2. SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

- 2.1 The review considered Home-Link's strategic and operational issues, and involved consultation with housing association partners, statutory and voluntary agencies, as well as customers of the scheme to gauge their experiences and views. A detailed report on the review's initial findings and recommendations was considered by the Home-Link Management Board on 6 March 2009. The Management Board

consists of chief housing officers of all the local authority partners as well as representatives from the housing association partners. Steve Plant is Huntingdonshire's representative on this board. The areas covered by the review and the issues raised included:

- 2.2 **Performance Management Information.** The Home-Link IT system holds a great deal of information about the demand for social housing, the circumstances of people applying for housing, and the letting of council and housing association properties across the sub region. The Management Board has requested that the reports produced from the IT system be refined to produce a range of performance management data and other information. This may then be used to inform the development of the Home-Link scheme and also give councils information that will be useful in delivering affordable housing on new sites across the sub region.
- 2.3 **Developing the Home-Link brand.** The initial plan was to establish the core function of the Home-Link scheme to let social rented properties by advertising them to applicants on the Housing Register. It was then hoped that the scheme would be extended to advertise low cost home ownership properties, including key worker housing as well as privately rented properties. This would then give households a range of property tenures that they could consider to try and meet their housing need. Having consulted with applicants on the Register throughout the first year of operation, over 70% of respondents said they would like to see privately rented housing advertised through Home-Link. This piece of work is due to be progressed through a project that the Cambridgeshire councils are currently involved in called the Enhanced Housing Options programme. The partnership is also in discussion with Key Homes East, the agent for delivering low cost homeownership housing, as to how they may make use of Home-Link to advertise their properties.
- 2.4 **Accessing and understanding the Home-Link scheme.** The Home-Link partnership sent a questionnaire to 10% of the households on the Housing Registers across the Cambridge sub region to ask their views on the Home-Link scheme, a total of over 2,200 households. Although only 364 responded this gave some interesting feedback:
- 79% of respondents understand how the scheme works.
 - 73% report they have enough information to allow them to use the scheme.
 - 72% know where/how to obtain a copy of property magazine or find out what properties are available.
 - 46% knew they could subscribe to the property magazine for a fee.
 - 18% of respondents state they have never bid because they have difficulty in understanding or using the scheme.

- Of the 18% above who did not bid because of difficulties understanding and using the scheme:
 - 12% had difficulties accessing the scheme due to lack of computer facilities, unable to get/afford magazine.
 - 8% said they needed help with accessing the scheme.
 - 5% were not aware of Home-Link.

What did respondents like most about the scheme?

- Top responses – Ease of use; transparency of the scheme; choice – not only of property but the increase in geographical area.

What did respondents like least about the scheme?

- Top responses – Not enough houses; complicated system; lack of feedback; don't like the system; unfair process; band C & D disadvantaged.

Overall rating of the scheme.

Good/Excellent – 40%

Average – 25%

Poor – 35%

2.5 Communications and raising awareness of the support available –

As some of the responses to the customer questionnaire above indicate, even from a small sample of households on the Register, it suggests there are still a significant number of people who do not fully understand how the Home-Link scheme works and/or require help to be able to access the scheme and bid for properties. This was one of the main concerns raised at the time the scheme was launched and as a result:

- A welcome pack is sent to everyone applying to the Register giving details of how the scheme works and the ways in which they can get information on the properties available and how they may bid for properties.
- The agencies able to offer support to customers were trained on the Home-Link scheme with many signing up to an 'Access Strategy' giving details of the type of support they may offer customers.
- Customer Contact and Call Centre staff within each council were trained on Home-Link so that they can advise and help customers.

2.6 As it appears that some people may still not be able to use the Home-Link system the Management Board has recommended that a Communications Strategy be put together to make sure that the

information regarding Home-Link and the places that support can be provided are publicised as widely as possible in order to help those people who may require help. This would also include an on-going training plan for other agencies to ensure they are kept up to date with the scheme and are confident about advising their customers about the scheme.

2.7 Lettings Policy issues. The review considered whether there were any aspects of the Lettings Policies of each of the partners that affected their ability to deliver their legal duties and strategic objectives in relation to meeting their own local housing needs. This part of the review was particularly important for two reasons:

- Ensuring that the relative weighting awarded to different housing circumstances within the common priority system of the Home-Link scheme (the banding system), did not restrict those in perceived greatest need being prioritised for housing.
- Ensuring that the policies were legal and complied with the relevant legislation.

2.8 Each partner felt that the banding system prioritised those households in greatest need and generally only minor changes to wording in the policy have been recommended. The only recommendation for change to the banding system was that applicants who were homeless and sleeping rough should have a higher priority than the band C priority the policy awarded. The logic to this was that other applicants awarded band C priority included people living in properties where they had to share facilities, such as a bathroom and a kitchen. A person without a roof over their head should therefore have a higher priority and a recommendation was made that they be awarded a band B priority. It is proposed that this Council adopts this recommendation.

2.9 Several choice based lettings schemes have faced legal challenge relating to how they prioritise households on their Register. It is sensible to review our policy in line with the rulings made in any of these cases so that any necessary changes may be made. Changes to policy would require formal adoption by Cabinet and so members will be kept informed of any legal rulings that impact on the Council's Lettings Policy. This will be an on-going process as any legal challenges and rulings emerge.

3. CONCLUSION

3.1 The Home-Link scheme has had a positive first year of operation and it continues to have encouraging feedback in terms of its transparency and ease of use, particularly amongst those applicants that use the website as a means of finding vacant properties and placing bids. The partnership recognises thought that it needs to continue to promote the scheme widely and ensure that the most vulnerable households in

housing need are supported so that they can participate in the scheme. This will include reviewing the Access Strategy and support voluntary and statutory agencies provide their clients and ensuring that any gaps in support provision are filled. This will be one of the major pieces of work over the coming months.

- 3.2 It is felt that the Council's Lettings Policy ensures that those households in greatest need continue to receive priority for housing and it has therefore only required minor amendments. The Policy will however remain open for review in the light of changing local circumstances and rulings on legal challenges against choice based lettings schemes elsewhere in the country. Any changes will be brought back to members as required.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 It is recommended that Scrutiny Panel:

- a) note the findings of the review of the scheme and the planned enhancements to Home-Link;
- b) support the proposal to Cabinet for the amendment to the Lettings Policy for homeless rough sleepers; and
- c) determine if there are any comments that the Panel would like Cabinet to consider or note.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Choice Based Lettings & Lettings Policy report – Cabinet July 2007

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