

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Scrutiny and Overview Committee 4th March 2010
AUTHOR/S: Corporate Manager – Affordable Homes / Housing advice
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Portfolio Holder: Cllr Mark Howell

CHOICE BASED LETTINGS – ACCESS TO THE SCHEME

Purpose

1. To review the actions already in place under the Home-Link scheme to ensure all applicants are able to access the scheme.

Options

2. The Committee may note the progress made with the Home-link scheme, in terms of joint working and actions in place to enable access onto the scheme, including the sub-regional actions within the development plan of the scheme.
3. The Committee may wish to recommend additional actions, outlined in the report that could be carried out, subject to sufficient additional funds being available.

Executive Summary

4. The home-link scheme requires applicants to actively bid for properties in order to be short listed for an offer of accommodation. A number of safeguards are in place to ensure that all applicants know how the scheme works and that assistance can be provided to those more vulnerable applicants who need help to bid on available properties. In addition, there is a large amount of joint working with other agencies and local authorities in the sub-region to raise awareness of the scheme and to provide assistance to the vulnerable people they support.

Background

5. SCDC are one of the partners in the Cambridge sub-regional choice based lettings scheme which replaced the points based waiting list system in Feb 2008. Instead of properties being allocated via a waiting list, SCDC properties are advertised every two weeks and applicants can express an interest or “bid” for up to 3 properties per advertising cycle. Priority is rated by band from A to D with A being the highest. Where 2 or more applicants within the same priority band bid, priority is given to the applicant with the longest date in band.
6. Under the Home-link scheme applicants can bid for properties through any of the following methods:
 - Via the home-link website;
 - By telephone
 - By text message
 - Through a postal coupon

7. The first year's review of the scheme showed that the proportion of non-bidding applicants registered with South Cambridgeshire District Council was 75.52%, across all priority bands.
8. Accessibility is recognised as being of primary importance amongst Home-link partners across the sub region. It remains a priority for the Home-link Management board to increase levels of accessibility for those who may be vulnerable or disadvantaged in using the system. This is being addressed through a number of strategies included in the Sub-regional development plan and supported locally by SCDC. Development actions completed and/or in progress so far include:
 - Awareness sessions for organisations working with disadvantaged clients
 - Forward training plan commencing in 2010 including RSLs, Local Authorities and service users
 - Development of Makaton guide
 - Increasing the number of partners signed up to the Access Strategy.
 - Review of the access strategy, including local reviews of the equality impact assessments.

Considerations

9. At the beginning of February 2010, the number of non-bidding applicants in South Cambridgeshire District Council was 2827, out of 4310 applicants (a proportion of 65.59% - an improvements on the previously reported 75.52%). Whilst this may initially still seem high, a further breakdown of non-bidders between the housing needs bands show that the majority of non-bidders are in bands C and D, who are not therefore recognised as having significant housing needs.

Non-bidding applicants

Band A	Band B	Band C	Band D	Total
79	157	1288	1303	2827

10. A number of safeguards are included within the scheme in order to identify and help any applicants who have difficulty accessing the scheme. Contact is made with applicants at the point when they make their initial application. At this stage information is sent to them about the scheme and officers check that they understand how the scheme operates and whether further assistance is required.
11. In addition to this regular checks are made of non-bidding applicants in Bands A & B and all applicants in these bands, who have not bid, have been written to twice. In many cases we are aware that applicants, whilst being awarded high priority, are making a conscious decision not to bid for properties as they have very specific preferences or do not currently wish to move. The most common housing need amongst non-bidding applicants is medical reasons, followed by under-occupation. In relation to medical need, many of these applicants transferred from the old points system into Band A or B, based on the points awarded to them under the old scheme. In many cases the applicants do not wish to move yet, but anticipate a future need as a result of their health. In relation to under-occupation, these are applicants wishing to move to a smaller property and, in many cases, are likely to be waiting for a specific type of property or have registered with a view to moving at some point in the future if the right property becomes available. In other cases we will contact the individual applicants to ask them if they understand how the scheme operates and whether they would like any assistance which can include:

- Personalised free sheet – a personalised list of properties suitable for the applicant is sent directly to them.
 - Assisted bidding – staff place bids on behalf of the applicant based on the applicants preferences for property type and location.
 - Providing a direct let - for statutorily homeless applicants who have not successfully bid after 3 months where this is appropriate, or other applicants who may be very vulnerable and/or those with an urgent need.
12. At present there are 27 applicants currently registered on the assisted bidders list and 32 have been housed, as a result of assisted bidding. In addition, personalised free sheets are sent to 16 applicants each bidding cycle (and 11 applicants have been rehoused as a result).
13. As a sub-regional scheme, there is much greater awareness of the lettings scheme across the county amongst other key agencies who offer support to vulnerable people, and joint working is in place to help enable access onto the scheme for vulnerable people. This includes:
- An access strategy which all partners and support agencies have been asked to sign up to.
 - A distribution list of support agencies, to which the fortnightly property magazine is sent.
 - Regular representation on, and updates provided to, the Disability Housing Strategic Network.
 - Awareness sessions held for support agencies.
 - Awareness and Q & A sessions planned for applicants as part of the sub-regional Home-Link forward training plan.
 - Raise awareness of the scheme and highlight ways to access the scheme via the planned introduction of newsletters later this year.
 - Cross training with other services/ support agencies.
14. Additional actions could be put into place, however, these are unlikely to be achieved within the existing staffing resources. This may include:
- A questionnaire to non-bidders in band A & B to establish and confirm their reasons for not bidding.
 - A reassessment of the priority banding of non-bidding applicants.
 - A more detailed review of non-bidding in bands C & D.
 - The permanent or temporary removal of non-bidding applicants from the housing register, following a re-assessment of their needs and reasons for not bidding.
 - The addition of another status for live applicants, who wish to remain on the list but have acknowledged that they do not currently wish to bid on properties (applicants with such a status would still be able to bid should they chose to, but this would help for monitoring purposes).

Implications

15.	Financial	Potentially, additional expenditure on staffing resources, if additional actions, outlined in the report, are recommended.
	Legal	None
	Staffing	Additional short term staffing required to carry out additional actions suggested in the report.

Risk Management	Contained within the CBL policy document – above actions are in place to prevent the risk of applicants being unable to access the home-link scheme
Equal Opportunities	Sub regional Equal Opportunities issues are contained within the CBL policy document and an Equality Impact Assessment has been completed.

Consultations

16. A consultation exercise took place prior to adopting the home-link scheme and new lettings policy, and during the sub-regional review of the scheme after its first year of operation.

Effect on Corporate Objectives and Service Priorities

17.	Being a listening Council, providing first class services to all
	Contact is made with new housing register applicants. A rolling review of housing register applicants is underway, and non-bidding applicants in band A and B are checked to ensure that are fully aware of the system and to check whether they require any assistance.
	Ensuring that South Cambridgeshire continues to be a safe and healthy place
	Making South Cambridgeshire a place in which residents can feel proud to live
	One of the main principals of the home-link scheme is to give more choice to applicants about where they want to live.
	Assisting provision for local jobs
	Providing a voice for rural life

Conclusions/Summary

18. Whilst the non-bidding figures may initially seem high, a number of actions are being carried out by SCDC officers and in partnership with other agencies to try to ensure that vulnerable applicants receive any help they need in accessing the home-link scheme. In addition we are aware that many of the applicants, who are not bidding are those that historically held high medical points under the old scheme but are making a conscious decision not to bid for properties at the time being.

Options

19. The Committee may note the progress made with the Home-link scheme, in terms of joint working and actions in place to enable access onto the scheme, including the sub-regional actions within the development plan of the scheme.

20. The Committee may wish to recommend additional actions, outlined in the report, that could be carried out, subject to sufficient additional funds being available.

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