

Report of Head of Housing Need and Environmental Health

Choice Based Lettings

1.0 Summary

1.1 The purpose of this report is to advise the Committee on the Council's progress in the development of Sussex Homemove, the sub-regional Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme, following its initial six months' operation in Adur.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The Committee is recommended:

- i) to note the development to date of the Sussex Homemove Choice Based Lettings system in Adur since its introduction in July 2007, as outlined in the report;
- ii) to consider whether there are any further points other than those highlighted in the report worthy of reporting back to members in future; and
- iii) to consider the frequency and method of reporting back to members in future as set out in 6.3. below.

3.0 Background

3.1 Choice-based lettings (CBL) schemes are a way of letting social housing through giving tenants a greater say over where they live. The schemes allow people to apply for advertised social housing vacancies, often through the local press, freesheets, inter-active websites, by telephone, post, e-mail, text messaging and other designated communication methods.

3.2 Applicants can see the full range of available properties and apply for any home to which they are matched. The successful applicant is the person with the highest priority for the property that they have bid for. The aim of CBL is to offer a more open and transparent system that offers greater control and choice. It is a government requirement that CBL schemes are in operation across the country by 2010.

3.3 CBL gives people a choice and a stake in where they live and the aim is that there will be more satisfied tenants who stay longer, become part of the local community, pay their rent and look after their homes. This in turn will ensure more stable, viable and inclusive sustainable communities and in many cases, improved housing management performance. The principles behind CBL were approved by the then Community Services Committee in March 2003 and this was reconfirmed by Housing & Central Services Committee in September 2005, where funding towards

the development of the sub-regional scheme and the agreement to adopt common prioritisation criteria was approved.

3.4 In October 2005, Sussex Homemove, a partnership of eight local authorities (Adur DC, Arun DC, Brighton & Hove CC, Chichester DC, Hastings BC, Lewes DC, Rother DC and Wealden DC) and the housing associations that work with these local authorities, were successful in the bid to the then ODPM (now DCLG) for £99,600 of grant-funding towards the setting up of the scheme (split £60,000 capital and £39,600 revenue). The DCLG were particularly impressed by:

- the commitment shown to develop common prioritisation criteria;
- the housing options approach the scheme intends to develop; and,
- the plans to expand working with the private rented sector across the scheme.

3.5 The Adur arm of the Sussex Homemove Sub-Regional scheme has now been live and in operation since July 2007 and this report is to present the progress of the scheme following its first six months of operation.

3.6 The following report relates to Issues 55 to 68 of the fortnightly Freesheet magazine which date from 6th July 2007 to 11th January 2008 respectively. The actual statistics are documented in Annex A to this report. It should be noted that the period documented does not exactly correlate with the quarterly reporting process and the figures reported as of 31st December 2007.

4.0 Scheme Progress: main points so far

4.1 During the period, 102 Council and housing association properties of various types and sizes located in the Adur area have been advertised under the new scheme (although 2 properties were subsequently withdrawn as they did not become available for letting). Of the 100 properties available for letting:

- 83 were flats / maisonettes
- 11 were houses
- 6 were bungalows

28 of the 102 properties advertised were housing association vacancies.

4.2 Of the 102 properties advertised:

- 11 were studio / bedsit flats
- 46 were one bedroom properties
- 27 were two bedroom properties
- 18 were three bedroom properties

4.3 There were no four bedroom properties available during the period. There have now not been any four bedroom properties available for letting for two years. The last time that there was a four bedroom property available for letting was in 2005/06.

4.4 The above figures are fairly typical of trends in recent years in that smaller properties have been in the majority for reletting, and Choice Based Lettings in itself can do nothing to redress the fact that there is not enough affordable rented

accommodation to go round, especially larger homes. What CBL can do is ensure that people are less likely to want to move immediately if they have positively chosen to bid for particular properties, which should have an effect on overall demand for transfers over time.

- 4.5 One of the criticisms sometimes levelled against CBL schemes is that they increase void relet times. However, CBL has had absolutely no impact on the time that it takes to relet a void Council property. The Council's void times have remained relatively consistent over the past couple of years as the following table shows:

Quarter	Av weeks to relet
April - June 2006	3.41
July – Sept 2006	3.71
Oct – Dec 2006	3.88
Jan – March 2007	3.49
April- June 2007	3.61
July – Sept 2007 (CBL)	3.73
Oct – Dec 2007 (CBL)	3.5
Average overall	3.62
Average under CBL	3.62

These void relet times remain in the top quartile for England and Wales. The July-Sept 2007 figure has been slightly inflated by the need to hold back on some lettings in June to ensure that a good selection of properties was available for the launch of the scheme.

- 4.6 The Council allows and assists applicants to place bids for properties through the use of its Self-Service Zone. The reports show that the majority of bidders are bidding via the website, with over 82% of applicants choosing to use this method. Staff are also available to help those who need assistance in placing their bids. However, the Lettings Team will be conducting further research as to whether there is a lack of web enabled users amongst the elderly and whether the points raised by 4.7 below are contributing to this. It may be that elderly applicants who it is thought are less likely to have web access could be being disadvantaged by the process and the Council wants to ensure that the lettings service is accessible to all those seeking housing. As the Council has a large number of sheltered vacancies become available each year, we need to ensure that those that are eligible for this type of housing are able to access it.
- 4.7 The Council wants to ensure that all those who want to be considered for housing are able to access the new scheme, be aware of which properties have become vacant and be able to place bids for the properties that they wish to be considered for. We are able to interrogate the lettings system to the level that we are able to see the number of applicants that are not bidding. From the issues in question, we are able to establish that a total of 595 applicants out of approximately 1600 applicants that have been registered on the Housing Register during the period in question have not bid since the inception of CBL. The Council will shortly be writing to these applicants to establish the reasons as to why they are not bidding under the scheme. Despite all applicants being written to and publicity awareness days being held at the inception of the scheme, reasons for not bidding could include:

- They are not aware of the scheme;
- They do not know how/understand how to see which vacancies are available;
- They do not know how/understand how to bid for a property that they wish to be considered for;
- There have been no properties available that they wish to be considered for and so have chosen not to place a bid.

4.8 It should however be noted that there are normally about 1300 – 1400 households on the Housing Register at any one time (table 4.6). On table 4.5 of Annex A, it can be noted that during the publication of issue 60, there were 995 bids received which seems to indicate that there are quite a high number of applicants that are aware of the scheme and how to place bids for properties that they are interested in. During this issue there were advertisements for the new housing association scheme of two and three bedroom house vacancies at Bishops Close, Lancing, and it is reasonable to conclude that the exceptionally high number of bids was in relation to those interested in these properties.

4.9 Table 4.6 in Annex A shows the number of applicants on the Housing Register per band at the end of January 2008. It can be seen that the number of applicants in Band A is higher than that of Band B. Band A includes the remaining tenants of the temporary accommodation at Golden Sands and a number of households that qualify for the Transfer Incentive Scheme (see 5.1. below) which distort the number of applicants seeking housing in this high band. Indeed the launch of CBL in Adur coincided rather unfortunately with the start of the process of emptying Golden Sands.

4.10 At the time of writing, 94 of the 100 properties available for letting had been allocated as follows:

Band A applicants:	67
Band B applicants:	6
Band C applicants:	20
Band D applicants:	1

Total:	94
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This demonstrates that although the majority of vacancies are allocated to those in the top priority band, a quarter of all lets have been made to those in the lower priority bands and that an applicant does not have to be in the top bands in order to be able to be allocated a property under CBL. For reference, the criteria for banding is attached as Annex B to this report.

4.11 Only one property during the period in question has been 'let direct' by Lettings staff. This property was in fact leased to the Rainer Fresh Start Project which assists ex young offenders who wish to 'go straight' to be accommodated, whilst being supported by a specialist supported housing provider and the Sussex Probation Service. This is an on-going project commitment that the Council has had with these agencies which has been in existence since 2000/01. At the time the referral was received under this scheme the next available one bedroom property was offered.

4.12 The average wait experienced by those that have been housed under CBL ranges from 9 months for a sheltered housing vacancy, to 28.5 months for a three bedroom property. The average wait for a two bedroom property was slightly less at 23 months with an average wait of 19.5 months for studio/one bedroom properties. At this stage these figures should be treated with a certain amount of caution as they are based solely on the 94 people housed to date under the scheme, and who have spent the bulk of their waiting time under the old allocation system.

5.0 Further information

5.1 Prior to the introduction of CBL, the number of households who were registered as under-occupying their accommodation was small. Until CBL, despite promotion of the Transfer Incentive Scheme, few tenants chose to free up their larger accommodation to move to a smaller property, resulting in significant underspends of this (HRA) budget. One of the unexpected but positive side effects of CBL has been that the budget has now been fully committed. Tenants have told Lettings staff that this is because they now have the opportunity to choose the property that they wish to downsize to. This frees up larger family-sized accommodation for other households who are in housing need.

5.2 Lettings staff have been advised by those that they are in contact with that the general feeling is that the majority of applicants are a lot happier now that they are able to see what accommodation is available and decide for themselves which properties that they wish to be considered for. Although complaint levels about the lettings process were relatively low, complaints about the service appear to have reduced since the introduction of CBL. This is particularly noticeable in the reduced number of telephone calls to the Lettings staff, especially during the times when the bidding period is open.

5.3 However, during the next annual review of the Housing Register, which will be a year on from CBL commencing, a customer satisfaction survey will be sent out to all households registered seeking their views on the CBL scheme, to see what issues may be of concern and how the Council can address any areas of the scheme which may be found to require attention.

5.4 There has been some criticism that applicants' expectations have been unreasonably raised by the introduction of the scheme, and that there is disappointment when the "choice" apparently on offer is based on the same small number of vacancies as before. This is understandable at the outset of such a scheme, although the information provided to applicants when they register seeks to put this in perspective. However, it is an aspect to consider in the customer survey referred to above. As the scheme matures, the up to date information that can be publicised about average waiting times, which categories of applicant are getting various types of property etc., will become more robust, and people will be better able to judge their chances.

5.5 It should be noted that a Sussex Homemove mutual exchange register is currently in the process of being developed which will provide additional mobility opportunities for tenants. There is currently no national mobility scheme to encourage mutual exchanges across the region or the country since the demise of the Homeswap service, although tenants wishing to exchange can still advertise in individual areas. It is envisaged that this would cost approximately £7,500 in set up

costs with annual revenue costs of about £750 to operate per authority. When this is developed in more detail, this will be brought back for further consideration. As the scheme will be for council and housing association tenants, it would be feasible for the majority of the costs could be funded by the HRA with housing associations contributing to that element which could not reasonably be expected to be HRA funded.

6.0 Conclusions

- 6.1 The Choice Based Lettings (CBL) system has taken a considerable amount of planning by the Council's Housing Needs team and others to implement in Adur, and it is generally considered that the introduction has been successful, partly as a result of the careful planning of the project. As it has only been in operation for just over six months, some of the information which in more established systems has proved beneficial to applicants, such as average waiting times, profiles of who is tending to get what properties, and so on, is not as robust as it will be in future. However, this will improve with time.
- 6.2 Nevertheless, the scheme has made an encouraging start and it would appear from initial feedback that, teething troubles apart, applicants are using the system well. Void times have not lengthened at all as a result of the scheme. While in itself it may not have increased the numbers of properties available to let, it has led to people being able to decide whether or not they wish to be considered for particular properties, which will have led to fewer inappropriate offers which people have refused. Anecdotally, Lettings staff feel there is less dissatisfaction among applicants, although clearly many are still frustrated at the lack of available homes overall, which is a wider issue.
- 6.3 It is proposed to report back to members on a six monthly basis in the future on the progress and development of the scheme, although whether this may be more appropriate to the relevant cabinet member in future, or through the overview and scrutiny system or both, is a matter members may have a view on. The degree to which it may be possible to introduce the service across Worthing as well is no doubt a matter for further joint debate, but this is clearly of relevance given the single officer structure to be developed from April 2008.

**Local Government Act 1972
Background Papers**

Sustainable Communities: Homes for All – ODPM

Community Services Committee report 11th March 2003: Allocations Review

Housing & Central Services Committee report 13th September 2005: Choice-based
lettings

Housing & Central Services Committee report 3rd October 2006: Choice-based lettings

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Appendix

1.0 Council Priority

- 1.1 Protect and enhance core services to the community: by modernising the way we work to meet expectations and increase accessibility of services;
Revitalise Adur: by seeking improvements to social infrastructure;
Contribute to partnership initiatives where possible: promote partnership outcomes that together achieve ADC priorities more effectively than working alone

2.0 Specific Targets

- 2.1 Adur Housing Strategy: Key priority 2: Meeting affordable housing needs: maximise affordable housing across a range of tenures: by maximising efficient use of existing social stock and introduction of a regional choice based lettings system

Government target that all areas have a Choice Based Lettings scheme in place by March 2010.

3.0 Sustainability Issues

- 3.1 If people have an element of choice over where they live they will be more committed to that area and this will assist in the overall sustainability of communities

4.0 Equality Issues

- 4.1 The scheme aims at equal opportunities for people to choose where they want to live, given what is available.

5.0 Community Safety issues (Section 17)

- 5.1 Matter considered and no issues identified

6.0 Human Rights Issues

- 6.1 Matter considered and no issues identified

7.0 Financial Implications

- 7.1 Contained in the report

8.0 Legal Implications

- 8.1 Set out in the report

9.0 Consultations

- 9.1 Scheme subject to consultation prior to introduction and further customer satisfaction survey work proposed

10.0 Risk assessment

10.1 Matter considered and no issues identified

11.0 Health & Safety Issues

11.1 Matter considered and no issues identified

12.0 Procurement Strategy

12.1 Matter considered and no issues identified

13.0 Partnership working

13.1 Sussex Homemove partnership involves eight local authorities and a number of housing associations across Sussex in providing the service

Fortnightly Issues 55 – 68 (6th July 2007 to 11th January 2008 inclusive)**4.1 Properties Advertised By Type**

<u>Issue</u>	<u>55</u>	<u>56</u>	<u>57</u>	<u>58</u>	<u>59</u>	<u>60</u>	<u>61</u>	<u>62</u>	<u>63</u>	<u>64</u>	<u>65</u>	<u>66</u>	<u>67</u>	<u>68</u>	<u>Total</u>
Bungalow	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	6
Flat	10	4	10	2	6	2	3	2	4	10	7	6	6	8	80
House	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	2	1	0	0	1	0	2	11
Maisonette	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	5
<u>Grand total</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>102</u>

4.2 & 4.3 Properties Advertised By Bedrooms

<u>Issue</u>	<u>55</u>	<u>56</u>	<u>57</u>	<u>58</u>	<u>59</u>	<u>60</u>	<u>61</u>	<u>62</u>	<u>63</u>	<u>64</u>	<u>65</u>	<u>66</u>	<u>67</u>	<u>68</u>	<u>Total</u>
Studio	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	3	1	0	1	1	11
One bed	9	3	5	1	4	0	2	0	3	5	3	1	4	6	46
Two bed	1	1	3	1	3	1	3	2	2	1	3	3	2	1	27
Three bed	0	1	3	2	1	2	0	1	1	0	0	4	0	3	18
Four bed	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<u>Grand total</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>102</u>

4.4 See Void Monitoring Statistics for 2006/07 and 2007/08 (to date) attached**4.5 Source of Bids for Properties**

<u>Issue</u>	<u>55</u>	<u>56</u>	<u>57</u>	<u>58</u>	<u>59</u>	<u>60</u>	<u>61</u>	<u>62</u>	<u>63</u>	<u>64</u>	<u>65</u>	<u>66</u>	<u>67</u>	<u>68</u>	<u>Total</u>
Coupon	34	26	66	17	35	107	53	21	24	21	37	27	24	27	519
Phone	12	24	32	19	20	60	35	40	21	26	24	18	9	20	360
SMS text	0	0	0	0	0	81	21	28	19	14	16	18	7	15	219
Staff	0	0	1	0	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	15	3	26	55
Web	313	260	429	221	431	747	501	456	478	261	395	365	289	299	5446
<u>Grand total</u>	<u>359</u>	<u>310</u>	<u>528</u>	<u>257</u>	<u>496</u>	<u>995</u>	<u>610</u>	<u>545</u>	<u>542</u>	<u>323</u>	<u>472</u>	<u>443</u>	<u>332</u>	<u>387</u>	<u>6599</u>

4.6 Number of Applicants Not Bidding

	<u>Number of Applicants Not Bidding</u>	<u>Number of Applicants on the Housing Register on 30.01.08</u>
Band A	18	90
Band B	15	58
Band C	279	646
Band D	283	524
<u>Total</u>	<u>595</u>	<u>1318</u>

Breakdown of Housing Needs Bands A – D

Band A – Urgent/emergency

- Homeless households owed the main duty by Adur District Council placed in emergency temporary accommodation where the only prospect of meeting the households' needs is in permanent accommodation (e.g. the applicant has obtained employment and is experiencing severe financial hardship or the household has severe medical or disability reasons).
- Homeless households owed the main duty by Adur District Council placed in temporary accommodation where the landlord requires the property back or the property is wholly unsuitable to meet the applicant's needs (or a member of the household's needs) and it is not possible to adapt the accommodation to meet the applicant's needs.
- Homeless households owed the main duty by Adur District Council where the homeless household is making their own temporary arrangements, or suffering family split due to a genuine lack of accommodation.
- Overriding medical priority awarded by the Council's Medical Adviser – where the housing conditions are having such a major adverse effect on the medical condition of the applicant or member of the household as to warrant emergency priority.
- Transfer applicants under-occupying family sized accommodation qualifying for the Transfer Incentive Scheme.
- Households who are statutorily overcrowded (as based on the Housing Act 1985 standard).
- Transfer applicants needing permanent or temporary decant where the property is imminently required for major repair.
- Releasing an adapted property or to make best use of adapted stock – at the Council's discretion, where the tenant does not require adaptations or where the existing property cannot be adapted to meet the applicant's needs.
- Move on from care or leaving supported housing (backed up with relevant care plan, references where appropriate and plans in place to meet future support needs.)
- Priority transfer, e.g. emergency harassment, agreed in exceptional circumstances due to significant and insurmountable problems associated with the tenant's occupation and where there is imminent personal risk to the household if they remain (supporting information from other agencies required).
- Severe need – exceptional circumstances and/or multiple complex needs, which warrant emergency priority – to be agreed by Housing Needs Manager.

Band B – High Housing Need

- Households lacking 2 or more separate bedrooms (see table).
- Successors and non-statutory successors – approved by Housing Management for an offer of smaller/suitable accommodation.
- Management Transfers – agreed by Housing Management in accordance with the related policy and procedure for transfers on management grounds, to properties of same size and type.
- Private sector households occupying category 1 housing under Housing Act 2004 Housing, Health & Safety Rating System.
- Category A medical priority.

- High priority hardship – housing applicants with a dependent child/ren living in insecure accommodation and not having a bedroom and lacking or sharing amenities.

Band C – an Identified Housing Need:

- Households lacking one separate bedroom.
- Council tenants under-occupying that do not qualify for the Transfer Incentive Scheme.
- Homeless households occupying temporary accommodation on an assured shorthold or non-secure tenancy until such time as the landlord requires the property back or the household's needs are no longer met unless offered permanent accommodation.
- Households identified in a Care Plan where accommodation is required to assist in delivering the Care Plan or to relieve other social/welfare hardship as agreed between Adult Social Care (or other relevant agency, e.g. mental health) and Housing.
- Category B medical priority.
- Housing applicant accepted on the HEMS mobility scheme.
- Other unsatisfactory housing conditions (e.g. substantial disrepair as assessed by Environmental Health, lacking and/or sharing facilities).
- Applicants for sheltered housing where no higher need exists.
- Applicants who need to move to a particular area in the District where failure to meet that need would cause hardship e.g. to give or receive support.

Band D – no Housing Need

- Transfer applicants with no other housing need.
- Housing applicants with no other housing need.