

EXETER CITY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – COMMUNITY 5 JUNE 2007

EXECUTIVE
19 JUNE 2007

ANNUAL REVIEW OF EXETER HOMECHOICE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To propose a number of policy changes to the Exeter Homechoice policy where it is deemed appropriate.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Exeter Homechoice went live on 14 July 2005. The policy was extensively consulted prior to this date and enjoys support from a wide range of partner organisations including the 15 other social landlords that have signed up to the scheme.
- 2.2 Amendments to the Homechoice policy were agreed at Executive on 19 September 2006. Since then it has been identified that the current policy requires some minor amendments to ensure that properties are allocated to those applicants in the most housing need and that it is up to date with current environmental health legislation. The proposed amendments are outlined below.

3 PROPOSALS

Homelessness Prevention

- 3.1 Families who have been served with a valid section 21 notice (the legal notice required to end an Assured Shorthold Tenancy) who currently are being investigated by Housing Advice Officer and there are no issues of intentional homelessness or collusion, qualify for red band.
- 3.2 The homelessness code of guidance recognises that people leaving the armed forces are more likely to be at risk of homelessness than others. In order to evict armed forces personnel from forces accommodation the ministry of defence normally serves them with a certificate of cessation of entitlement to occupy service families accommodation or a notice to vacate family quarters. It is therefore recommended that this section of the policy is amended to also state that *where families are served with a certificate of cessation of entitlement to occupy service families accommodation or notice to vacate family quarters and the date of eviction will be within the next 3 months, they will qualify for red band*. In the last 6 months there have been just 3 cases that would qualify for red band in these circumstances

Anti-social behaviour

- 3.3 Where an applicant is an existing social housing tenant and they are at risk of imminent harm they can apply for an emergency card. The emergency card request is

then considered by a panel of seven people from across the Homechoice partnership. If it is agreed, the applicant is given the emergency card for a ten week period.

- 3.4 Concerns have been raised by partner organisations at the last Homechoice working group that the current emergency card procedure does not allow landlords to address anti-social behaviour issues swiftly and ensure that the victims of anti-social behaviour are sufficiently supported. Prior to the introduction of the Homechoice policy organisations could instigate a management transfer for clients suffering anti-social behaviour, however the current policy does not enable this to happen.
- 3.5 It is therefore proposed that the emergency card procedure is amended to add the following criteria for emergency card requests involving anti-social behaviour

A management transfer will only be considered where there is a serious risk of physical or psychological harm to the applicant due to violence or anti social behaviour. These requests will only be considered as a last resort and must have support and evidence in writing from other statutory agencies (outside the local authority or housing association) such as the police or social services. Where an emergency card is awarded under these circumstances the applicant will be directly matched with an available property of a suitable size for their needs under the Home Choice policy.

These requests will be considered by the emergency card panel in the normal manner.

Category 1 Hazards under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System

- 3.6 Applicants are eligible for red band if they have 2 or more bedrooms fewer than their household needs. Applicants are eligible for amber band if they have one bedroom less than their household needs.
- 3.7 The new Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) was introduced by the Housing Act 2004 in April 2006, replacing the housing fitness standard as the means of assessing unsafe and unhealthy housing. It applies to all tenures of housing, and surveyors (usually Environmental Health Officers) have to take account of the 29 hazards in the home that are most commonly responsible for injuries and ill-health requiring medical attention. The majority of these hazards can be resolved by improvements or repairs to the dwelling.
- 3.8 The hazard ‘crowding and space’ is the only hazard that also takes account of the current occupation of the home, and considers the suitability of the number of bedrooms, room sizes, and amenity space for the size and ages of the household members. Although a dwelling may not be statutorily overcrowded (the provisions of which are based upon an old inter-war standard), it may contain a category 1 hazard under the new HHSRS (which more closely reflects modern-day standards such as the Bedroom Standard, and recognises the detrimental impact that crowded living has on families). The crowding and space hazard is the most difficult hazard to resolve, as the options are to either enlarge the dwelling or reduce the number of occupants. However, the Council has a legal duty to act to remove category 1 hazards from housing.

- 3.9 It is therefore proposed that the following clause is added to the Homechoice policy to remedy this situation.

In the case of an applicant in the Green or Amber band, where a report from an Environmental Health Practitioner is received which identifies a category one crowding and space hazard where there is no practicable resolution, the application will be assessed on a case by case basis (including an assessment of intentionality as to whether a crowded situation has been manufactured). The applicant once assessed, may be moved up to the next band.

Where an applicant is already in Red band and the Council receives a report identifying a category one crowding and space hazard, it is the case that Homechoice, and therefore the local authority, has done all that is applicable under its own policy to ensure the applicant has highest priority to be re-housed and there will be no further priority awarded.

Level access properties and applicants with special needs

- 3.10 Currently all ground floor, level access properties are advertised to all applicants. The applicant who bids for the property and is in the highest band for the longest period of time will be allocated that property.
- 3.11 There are a significant number of applicants who have special needs who are in red band and require a level access property due to their disability. Given the lack of properties with level access and the number of applicants with disabilities who require such properties, we intend to advertise properties with level access as “*preference will be given to those who would benefit from a level access ground floor property due to medical or special needs*”.

4 RECOMMENDED

- 1) that Scrutiny Committee – Community supports and Executive agrees to adopt the changes to the Exeter Homechoice Allocation Policy as outlined in this report.

HEAD OF HOUSING SERVICES

S:LP/Committee/607SCC16
15.5.07

COMMUNITY AND ENVIRONMENT DIRECTORATE

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling the report: -

None