

Information/Discussion Paper

Overview and Scrutiny - Social and Community Monday 9th November 2009

Gloucestershire Homeseeker - Choice Based Lettings - Progress report

This note contains the information to keep Members informed of matters relating to the work of the Committee, but where no decisions from Members are needed

1. Why has this come to scrutiny?

- 1.1 Gloucestershire Homeseeker, the county wide Choice Based Lettings system, is now fully operational. Overview and Scrutiny committee has requested a progress report to inform them of current usage of the system.

2. Background

- 2.1 Gloucestershire Homeseeker is the county's choice based lettings system that has been introduced in response to the amendments made by the Homelessness Act 2002 to the Housing Act 1996 which facilitate the introduction of allocation schemes that offer new applicants and existing tenants a more active role in choosing their accommodation.
- 2.2 It is the mechanism for meeting the government's policy on offering a choice of accommodation to applicants and strengthening communities as stated in the accompanying Code of Guidance: *'...allocation policies for social housing should provide for applicants to be given more of a say and a greater choice over the accommodation which they are allocated, while continuing to ensure that the primary purpose of social housing is to meet housing need. This is the best way to ensure sustainable tenancies and to build settled, viable and inclusive communities...'*

The Gloucestershire model is based on the following set of principles:

- Web based system – process driven by the customer seeking to address housing needs
- Provide choice while meeting local housing need
- To use a common housing Registration process across the 6 Districts
- To share eligibility criteria across the 6 Districts
- To ensure simplicity and transparency

3. Summary of evidence/information

3.1 Transitional Process

3.2 Gloucestershire Homeseeker went live for registrations on 23rd September 2009. In preparation for this event the following activities had been undertaken:

3.3 Since February 2009 to 'go live' all new and existing applicants subject to our rolling annual review had been issued with information regarding Gloucestershire Homeseeker, to prepare them for the changes to be introduced and the requirement for re-registration.

3.4 The Gloucestershire Homeseeker Partnership received the live system and the single county wide register (an amalgamation of the 6 separate district housing registers) at the beginning of September 2009. A process of removing all duplicate entries, whereby individual households were registered on more than one district register, was undertaken so that households would receive only one registration pack and reference number for ease of re-registration.

3.5 A total of **16,138** re-registration packs were sent to households captured on the single county wide register, which included **3023** packs for the Cheltenham area. The packs included a letter with the household's personal reference number, instructions on how to re-register, an easy to follow information booklet of the system, information on community free ICT access points (11 for the Cheltenham Area) and contact numbers for the Housing Options service for people to seek assistance.

3.6 A press release was issued on Tuesday 27th October to promote go live for registration.

3.7 In parallel with this process a number of demonstrations, training and presentations were given to both internal staff and a wide range of organisations and agencies delivering services to people across the county to ensure they were able to advise and support people for both the re-registration process and the system. This included:

- Housing Related Support Providers via the Supporting People Inclusion Forum
- A series of training sessions for support agencies held in the offices of Cheltenham, Stroud and Tewksbury, (attendance: Chelt = 81, Tewks = 24 & Stroud = 85)
- Training sessions were held with the members of staff from Libraries across Cheltenham.
- Hester's Way Neighbourhood Project and regeneration partnership
- Whaddon, Lynworth & Priors Neighbourhood Project

4 Support arrangements

4.1 An Inclusion and Access strategy had been developed by the partnership prior to the launch of the system. This strategy aims to ensure that Gloucestershire Homeseeker is open to all sections of the community, and where groups of vulnerable people or individuals encounter difficulty in making use of the system, support and advice will be available from a range of sources.

4.2 For the purposes of Gloucestershire Homeseeker vulnerability is defined as those who are less likely to be able to access and secure their own accommodation without assistance.

4.3 A number of potential barriers and challenges in relation to specific vulnerable customer groups were assessed in order to consider suitable solutions to reduce or eliminate the barriers.

Such solutions include:

- Widespread promotion and understanding of system amongst support agencies through such ongoing activities as those listed in section **3.7**.
- Use of Dixerit Plus function on the website (Enables a range of functions to assist people with visual impairments and language issues including: reads the text of the website in audio, magnifies text by up to 32 times original sizing and also can provide a tinted overlay or changes to colour of screens)
- Use of symbols and photographs in property adverts
- Translation facility on website
- Telephone bidding available in other languages
- Language translation service
- Support workers and agencies trained to assist
- Community support groups
- Hard copies of vacant property information available in a number of locations
- Ability to bid in a variety of ways (online, via telephone line, by text)
- Automatic bidding available
- Advocacy bidding available
- Option to receive property newsletter by post or e-mail where necessary
- Help from other agencies and friends/family to bid on line
- Finally a range of support is available from Housing Options service including telephone support, office appointments and home visits

4.4 It is recognised that not all customers within an identified vulnerable group will need support. A fundamental principle of Choice Based Lettings is to empower the customer to drive the process for themselves with relevant support where necessary. Therefore, the circumstances of individuals will be considered by Housing staff at the local Council and where appropriate, relevant support, tailored to an individual's specific needs, will be provided either directly or via a support agency/service.

4.5 Since going live for registration on September 23rd the Housing Options Service based in Cheltenham First Stop has been approached by customers seeking advice and assistance. The number of contacts we have received are as follows:

- Telephone enquiries: we have received a total of 840 telephone calls during this time. The greatest number of telephone enquiries consisted of 466 requiring assistance

with the on line application form which resulted in 127 appointments made to assist people using the computer to re-register – remainder of other calls were with regard to people asking which log in details and ID they needed to submit and queries relating to the band they had been placed in. 6 people were unhappy that they had to submit their information again and 3 calls referred to concerns of older people being able to use the system on line.

- Approaches to offices: In the month of October the Housing Options Service at Cheltenham First Stop received 901 visits by households with queries representing an approximate increase of over 150% on average monthly figures.
- The system also has an electronic contact form available for people to send questions and issues at anytime which are sent directly to the Housing Options Team via email. To date we have received in the region of a few hundred personal queries all relating to their individual application which staff are responding to individually.
- Throughout implementation we have been closely monitoring the nature of the queries we have been receiving and making as many changes to the system as possible to improve the information and accessibility, including adding additional text to screens with more information and direction and also adding to the Frequently Asked Questions on the site to assist both customers and support agencies.

5. Levels of Access to date

- 5.1** On 23rd September the system was open to receive all registrations; hence we have been receiving new applications since that date in addition to those households re-registering from the previous housing registers. We have been routinely monitoring the performance information to ascertain the level of usage and determine what further actions may be required.
- 5.2** As at Tuesday 3rd November a total of 1411 households had successfully registered, been verified and made active by the Housing Options Team for Cheltenham. A further 632 applications have been cancelled, comprising of duplicate entries and re-registration packs returned to sender as applicant no longer occupant or in need of accommodation. The allocation of properties under the existing points based allocation policy and system continued between 23rd September and the first advertising cycle on 28th October and a number of households were housed during this time. In total 2043 applications have been processed under the Gloucestershire Homeseeker system between 23rd September to 3rd November, equating to a level of almost 68% of the volume of the previous register. A full breakdown is shown in **Table 1**
- 5.3** We have evidence to suggest that households that we have asked to re-register have in fact entered the system and submitted an entirely new application rather than enter and update their application information we had transferred from the previous waiting list. This leads to a position of an inflated number showing under the category of awaiting completion of application as marked with an asterix *. It has not been possible as yet to cross reference new applications to check if they are also showing under awaiting completion due to our priority being on processing applications as they come in. We aim to do so as soon as some capacity can be released from verifying applications.

Table 1

Cheltenham Figures as at 3rd November	Re-registrations	New applications	Total
Active Registration completed, verified and made active	855	556*	1411
Cancelled (returns and duplicates), closed	545	87	632
Total number of applications completely processed by Chelt CBC	1400	643	2043
Housed			5
Online application complete Awaiting verification, pending enquiries	8	31	39
Awaiting completion of application	1782	115	1897*

5.4 We have also been specifically monitoring the access of the system by age. As at Monday 2nd November a total of 156 households over the age of 60 had been registered, verified and made active. A further 2 households had completed their registration and were awaiting verification by CBC with 67 households aged 60+ being cancelled due to packs being returned to sender or duplicate registrations. This equates to 225 households over the age of 60 having accessed and/or been processed within system. Our records indicate that 276 households are still to complete their application (subject to note in section 5.3) – see section 6 for future actions.

5.5 Advertising of properties

The first raft of properties for letting via Gloucestershire Homeseeker was advertised on Wednesday 28th October with a press release issued the preceding day. 126 properties were advertised across the county with 18 Cheltenham Borough Homes and an additional 14 Registered Social Landlord properties available in Cheltenham. At the close of the bidding cycle a total of 698 bids had been placed on the properties. All properties available in Cheltenham secured bids.

6 Summary of performance and Future Activities

6.1 A considerable amount of activity has been undertaken by Gloucestershire Homeseeker Partnership, Cheltenham Borough Council, Registered Social Landlords, particularly Cheltenham Borough Homes, and a wide range of support agencies to prepare internal arrangements so that we were collectively in a strong position to provide an efficient and robust support to customers as we went live.

- 6.2** A significant number of households have accessed the system since September 23rd and it is a testament to the partnership arrangements we have in place and particularly the efforts of the Housing Options Team that we have been able to fully process such a large volume of applications in the short time span leading up to the advertising cycle.
- 6.3** Cheltenham Borough Council's position compares very favourably with the other districts across the county and indeed is in line with levels of expectations informed by researching the implementation of previous CBL systems nationally.
- 6.4** In addition to processing the large volumes of registrations, CBC's Housing Options Team have also been proactive in processing those customers previously identified as being in high housing need or vulnerable.
- 6.5** We anticipate another peak in registration activity following the advertising of properties and as knowledge and experience of the system becomes more widespread
- 6.6** In response to the numbers of applications previously registered on Cheltenham's waiting list and still awaiting to be completed, we plan to increase our focus on those identified as potentially vulnerable in the first instance and will continue to try and make contact via phone or support agencies where we have such information available, firstly to determine whether they are still in housing need and then to assess what support they may require. A second letter reminding applicants to re-register will be sent out at the end of November to all those previously registered but still awaiting completion.
- 6.7** Promotion of the system continues amongst support agencies, for example CBC is to undertake a specific training session for social workers working with people with Learning Disabilities and also due to address a county mental health meeting in November.
- 6.8** County wide performance monitoring of the system following implementation will be undertaken via an operational group comprising of all districts and representatives of Registered Social Landlords and a strategic management Board comprising the same level of representation.

7 Next Steps

- 7.1** Committee to receive a verbal summary and update of progress at meeting

Background Papers	Cabinet Report – 30 th October 2007 - Choice Based Lettings
Contact Officer	Kathryn Chamberlain, Head of Service – Stronger Communities, 01242 775205, Kathryn.chamberlain@cheltenham.gov.uk
Accountability	Cllr Martin Dunne- Cabinet Member Housing and Safety
Scrutiny Function	Social and Community