



Choice Based Lettings

What is choice based lettings?

Choice Based Lettings is a new approach being used by Councils and Housing Associations to rent their houses. A choice based system is intended to allow applicants to exercise some choice over their future homes. Tenants/Customers become “house hunters” by responding to adverts that list available houses to rent.

At present when you apply for a house you can in theory, express a preference as to where you want to live and the type of property you want to live in. What happens in practice means that your choices are very restricted. This is because:

- The choice of areas is usually very wide (apart from specific local lettings schemes), applicants are often unable to pinpoint exact localities
- The property types are limited in relation to household size, the amount of houses available and high or low demand for the area
- The number of offers you receive is usually limited
- There is little evidence of landlords encouraging transfers or promoting mutual exchanges
- Information and advice to applicants is ad hoc and lowest in areas of high demand
- The system can be bureaucratic and time consuming
- Officers make judgements based on written records whether a vacancy meets the needs and preferences of an applicant
- Officers make decisions for applicants and can result in paternalistic assumptions

Key Principles of Choice Based Lettings

- Initiative to apply for a particular property is taken by the tenant ‘customer’, not the housing officer.
- Applicants receive information giving details of properties available and who can apply
- Information about the popularity of particular types and locations of property is provided, which gives you a better idea of your chances of making a successful application.
- In addition basic information on available properties such as property features, central heating, location, gardens and schools – helps ‘customers’ make a more informed choice / response to advertisements – more likely to suit your needs and preferences.

Assisting vulnerable groups of people

The needs of vulnerable applicants such as homeless people, people with mental health issues, learning difficulties or disabilities must be taken into consideration. Information and marketing material must be tailored to meet the needs of all applicants so that the system is accessible to everyone. Promotional material must therefore cover applicants’ needs and landlords must offer specific help and advice to individual applicants. Different methods would be introduced to protect vulnerable people and improve their housing opportunities as well as ensuring that people in the most urgent need can be helped eg:

- priority cards
- targeted advice and support
- banding systems based on levels of need

Selection Criteria

It is essential that there is clear selection criteria used to assess the needs and award priority to home seekers (for example separating applicants into broad bands of need) as it is very likely that there will be more than one applicant for each house.

Communications

Quality communications between landlords and applicants is central to the system and a wide range of advertising methods can be used, e.g. mail shots, telephone and personal responses to customers, use of IT / web-sites and the establishment of property shops. Information about properties and on selection criteria is crucial to success of this system.

How to involve tenants

The Council must consult under Housing (Scot) Act 2001. The system needs to develop reflecting local circumstances.

Meeting legal commitments

Landlords are still required by law to prioritise their housing to those in greatest housing need. There is a number of different ways that this can be done through the choice based system, for example:

- Retaining a choice based system
- Banding systems – top band for those in greatest housing need, priority for advertised vacancies
- Priority cards – time limited for homeless applicants
- In some cases a needs based system of allocating houses can be run in parallel with the choice based system, e.g. advertising adapted properties separately with a separate needs based criteria.
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Some advantages for tenants of a Choice Based Letting System

- Prospective tenants are given access to decision making processes and are able to exercise 'choice'
- Provision of high quality information about properties, neighbourhoods and how the system operates can increase satisfaction levels within the system
- Provides information – at a very detailed level which can be invaluable to both tenants and landlords.

However...

- The system may possibly be hard to access if you are a vulnerable applicant
- The system still works within the limits of the housing which is available for rent and
- Will not relieve pressure in high demand areas

The SLTDSP has produced five Fact sheets on housing allocations; An Introduction to Housing Allocations, The Legal Framework for Allocations Policies, SLC Allocations' Policy, Common Housing Registers and Choice Based Lettings. These are all available free by contacting the Project on 01698 527108.