The population of Tower Hamlets has grown considerably from around 161,000 in 1991 to 196,106 by 2001, a rise of 22%. However the introduction of Choice Based Lettings is also set within the context of an increasingly ethnically diverse borough.

London choice based lettings pilots, sponsored by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), have taken a range of approaches to introducing choice. Some have retained points and others have piloted the scheme in specific areas or for particular client groups. Tower Hamlets leads a number of the pilots in achieving all of the Government’s six principles underpinning a choice-based approach. The equality impact assessment (EIA) was carried out at quite an early stage of the Choice Based Lettings scheme whilst a number of systems were in development or were bedding down. The policy and practice issues that this report raises should be viewed within this context.

On a number of issues there remains a perception that the Council is acting in an unfair manner, even where the evidence does not bear this out. The Council does however have a responsibility to manage perceptions, even where they prove unfounded.

Background:

The Housing Green Paper, Quality and Choice: A Decent Home for All, was the first comprehensive review of housing for over 20 years. The paper mapped out a broad housing strategy covering all tenure types and for the first time introduced the concept of ‘choice’ in the allocation of social housing. A key proposal was the reform of lettings policies to give tenants in social housing real choice over the homes they live in.

The Homelessness Act 2002 and the Homelessness (Priority Need for Accommodation) (England) Order 2002 reinforced this emphasis by facilitating the introduction by housing authorities of allocation schemes that offer new applicants and existing tenants a more active role in choosing their accommodation.

Equalities profile of service users: The White British population now forms well under half of the population of the borough. The largest BME group, the Bangladeshi community, is approaching the white community in size and has the greatest housing need of all communities.

BME households currently make up approximately 60% of all housing applicants on the common housing register. Overall the level of RSL lettings to BME households has been below the level that might be expected given the population representation and patterns of housing need, but is proportionate to the demand on the housing list.

Data Sources: National Statistics – Census 2001 Profiles  
SWIFT System - Social Services  
CORE System - Registered Social Landlords

Housing and mental health care needs of Asian people in the London boroughs of Brent, Ealing, Harrow and Tower Hamlets. JRF  
PS Martin Hamblin Ltd (Sept 1998) Housing Need in Tower Hamlets  
Community Survey, Residents Panel and Focus Groups

Views of residents: Health and disability groups were most negative about the Choice Based Lettings process. African and Caribbean and health focused groups perceived the Council as not being understanding or sympathetic to people living with HIV/AIDS and conditions largely affecting minority groups like sickle cell. There is a perception that the Council concentrates on two ethnic groups to the exclusion of others.

Internal/external Communications: Available lettings are advertised in EastEnd Life and a property brochure called Homeseekers. The Registered Social Landlord partners also have property boards. Advertisements are in English and Bengali.

• A clear distinction needs to be made between a policy that is discriminatory in its intent and a policy which has the potential to be discriminatory in its effect

• The Choice Based Lettings Policy intentions need to give due regard to the Disability Discrimination Act and keep under close review the effect of practices that could disadvantage some groups
4. Conclusions & Recommendations

Although at an early stage, the Council has made significant progress in developing the scheme and is one of a few local authorities to make all properties in the borough available for bidding and has set up a holistic service advertising lettings, providing housing assessment and client support.

There is strong support for Choice Based Lettings. The system is more transparent than the previous lettings system and should therefore lessen opportunities for discriminatory practices.

The clear majority of participants of this study felt that choosing their own home would make them more committed to the area that they live in. They also felt that it would allow them to live nearer to friends and family, protect themselves from racial harassment and be more aware of housing in the borough.

The early indications are that BME applicants are using the scheme and the number of lettings made to them is commensurate with the demand they place on the housing register. The number of local authority lettings to BME households has increased in 2002/03 and this has been maintained since the inception of Choice Based Lettings.

There are a number of features to the Choice Based Lettings policy that could have a negative impact on BME communities, older people, disabled people and people living with a debilitating illness. These negative impacts can however be mitigated by the actions noted in our recommendations or may need to be reviewed if on-going monitoring shows them to disadvantage particular equality groups.

It is recommended that the authority:

Widen choice by:
  • encouraging more Registered Social Landlords to pool their properties and allowing people from outside the borough to apply.

Tackle negative perceptions by:
  • ensuring progressive illnesses are taken into account in the initial housing assessment
  building stronger links with community health groups to actively engage them as advocates of Choice Based Lettings

Make the system more accessible by:
  • making use of modern technology
  addressing the communication needs of residents whose first language is not English or who have literacy problems
  • addressing the communication needs of vulnerable groups, particularly those with a visual impairment
  • keeping applicants well informed by regularly reporting the results of successful bids

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<tr>
<th>Recommendations</th>
<th>Key Activity</th>
<th>Progress Milestone</th>
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<tr>
<td>Monitor the policy to ensure that potentially discriminatory trends are identified and remedial action taken.</td>
<td>• Produce regular monitoring information.</td>
<td>• All reports on lettings activities now contain diversity monitoring information as standard.</td>
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<td>Implement strategies to generate moves for groups that are not participating in mutual exchange.</td>
<td>• Use advertising media to raise profile of mutual exchange scheme.</td>
<td>• By Summer 2004 advertise mutual exchanges in EastEnd Life and the internet.</td>
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<td>Widen access to information about adverts for available homes.</td>
<td>• Use IT solutions to increase</td>
<td>• By April 2004 introduce</td>
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<td>Develop a strategy for communicating information to groups with literacy problems and BME groups by making information available in a wider range of languages including Somali, Vietnamese, Cantonese and Urdu.</td>
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| • Use IT solutions to increase public access.  
  • Consolidate the work of the Client Support Team to ensure equal access for vulnerable groups. |
| • By August 2003 generic information in EastEnd Life to be produced in 6 community languages.  
  • By April 2004 telephone bidding system to be available in 6 community languages.  
  • By April 2004 available homes website to be introduced with potential to translate into 6 community languages.  
  • By April 2005 introduce public access internet kiosks at One-Stop Shops with potential to translate into 6 community languages.  
  • Supporting People funding secured for Client Support Team. |

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<th>Actively tackle the negative perceptions held by some members of the community.</th>
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| • Use advertising media to inform.  
  • Host events offering face to face contact for residents with housing options specialists.  
  • Consolidate the work of the Client Support Team to ensure equal access for vulnerable groups.  
  • Network with 3rd sector groups to offer advice and support. |
| • Regular information about housing options and housing demand now alongside advertised available homes.  
  • By June 2004 host 1st lettings event.  
  • By April 2004 have facilitated workshops with 3rd sector. |

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<th>Adopt standard equality monitoring across departments.</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Use IT solutions to standardise information.</td>
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<td>• By April 2004 collect monitoring information in corporate standard format.</td>
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