

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Leader and Cabinet 14 September 2006
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CHOICE BASED LETTINGS – CONSULTATION ON THE DRAFT LETTINGS POLICY AND PROPOSED MEMBER’S ADVISORY GROUP

Purpose

1. To advise on the current development of the proposed letting policy for the sub-regional Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme and the proposed consultation.
2. To consider options for Member involvement including the setting up of an advisory group.
3. **Effect on Corporate Objectives**

Quality, Accessible Services	Development of Choice based lettings scheme, which focuses on applicants for social housing having increased choice.
Village Life	As part of an options package allows those in housing need to exercise choice over their rehousing options
Sustainability	
Partnership	This is a sub-regional scheme involving 5 Local Authorities in Cambridgeshire, St Edmundsbury and Forest Heath and local Registered Social Landlords.

Background

4. In the Housing Green Paper of April 2000 *Quality and Choice: A Decent Home for All* the Government put forward its proposals for reforms to lettings policies to give tenants in social housing real choice over the house they live in.
5. By offering people choice about where they live it is envisaged that tenants will be more satisfied, stay longer, pay their rent, look after their homes and tenants will invest in and engage with their local communities. In addition, by giving housing applicants a more active role in the process, it is hoped that applicants with very little chance of getting the housing they want will make greater efforts to look for alternative solutions.
6. The ODPM published targets for moving towards greater choice in spring 2002 as follows:
 - a. 25% of local authorities are required to have CBL schemes by the end of 2005 and,
 - b. 100% of local authorities to have a CBL scheme by 2010
7. Further the government have stated that they want to see CBL schemes developing on a regional or sub-regional basis.
8. Cabinet agreed in principle on 8th September 2005 to proceed to implement a sub regional choice based lettings (CBL) scheme in order to achieve compliance with

CBL delivery by 2010. An application by the seven sub regional partner authorities to the ODPM for funding successfully attracted £181,000 which will be used to fund a sub regional project manager and purchase of software.

9. The successful applicant under a CBL scheme will be the one that has the highest priority for the property for which they have made a bid. The relative priority of one applicant over another will be determined by the Lettings Policy adopted by the sub-region.
10. The main difference between the traditional approach to lettings and CBL is that applicants are required to be proactive in seeking a home rather than wait for a local authority or housing association to contact them about a property they can be 'allocated'. It is therefore important that the system is straightforward, understandable, transparent and fair.
11. For these reasons in many of the existing CBL schemes a banding system has been preferred as this is considered to be more simplistic and easier for applicants to understand than points systems.
12. Another feature of CBL is that feedback needs to be made available to unsuccessful applicants so that they can understand why their application was not successful. This feedback will help applicants assess their likelihood of receiving an offer for any similar properties that may arise in the same area and decide whether to review their expectations and search criteria in order to find a suitable home including reviewing other options.
13. A sub regional project management infrastructure has been agreed and various sub groups have formed to progress the various aspects to the scheme, including a policy sub group who have been working on a draft lettings policy.

Considerations

14. The lettings policy will be a sub-regional policy covering all partners of the sub regional scheme. There was a strong preference from all partners to move towards a banding system to achieve an understandable and transparent policy.
15. It had been hoped to commence formal consultation in September, following Cabinet approval. However the draft policy is not currently at a stage to go through this process. In addition, delaying the formal consultation will allow time for a court ruling regarding a CBL related lettings policy and guidance from the DCLG to be available, as well as further testing of the proposals by partner agencies.
16. However, informal consultation will commence in September and include such activities as articles in South Cambs Magazine, on the website, distribution and availability of leaflets, focus groups etc to raise awareness of the move towards Choice Based lettings and to help shape the draft lettings policy further.
17. As this is a major change in the lettings policy a consultation period of at least 12 weeks is required to consult with RSL's, and those who will be affected by the change. It is anticipated that the formal consultation will now commence in the spring 2007.
18. To progress this further at a local level it is proposed to set up a member's advisory group, which under the Council's constitution should not comprise of more than 9

members (plus the relevant Portfolio Holder), and would have to comply with the political proportionality rules.

19. The terms of reference for this group would be to assess how the proposed sub-regional CBL scheme and associated lettings policy would:
 - make best use of both the existing and new affordable housing in terms of meeting the housing needs of the district/sub-region
 - offer appropriate housing choices to those in housing need including vulnerable groups
 - ensure equality of access to housing
 - to contribute to maintaining sustainable communities within existing villages and the creation of balanced communities in the major new developments
 - make recommendations in respect of the local implementation of the scheme

It is suggested that Members will be asked to attend no more than three meetings between September 2006 and March 2007'

Financial Implications

20. A commitment has already been given to fund the CBL local implementation costs within existing budgets.
21. The Council is committed to meeting a share of the implementation costs of the Sub-regional scheme which is currently £17,000 based on estimated costs, the amount of DCLG funding made available and there being a minimum of 7 partners. This position could change over the course of its implementation eg due to unforeseen additional costs and/or increase/decrease in number of partners but the project is currently within budget.
22. The Council's contribution of £17,000 is being accounted for over 3 financial years with £2,000 having been paid in 2005/06 and £9,000 provided for within the 2006/07 Housing General Fund Estimates.

Legal Implications

23. The scheme will need to meet the legal requirements for the allocation of social housing as set out in the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002).

Staffing Implications

24. The Council have already agreed to the recruitment of a Choice Based Lettings Project Officer to enable implementation at a local level, the cost of which will be met from existing budgets. The development of this scheme requires commitment and input from various services across the Council, and a local corporate implementation group has been set up to facilitate and manage the project.

Equal Opportunities Implications

25. In line with general and specific statutory duties under the Race Relations Act 1976 and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, the Council operates a Race Equality Scheme (RES) in order to eliminate unlawful discrimination and to promote race equality and good race relations. This was last revised and agreed by the Council in July 2006, with an update of the 2005-08 action plan. The Council is

committed to treating everyone fairly and justly, whatever their race or background. The proposed lettings policy will include a statement on equal opportunities and consultation will take place with the local community, including voluntary and statutory agencies that assist and support vulnerable groups. BME housing register applicants currently represents 4.3% of those aged under 60 and 1% of those aged 60 or over on our housing register and 1% of transfer applicants. Translation of leaflets and information will be made available when this is required.

Consultations

26. The consultation required will need to be managed at two levels. At the sub-regional level the partnership can jointly consult with stakeholders in common such as RSL partners, statutory agencies and others. At the local level the Council will need to ensure that other stakeholders eg tenants, applicants, Parish Councils, Members and other locally based organisations whose clients may be affected by the implementation of a CBL scheme are fully consulted.
27. In order to ensure engagement with Members on the CBL project it is suggested that the creation of a Cabinet Advisory Group could be an effective means of achieving this provided there is a sufficient level of interest across the political groups. An alternative would be to run a series of workshops with open invitations to all Members to attend to discuss particular aspects of the scheme eg the draft lettings policy so that their views can be fed back to the Sub-regional partnership.

Conclusions/Summary

28. The Council are working with partners across the sub-region to develop a choice based lettings scheme. This will fulfil the requirement by the government that all authorities are operating such a scheme by 2010. A new lettings policy is required that satisfies our legal obligations and addresses the needs of households across the sub-region, as well as being transparent to applicants. Consultation will play a large part in the development of this policy including with Members of this Council.

Recommendations

29. It is recommended that Cabinet,
 - (a) note the proposals for consultation, and
 - (b) agree to the setting up of a Cabinet advisory group with terms of reference as set out in paragraphs 19 of this report and to determine the size of the group.

Background papers: the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

Housing Green Paper: *Quality and Choice: A Decent Home for All*

ODPM April 2000

Allocation of Accommodation: Code of guidance for local housing authorities

ODPM November 2002

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