

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Housing Portfolio Holder
AUTHOR/S: Corporate Manager – Affordable Homes

March 2009

CHOICE BASED LETTINGS ANNUAL REVIEW

Purpose

1. To review the operation of the choice based lettings (CBL) scheme (Home-Link) within South Cambridgeshire District Council since its introduction in Feb 2008.

Background

2. SCDC are one of the partners in the Cambridge sub-regional choice based lettings scheme which replaced the points based waiting list system in Feb 2008. Instead of properties being allocated via a waiting list, SCDC properties are advertised every two weeks and applicants can express an interest or “bid” for up to 3 properties per advertising cycle. Priority is rated by band from A to D with A being the highest and properties are offered to the highest banded person on each shortlist. Where 2 or more applicants within the same priority band bid, priority is given to the applicant with the longest date in band.
3. This report should be read in conjunction with the Sub-regional CBL review attached as appendix A, the snapshot picture of SCDC applicants and activity recorded in Appendix B and the Affordable Homes service plan.

Considerations

4. The full sub regional report contains a number of recommendations that will impact on the operation of the scheme at individual partner and sub regional level. These recommendations are broken down into 8 categories with associated levels of importance. Individual partners also need to review Equality Impact Assessments against allocation performance and BME applicants against local area statistics. A number of working groups have also been recommended and it will be necessary for SCDC staff to be represented on these.
5. The priority-banding scheme adopted across the sub-region has also been reviewed and appears to be working well, with the exception of the level of priority awarded to rough sleepers. This is addressed under section 5.9 of the review document. Rough sleepers had originally been placed in Band C along with applicants with a roof over their head and sharing facilities. This issue had been brought before the Home Link Management Board (HLMB) in November 2008 with a recommendation that ‘confirmed’ rough sleepers should be given a higher priority and placed into Band B. The HLMB agreed with, and approved the change in priority. Local Authority partners are therefore required to ensure they include this change when revising lettings policies. It will therefore be necessary to amend our policy in line with the sub-region, however, it is anticipated that this will have little impact on SCDC due to the estimated small number of rough sleepers in the district (0-2).
6. Other key issues from the sub regional report relating specifically to SCDC are:

SCDC has 18.55% of all applicants registered sub regionally (4060 applicants)
It also has the lowest level of transfer applicants registered at 13.84% (562)
75.52% of all applicants registered have failed to bid for any property (2nd highest in region)

205 properties had been let within SCDC at the point of writing the report.

SCDC had the second highest number of bids recorded showing that whilst we have a number not actively bidding, falling mainly into the C and D bands those that do bid are doing so regularly and bidding for a number of properties.

7. SCDC consulted members on their views of the home-Link scheme. 57 questionnaires were sent out and 25 returned. A task group review meeting had been planned but no members expressed an interest in attending. In general the report showed a reasonable level of understanding of the scheme and most members felt able to advise residents on how to register and use the scheme. Most however felt they needed extra awareness sessions. However, these have been offered in the past with a very low take up rate. In general the responses were largely positive and members felt the numbers of enquiries they were receiving regarding lettings had fallen and even those that reported an increase, felt that it was insignificant. The full feedback report is attached as Appendix C.
8. In August 2008, SCDC entered into a 6 month pilot with the housingmoves service run by the CLG. Their Seaside and Country Homes scheme seeks to move underoccupying tenants from London Boroughs into rural and coastal locations. SCDC agreed to consider their applicants for properties with no other local bidders via the Home-Link scheme thereby reducing void times and maximising rental income. So far, 55 applicants have been registered and 10 tenancies created. The housing moves team verify all applicants and bid on their behalf. The CLG have used our pilot as an example of partnership working and are actively looking to expand the initiative to other landlords across the UK.
9. SCDC also looked at its operation of the voids process and the procedures adopted by other local landlords with a view to reducing void times from around 42 days. This was carried out in conjunction with the implementation of CBL and as a result of developing the two together, both systems support each other with a result that void times for sheltered and non sheltered property have fallen to around 16 days for the full financial year. This is in contrast to other partners where void times have increased. SCDC have been asked to visit other partner landlords to explain how our system works so they too can improve void times.
10. In order to facilitate access to the scheme for less able applicants, an assisted bidder list has been created whereby staff place bids on behalf of applicants based on their preferences for property type and location. At present there are 40 applicants registered on this list and 10 have been housed within the year. In addition, the team also maintain a list of applicants who have requested a personalised free sheet, which is sent to them each bidding cycle.
11. SCDC sent questionnaires to a sample of 400 applicants registered on Home-Link. Of those that replied (189), 31.22% (59 in total) rated the scheme as poor but these were likely to be applicants in bands C and D with less likelihood of being housed. 21.69% (41) rated the scheme as good or excellent. The remainder rated the scheme as average.

12. Participating RSL's can either advertise, shortlist and offer property themselves or can ask SCDC to do the first 2 functions on their behalf. Only 2 RSL's in the district have opted for the second option. RSL's activity can be tracked on the system where they carry out functions themselves but we have to update where we are carrying out the main activity. This relies on those RSL's keeping us informed in order to maintain accurate records but both have been particularly slow in doing this often needing a reminder to do so. The only landlord in SCDC area not participating in Home –Link is Hanover Housing Association.
13. In order to promote cross partner mobility a proportion of properties of all types and sizes appear in the “Cross Partner” section of the Home-Link System. These properties are selected at random and form 10% of properties advertised (25% in the case of new build). For SCDC the average number of properties appearing in cross partner is between 9 – 10 % showing that the system is working well. Property can be voluntarily included in the cross partner section (e.g. known low demand) but is not included in the 10% and also voluntarily excluded in the case of rarely available property (e.g. 4 bed houses). In this case the 10% is taken from remaining properties advertised in that cycle. To date 20 SCDC applicants have been housed by other Home-Link partners whereas SCDC have let 29 properties to applicants from other local Authority areas. Of these nine, seven of the properties were sheltered which traditionally are harder to let.
14. Each partner has the option of letting property outside the CBL system. This is known as a direct let. Each partner aims to keep these to a minimum. Examples of such lets could be urgent management transfers, fleeing domestic violence, staff moving out of SCDC property (e.g. Sheltered Housing Officers moving off scheme) and homeless applicants residing in temporary accommodation for more than three months. All such moves have to be approved by a senior officer within SCDC. In comparing direct lets across the sub regional partners, SCDC has one of the lowest figures which shows that we are maintaining an effective monitoring of such cases and maximising the opportunities for choice for applicants on the housing register.
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Legal	None
Staffing	SCDC hosts the post of sub regional CBL Manager who is based at Cambourne.
Risk Management	Contained within the CBL policy document
Equal Opportunities	Sub regional Equal Opportunities issues are contained within the CBL policy document

Consultations

16. The CBL review took into account the views of Local Authorities and RSL partners. A survey of applicants has also been carried out. Locally CBL has been discussed at

the tenant participation group and the views and opinions of members and staff have also been sought.

Effect on Service Priorities and Corporate Objectives for 2008/09

17.

Work in partnership to manage growth to benefit everyone in South Cambridgeshire now and in the future
The sub regional nature of Home-Link has offered applicants the chance to move to other neighbouring Local Authority areas and also increased the number of properties they can be considered for via the cross partner aspect of the scheme
Deliver high quality services that represent best value and are accessible to all our community
The sub regional nature of the scheme allows service efficiencies and reduced costs by sharing one system and associated development and maintenance costs. Strategies such as assisted bidding together with different bidding methods mean that the scheme is accessible to all applicants.
Enhance quality of life and build a sustainable South Cambridgeshire where everyone is proud to live and work
The quality of SCDC homes and the services offered play a role in the quality of life for all residents in SCDC villages

Recommendations

- To note the improvements in the lettings service since the introduction of the choice based lettings Home-Link scheme.
- To note the sub-regional recommendations for scheme improvements and support SCDC's role in participating in these activities.
- To approve an amendment to the lettings policy to place 'confirmed rough sleepers' into Band B.

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