

Committee: COMMUNITY COMMITTEE

Agenda Item

Date: January 18th 2007

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Title: Choice Based Lettings

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Summary

1. This report asks Members of the Committee to reconsider a decision made in September to withdraw from the implementation of Choice Based Lettings through the Herts and Essex Housing Consortium Bid.

Recommended

2. That the Committee reconsiders the position regarding the Choice Based Lettings Scheme Consortium bid in the District and authorises officers to rejoin the consortium and implement Choice Based Lettings in the District before the Government deadline of 2010.

Background Papers

3. The following papers were referred to by the author in the preparation of this report and are available for inspection from the author of the report.
 - I. Monitoring the Longer Term Impact of Choice Based Lettings, DCLG Housing Research Summary Number 231, October 2006.
 - II. Sustainable Communities: Homes for All, A Strategy for Choice Based Lettings. ODPM
 - III. Fund for the development of regional and sub regional choice based lettings scheme. ODPM
 - IV. Harlow Choice Based Lettings Policy. Harlow Council.
 - V. Health and Housing Report September 8th 2005.
 - VI. Community Committee Report June 8th 2006
 - VII. Community Committee Report September 14th 2006

Impact

4.

Communication/Consultation	There will need to be communication with the other LA's involved and report back to Committee with progress made.
Community Safety	None
Equalities	There would need to be safeguards for minority groups to ensure they can access the service. An equality impact assessment will need to be carried out.
Finance	Some ongoing funding will be required for running costs estimated to be £25,000 - £30,000 per annum.
Human Rights	None
Legal Implications	Investigate scheme and its legal implications
Ward-specific impacts	Across District
Workforce/Workplace	Role of housing team will have impact

Situation

5. It is Government policy that all stock owning social housing landlords should have a Choice Based Lettings Policy in place by 2010. Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996 as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002 states that 'authorities must include a statement in their allocations scheme about the position on offering choice to applicants or the ability to express preferences and includes a provision to facilitate the introduction of advertising schemes'. Clearly DCLG are keen that authorities offer choice and implement Choice Based Lettings schemes by the above date.
6. Choice Based Lettings is a new government approach to the letting of social housing. It aims to make lettings arrangements more transparent and to make it easier for tenants and residents to apply for housing with the Council or with Registered Social Landlords (Housing Associations). Pilot schemes have introduced 'advertising' models for letting homes, which allow applicants to play a greater role in the allocation process. Many authorities have also combined this with steps to increase applicants' awareness of a range of possible solutions to their housing problems.
7. The Committee has received three previous reports on this issue. In September 2005 the then Health and Housing Committee agreed that the

Council should be part of a sub regional bid to try and access funding for the implementation of a scheme. The funding bid was successful and this was reported to the Committee in June 2006. A further report was then presented in September 2006 to decide if the Council continued with the Choice Based Lettings scheme as consultants were being appointed to oversee the scheme.

8. Members of the Committee decided that the Council would not proceed with the implementation of a Choice Based lettings scheme through the Consortium and asked Officers to investigate a scheme particular to Uttlesford before the deadline of 2010.
9. Officers have since been visited by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and the Government Office to discuss the decision made and explore the issues raised in the Committee report. They have asked Officers to bring a report back before Members of the Committee to reconsider the decision made in September 2006. Officers have now received assurances that the issues raised can be overcome to allow for Choice Based Lettings to be introduced in Uttlesford.
10. The issues raised in the November report included:
 - a. **Issue** - Higher costs for the provision of the service
Revised Position - Choice based lettings set up costs can be substantial however these are being partly funded by the DCLG grant. Recent research by DCLG (Research Summary 231, October 2006) has shown that in some instances CBL costs more to administer than the tradition allocations model. Overall staffing costs usually remain unchanged but additional costs are found in the advertising of properties. The Consortium will be advertising in one publication to save on these costs. It is estimated that the scheme will cost £25,000 - £30,000 per annum for ongoing costs.
 - b. **Issue** - The void rate for general need vacancies could increase –
Revised Position - Research has shown that CBL speeds up the re letting of empty properties. This is due to fewer refusals when a tenancy is offered. Through CBL applicants are choosing the property they want to live in so are less likely to refuse the allocation when made.
 - c. **Issue** - Applicants could fail to register a bid because of social problems (Illness, holiday etc) –
Revised Position - Bids can be made via the internet or SMS text message so an applicant with a mobile phone or close to an internet connection can still bid for a property. Some CBL schemes also have a telephone service whereby applicants can call at local rate to listen to the vacancies recorded on an automated phone line.

- d. **Issue** - Ethnic minority and disadvantaged people could miss out on making a bid –

Revised Position - Officers already have links with the BME community in the District and will work with them to ensure that the scheme is inclusive. There are also links with the local Learning Disability and Mental Health groups and CBL will be put on the agenda of one of their future meetings to discuss the implications for them and any concerns they have. They would also be visited after the scheme goes live to ensure they can access the service (or someone can on their behalf) Some Local Authorities also keep a list of those who require special assistance and help them bid for properties.

11. Officers feel that the issues that were brought before Members of the Committee in September 2006 are able to be addressed and are recommending that the decision made is reconsidered and Uttlesford re join the Consortium as suggested by the DCLG and the Government Office.
12. The views of the Tenant forum will be verbally reported to the Committee.

Targets

13. What we are trying to achieve is to continue working in partnership with the Herts and Essex Housing Options Consortium to meet the Government's requirement of a Choice Based Lettings Scheme by 2010 but to also balance this with existing Council policy and ensure that applicants continue to be treated fairly for housing.

Options

14. There are [2] potential options.
15. They are:
- a) Rejoin the Partnership and implement Choice Based Lettings and therefore achieve the Government requirement ahead of the target date.
- The Committee will have to suspend rule 12.1 of the Council Procedural Rules in order to rescind the previous decision.**
- b) Continue with policy decided and review the situation between now and 2010 depending on statutory requirements.

Pay-Offs/Penalties

16. If the Council proceeds with this Partnership, then choice based lettings will be implemented during 2007/08 ahead of the Government timescale of 2010 and with significant project savings.

17. If we do not go ahead with the Partnership, then the other Authorities in the sub region will continue to do so and we will lose the opportunity for sub regional working, the funding opportunity and the reduction in costs.

Risk Analysis

18. The following have been assessed as the potential risks associated with this issue.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating Actions
The scheme is implemented but increases void turn around times and staffing costs increase.	Medium	Medium	Although CBL schemes already in place have experienced longer void turn around times it is hoped that this will improve when the scheme is fully operational
Uttlesford do not rejoin the sub regional bid	Medium	High	UDC would have to fund the total costs of the project if it becomes statutory.
Council could be accused of not embracing regional/sub regional agenda	Medium	high	Could impact on CPA review score.
Tenants are not satisfied with a choice based lettings scheme	Medium	High	Could mean reverting back to the traditional methods of allocating properties.