

Committee: HEALTH AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

Agenda Item

Date: September 8th 2005

14

Title: CHOICE BASED LETTINGS

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Summary

This report advises members of an opportunity to bid for ODPM funding to possibly implement choice based lettings in the Uttlesford District with sub regional partners.

Recommended

That Officers progress a sub regional bid to the ODPM for investigation into a choice based lettings scheme

Background Papers

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.

1. Sustainable Communities: Homes for All, A Strategy for Choice Based Lettings. ODPM
2. Fund for the development of regional and sub regional choice based lettings scheme. ODPM
3. Harlow Choice Based Lettings Policy. Harlow Council.
4. Introducing Choice Based Lettings, S Clarke (attached)

Impact

Communication/Consultation	There will need to be communication with the other LA's involved
Community Safety	None
Equalities	None at present
Finance	None at present

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Human Rights	None
Legal Implications	Investigate scheme and its legal implications
Ward-specific impacts	Across District
Workforce/Workplace	Role of housing team could have impact

Situation

1. This report has been presented to Members because the ODPM is providing £4 million over three years to support the development of regional and sub regional choice based letting schemes. "Homes for All" , the Government's 5 year housing plan sets out the Government's plans for taking forward its choice based lettings policy. "Homes for All" also makes clear that the Government is keen that Choice based lettings systems should operate sub regionally or regionally, recognising that housing markets do not follow Local Authority boundaries.
2. The situation that has arisen is funding has been made available via a 3 year bidding round from the ODPM. The bidding round closes on 7th October 2005. The funding is available to Local Authorities working sub regionally to provide choice based lettings.
3. I have met with staff at Epping Forest District Council, Brentwood Borough Council, Broxbourne District Council, East Herts District Council and Chelmsford Borough Council to look at the feasibility of a sub regional choice based lettings scheme. After discussions with a CBL provider, it seems that working in partnership would lead to high savings on the set up costs and advertising of this initiative. Each Local Authority would still do all of their own allocations and the partnership working would be around a joint computer system in each Local Authority office and a joint magazine/website advertising the properties that are available across the area. There is an appendix to this report that explains the issue in more depth.
4. The funding, if granted, would help with set up costs, the computer system needed and a project officer who would implement the scheme in each Authority area. This would enable Uttlesford DC to move forward with Choice Based Lettings earlier than originally thought possible and without the strain on staff resources.
5. It needs to be considered now because funding from the ODPM would enable the housing department to implement, subject to Member approval, Choice Based Lettings much earlier and at a reduced cost by working sub regionally.

Targets

6. What we are trying to achieve is to review what needs to be done to meet the Government's requirement of a choice based lettings scheme by 2010. The issue would be subject to a further report to Committee when the situation is clearer.

Options

7. There are 2 potential options.

8. They are:

- a) Involvement in a bid to the ODPM with other sub regional authorities making savings of 80% on the set up costs and 30/40% on the ongoing costs.
- b) No involvement in the bidding round and work towards funding and implementing a scheme ourselves between now and 2010.

Pay-Offs/Penalties

9. If we go ahead with the bid and are successful, then the research into choice based lettings can begin during 2006/07. Implementation would only follow during 2007/08 before the Government deadline of 2010. This would only be if such a scheme was approved by Members.

If we do not go ahead with the bid, then the other Authorities in the sub region will continue to do so and we will lose the opportunity for sub regional working, funding opportunity and the reduction in costs. We will still have to implement a scheme before 2010 within our own resources.

Risk Analysis

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

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating Actions
The bid is not successful	MEDIUM	LOW	A bid can be made in the 2 nd or 3 rd year of the programme
Uttlesford do not join the sub regional bid	MEDIUM	HIGH	UDC would have to fund the total costs of the project. UDC would not be working sub regionally on this project as expected by the ODPM

What is Choice Based Lettings?

Choice Based Lettings is a new approach to letting homes which 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 process of selecting their home. Many authorities have also combined this with steps to increase applicants' awareness of a range of possible solutions to their housing problems.

Why is Choice Based Lettings important?

Introducing Choice Based Lettings is important as it provides a significant focus on our Customer Services and for ensuring that our services develop in line with the Governments' housing policy.

Listening and responding to our customers, working with partners, improving communication using technology to improve customer services, developing effective performance measures and improving performance will all need to be central to the successful introduction and implementation of Choice Based Lettings.

The Government is keen to see a move away from traditional systems for allocating homes to those which place greater emphasis on the themes of choice, responsibility and a more active role for applicants in the allocations process.

The Government also sees choice Based Lettings as a way of encouraging sustainable tenancies and building more settled and stable communities. It is suggested that tenants are more likely to meet their tenancy obligations, maintain the property in a good condition, and remain in situ for longer if they have chosen where they live.

What benefits can it bring to our customers?

Choice Based Lettings has been tested in many Councils and has been shown to bring many benefits for customers. Although demand for housing is likely to remain high in a number of cases, Choice Based Lettings can bring many benefits to tenants and residents in Uttlesford including:

- **The chance to decide which properties to apply for** – rather than wait for the traditional way of a Housing Officer sending an offer.
- **Better quality information** – Choice Based Lettings can help to make sure that customers know which properties are available and that more specific information is available on the location, the type of heating, garden, nearest schools etc.

- **Increasing awareness of other housing options** – for example making sure that customers know about schemes that may be available to adapt their existing home, help with a deposit to rent a home in the private sector or to consider the option of shared home ownership.
- **Clear and transparent criteria to decide who is eligible for housing** – this means having straightforward conditions to decide who is eligible to join the housing needs register as well as clear criteria to assess needs and award priority.
- **Support for vulnerable groups** – help and support can be provided to protect the needs of vulnerable people, improve their housing opportunities to help ensure that people in most urgent need can be helped.
- **Better communication** – Authorities who have introduced choice based lettings have advertised vacancies in a range of different ways including regular mailings, websites, text messaging or by setting up property shops for customers to call in to find out about vacancies and bid for properties about which they are interested.

Why work sub regionally?

Funding is available from the ODPM to work sub regionally on a Choice Based Lettings scheme. Officers have met with staff at Epping Forest District Council, Brentwood Borough Council, Broxbourne District Council, East Herts District Council and Chelmsford Borough Council to look at the feasibility of a sub regional choice based lettings scheme. After discussions with a CBL provider, it seems that working in partnership would lead to high savings on the set up costs and advertising of this initiative. Each Local Authority would still do all of their own allocations and the partnership working would be around a joint computer system in each Local Authority office and a joint magazine/website etc to advertise the properties.

The funding would help with set up costs, the computer system needed and a project officer who would implement the scheme in each Authority area. This would enable Uttlesford DC to move forward with Choice Based Lettings earlier than originally thought possible and without the strain on staff resources.

For further information

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