

Report to Housing Scrutiny Panel

Date of meeting: 25 March 2010

Portfolio: Housing – Councillor D. Stallan

Subject: Options for Cross-boundary Allocations

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Recommendations/Decisions Required:

The Housing Scrutiny Panel is asked to consider the options for cross-boundary allocations within the areas of the Herts and Essex Housing Options Consortium in accordance with the expectations of the Communities & Local Government (CLG).

Report:

1. The Herts and Essex Housing Options Consortium (HEHOC) was set up in 2005, to develop a joint Choice Based Lettings Scheme (CBL). The six local authority partners within the Consortium are listed below and comprise all of the local authorities in the eastern part of the London Commuter Belt Sub-Region (i.e. on the Herts and Essex border), with the exception of Harlow District Council, which independently operates its own CBL Scheme:

- Brentwood Borough Council
- Broxbourne Borough Council
- Chelmsford Borough Council
- East Herts District Council
- Epping Forest District Council
- Uttlesford District Council

2. One of the objectives of the Regional Housing Strategy for the East of England is to provide mixed communities and widen choice. The Sub-Regional Housing Strategy has an objective of achieving social inclusion, and to ensure access and choice to housing and the inclusion of collaborative working on CBL within the Sub-Regional Strategy's Action Plan.

3. Since all authorities have implemented CBL, it is an expectation of the Communities and Local Government (CLG), through their Special Advisor in this area, to move towards cross-boundary allocations. One of the key objectives of HEHOC, which was included in the Consortium's successful bid for Government grant, is to work collaboratively amongst local authority and Registered Social Landlord (RSL) partners to increase opportunities for cross-border mobility and nomination arrangements and to explore the opportunities to extend the scheme to private sector landlords.

4. Although customers from any of the partner local authority areas are able in law to register with any other partner local authority, and express an interest for vacancies in that area, there is currently no formal provision for any cross-boundary working.

5. The Government's recently published statutory guidance "Fair and Flexible" on social housing allocations for local authorities in England also refers to cross-boundary working in its document. Some examples of references to this are as follows:

Greater Mobility – "could develop arrangements with other authorities or RSLs to make a proportion of their lettings available for cross-boundary nominations" (Page 14 paragraph 29).

Local Lettings Policies – "Attracting essential workers into the district by giving them priority for a small number of properties" (Page 29 paragraph 86).

Local Lettings Policies – "Where a number of local authorities have agreed a common allocations policy or common prioritisation criteria as part of a sub-regional CBL scheme, local lettings policies can be useful as a means of incorporating local priorities" (Page 29 paragraph 88).

6. The agency Locata Housing Services (LHS) is the largest Choice Based Lettings agency in the UK, which administers the HEHOC HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme. LHS advises that a number of the Consortia they administer operate some form of cross-boundary working. The allocations policies used are based around one of the following four Models:

Model One – Retention of Own Allocations Scheme

7. This is the Model currently used by HEHOC, with each authority retaining their own Allocations Schemes with no cross-boundary working. Under Choice Based Lettings, all applicants are able to view all available properties across all six local authority areas either in the free-sheet or on the Website. As housing applicants can join any housing register throughout the country, they are able to express an interest in any property they are eligible for that is advertised in the free-sheet, as long as they are registered with the authority that has the vacancy. However, as applicants only have priority in terms of local connection in their own area, they obviously have much lower priority for properties advertised by their neighbouring authorities, which limits mobility.

Model Two – Retention of Own Allocations Scheme with an Over-arching Sub-regional Policy

8. Under this Model, although each authority would retain its own Allocations Scheme locally, prior to any expressions of interest being registered, around 5 - 10% of vacant properties selected randomly, would be extracted by LHS from each HEHOC member authority for cross-boundary "bidding". These vacancies, during each two-weekly cycle, would be allocated under a separate, over-arching, sub regional allocations policy. Priorities under the over-arching policy would need to be agreed, but should not include applicants being placed in the lowest bands for not having local connection. Banding priority would be predominantly based upon need, with those applicants who do not have local connection having less priority within each band. If all Consortium members' policies were similar, with for example all members having a banding scheme, this would result in a reduced free-sheet as less information on individual schemes would need to be published, which would reduce costs. As explained in paragraph 2, within the Sub-Regional Housing Strategy there is an objective of achieving social inclusion, and to ensure access and choice to housing and the inclusion of collaborative working on CBL within the Sub-Regional Strategy's Action Plan. This Model would meet with this objective.

Model Three – retention of Own Allocations Scheme allowing Cross-border allocations for Mobility reasons

9. This model is a variation of Model Two, but without the need for an over-arching policy. A random 5-10% of all vacancies would be made available to applicants in other local authority areas within the Consortium's area, based on mobility need. The "mobility need" criteria would need to be agreed but could include, needing to move to be closer to older or younger relatives, work, or other socio-economic reasons. This would meet the Government's proposals under its statutory guidance set out in Paragraph 5. Properties would then be allocated to the applicant who had an assessed need to move to the local authority area, who had been registered on their own Housing Register the longest, irrespective of banding (or, indeed relative housing need).

Model Four – Voluntary Sub-regional Policy for Difficult to Let Properties

10. With this Model, all HEHOC members would pool all difficult to let properties and advertise them as being available to all applicants across the partner authorities, possibly subject to applicants being registered with the authority where the vacancy exists. Although it could be argued that this would demonstrate partnership working, in reality it would not increase the chances of an applicant outside of an authority's area as they would be already placed in a lower band (or have less points) due not having local connection. It would therefore be recommended that, if this Model was agreed, priority should be based upon an over-arching banding policy across the Consortium for difficult to let properties, based upon the applicant's need (and time on the list) only, with local connection disregarded.

Model Five – Common Assessment Policy

11. Under a common assessment policy, all HEHOC members would allocate accommodation across all areas under one Allocations Scheme. In order to make this work, all partners would need to work to either a banding or points based system (EFDC works on a banding system, some other local authorities in the Consortium work on a points system). If a banding system was agreed, then local connection could give greater priority within each band rather than applicants being placed in the lowest band for this reason, which currently happens. As explained in Paragraph 2, the Sub-Regional Housing Strategy has an objective of achieving social inclusion, and to ensure access and choice to housing and the inclusion of collaborative working on CBL within the Sub-Regional Strategy's Action Plan. This Model would meet with this objective.

12. One of the clauses in the Consortium's Memorandum of Understanding is that it is the intention of HEHOC that individual housing allocations schemes shall remain the sole responsibility of the individual authorities in which they operate and that responsibility for amendments remain the responsibility of the individual member authorities. Therefore, although there is an expectation of Government to have some form of cross-boundary working, no commitment has been made between the HEHOC partner authorities.

13. Officers in each local authority of HEHOC are reporting on this matter to their Members, to gauge interest and preference across the sub-region. Therefore, the Housing Scrutiny Panel is asked to consider this Council's response to HEHOC on the options for cross-boundary working on the allocation of accommodation. The views of other HEHOC members who have already considered the issue will be reported verbally.

Reason for decision:

To consider the Council's response to HEHOC Choice Based Lettings Consortium on the options for operating cross-boundary working on the allocation of accommodation.

Options considered and rejected:

Not to consider the options on cross-boundary working on the allocation of accommodation, or to consider other options.

Consultation undertaken:

The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation will be informed of the matter at their meeting in April 2010.

Resource implications:

Budget provision: N/A

Personnel: N/A

Land: N/A

Community Plan/BVPP reference: N/A

Relevant statutory powers: Housing Act 1996

Background papers: HEHOC Bid for Government Grant & Government's Statutory Guidance "Fair and Flexible" on Framing Allocations Schemes

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications: N/A

Key Decision reference: (if required) N/A