

Report to the Housing Scrutiny Panel

Date of meeting: 3 March 2006

Subject: Choice Based Lettings

Portfolio: Housing – Councillor Michael Heavens

Officer contact for further information: Roger Wilson extension 4419

Committee Secretary: Adrian Hendry



Decision:

That the progress made on the implementation of the Choice Based Lettings Scheme for all the Council's vacant social rented properties be noted.

Background Report:

1. At its meeting on 24 May 2004, the Cabinet agreed the recommendations of the former Overview and Scrutiny Committee (1) that the Council adopts a move towards a Choice Based Lettings system in principle. This followed detailed examinations of the principles and issues at a number of meetings by the former Working Group on Housing.
2. Under a Choice Based Lettings scheme, all vacant social rented properties would be advertised to applicants on the Housing Register in a periodic publication, website, interactive kiosks and other media showing a photograph and giving details of location, type, rent, service charge, council tax band and landlord of the available accommodation. Applicants would apply for a property by "bidding" either in person, by post, telephone, text, email or Internet. Bidding restrictions would be in place, which would include restricting "bidding" for properties to those households which only have an assessed need for a particular property type.
3. At the end of the "bidding" cycle, the Council would analyse the "bids" received and allocate each property following a prioritisation and selection process in accordance with its Allocations Scheme. In general terms, the property would be offered to the applicant in the highest band, who has been registered the longest, who had "bid" for the specific vacancy. The results of the "bidding" on each property advertised is then published in the next periodic publication, setting out the number of "bids" received on each property, as well as the Band and registration date of the successful applicant. This helps applicants to see how long the successful applicant has been waiting and gives greater transparency in the allocation of accommodation, as each applicant would be able to clearly understand the type and location of properties for which they would be most likely to "bid" successfully.
4. Any Choice Based Lettings Scheme must be developed in a way that takes into account the needs of vulnerable groups. This would involve close liaison with Social Care and a wide-range of partner agencies, ensuring that vulnerable people are able to participate fully in any scheme.
5. At its meeting on 15 September 2005, the Housing Scrutiny Panel considered and made comments to the Housing Portfolio Holder on a detailed report setting out the proposed way forward

on the implementation of the Scheme. This is in accordance with Item (4) of the Housing Scrutiny Panel's Work Programme.

6. Following the meeting the Housing Portfolio Holder agreed the following recommendations of the Panel:

- That the principle of introducing a Choice Based Lettings Scheme operated through an agreement with a Choice Based Lettings Agency for all applicants on the Council's Housing Register be agreed;
- That the Choice Based Lettings Scheme and Agency be commissioned in partnership with neighbouring local authorities within the London Commuter Belt Sub-Region
- That, following the consideration of comments from neighbouring partner authorities, the Head of Housing Services be authorised to agree the final version of a joint bid and submit the bid, to the Government's Choice Based Lettings Regional Fund, generally in line with the draft version of the bid attached as an appendix to the report;
- That the Council be prepared to act as the host authority for the engagement of a consultant to act on behalf of all neighbouring authorities; receive the Government's funding; and make appropriate payments on behalf of the authorities;
- That, if the bid is successful, the Head of Housing Services be authorised to appoint a consultant to project manage the implementation of the joint Choice Based Lettings Scheme, funded from the ODPM grant; and
- That a further report be submitted to the Housing Scrutiny Panel and Housing Portfolio Holder to consider:
 - The outcome of the bid to the Government's Choice Based Lettings Regional Fund;
 - The detailed operation of the joint Choice Based Lettings Scheme;
 - The joint contract arrangements with other authorities;
 - The joint commissioning arrangements for the appointment of the Choice Based Lettings Agency;
 - Budgetary requirements for the establishment and on going operation of the scheme
 - The timescale for the Project.

Formal Delegation of Consortium Functions

7. Under the Council's Constitution (Financial Regulation F1 to F9) the Cabinet is responsible for approving delegations, including frameworks for partnerships, which would include the Consortium. At its meeting on 6 February 2006, the Cabinet agreed that the functions relating to the Herts and Essex Housing Options Consortium, a partnership with five other local authorities, be delegated to the Head of Housing Services in accordance with Financial Regulations F1 to F9 within the Council's Constitution. In practice they will be exercised by the Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations).

Choice Based Lettings – Regional Fund

8. In Autumn 2005, the Council received notification from the Government confirming that £4 million was to be provided to local authorities over three years nationally, through a competitive bidding

process, to support the development of regional and sub-regional Choice Based Lettings Schemes in England.

9. On the recommendation of the Housing Scrutiny Panel, the Housing Portfolio Holder agreed to the Head of Housing Services, in consultation with the five other local authorities and 24 RSLs in the Consortium, submitting a bid to the ODPM. In December 2005, the ODPM notified the Consortium that the bid had been successful and the grant of £96,000 has now been received. The Council is holding the funding, and will make payments, in accordance with the Scrutiny Panel's and Portfolio Holder's decision.

10. In addition to the grant received from the ODPM, each member of the Consortium are making budget provision to supplement the grant to meet operational and any additional implementation costs. The successful consultant will be required to determine the likely set-up and operational costs of each of the partners which will include information technology requirements, staff training, the periodic publication, leaflets and translations. The Council has made budget provision of £40,000 which has been included in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget for next year.

The Herts and Essex Housing Options Consortium's Operational Group

11. The Consortium set up an Officer Operational Group comprising of a representative from each of the six partner authorities and two housing association representatives, which has been charged with setting up the Choice Based Lettings Scheme. At the time of writing the report the Operational Group have drafted a Consultancy Brief which will be approved finally by the Group at its meeting on 7 March 2006. A copy of the current draft is attached as an appendix to the report for information. In addition, at that meeting the Group will be considering an evaluation model for the selection of the successful consultant. The Council will be advertising in Housing Journals during March/April 2006 for expressions of interest from suitably qualified consultants to undertake the work set out in the Consultancy Brief.

12. The Housing Scrutiny Panel are asked to note the progress made to date on the implementation of the Choice Based Lettings Scheme.