

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF HOUSING SCRUTINY STANDING PANEL
HELD ON MONDAY, 11 SEPTEMBER 2006
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 2, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 5.30 - 6.55 PM**

Members Present: S Murray (Chairman), , K Angold-Stephens, Mrs P Brooks, Mrs H Harding, Mrs J Lea, Mrs J H Whitehouse, J Wyatt and Mrs M Carter (Epping Forest Tenants and Leasholders Federation)

Other members present: D Stallan

Apologies for Absence: Mrs R Gadsby and Councillor Mrs D Borton

Officers Present A Hall (Head of Housing Services), R Wilson (Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations)) and A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer)

Also in attendance:

11. SUBSITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Panel noted that there were no substitute members.

12. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The Panel noted that there were no declarations of interest.

13. NOTES OF LAST MEETING - 27 JULY 2006

The minutes from the last meeting were noted and agreed.

14. TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Terms of Reference and Work Programme were noted.

15. CHOICE BASED LETTINGS

The Panel considered the draft Specification for the implementation of the Choice Based Lettings Scheme. The Panel also considered a draft Portfolio Holder report on Choice Based Lettings proposing to authorise the Head of Housing Services to agree the final version of the specification.

The Assistant Head of Housing Services took the Panel through the background of this scheme. The Council has agreed to work in partnership with five other local authorities, creating a consortium of six authorities, Brentwood BC, Broxbourne DC, Chelmsford BC, East Herts DC, Epping Forest DC and Uttlesford DC. The scheme is based around a website and a free sheet being distributed every two weeks, which would advertise any vacancies in the housing stock of the relevant authorities. The people on the housing register could then express their interest in any property advertised. The expressions of interest are then analysed and prioritised by an external Choice Based Lettings Agency. The next website update and issue of the

free sheet will then show the properties allocated and any background information associated with it. It was noted that:

- It was too early to determine whether there would be any staffing implications associated with this; the Choice Based Letting Agency would in theory handle most of this work and once the scheme had been operating six months to a year the staffing implications could be analysed.
- Each authority would continue to have its own Allocation Scheme, which the Choice Based Lettings Agency would apply.
- A tenant could apply to go on another Council's list, but were more likely to get something from their own Council as they would be higher on their list.
- The website and free sheets could and will be used to put other relevant information in each advert such as distance from the nearest rail station and the local bus routes.
- Also available on the website and with the free sheet will be a User Guide.
- Each of the six authorities will have a Memorandum of Understanding amongst themselves and individual contracts with the Choice Based Letting Agency, if one of them wants to leave the consortium then it would not affect the others, although these agreements would make it difficult for a council to leave.
- When the scheme starts each tenant will get a pack explaining how it works and how to express an interest in the properties advertised.
- The current target date for implementation of this scheme is 1st June 2007, although officers consider this optimistic.
- The Choice Based Letting Agency would let the Council have a whole range of management reports including identifying any vulnerable applicants who may not be participating.
- The system will also report back on any ineligible bids to officers.

The Panel were happy that the Head of Housing Services agree final changes to the specifications in conjunction with the Housing Portfolio Holder, and amended Recommendation 2 of the Portfolio Holder's report accordingly. The recommendation would now read:

"That, following any requested changes made by the partner authorities in the Consortium and/or as a result of the Public consultation, the Head of Housing Services be authorised in consultation with the Housing Portfolio Holder to agree on behalf of the Council the final version of the Specification, generally in line with the draft version."

The budget details were then considered by the Panel. They noted that an initial government grant of £96,000 had been received to set up the project, around £58,000 of which will go to the Project Management Consultants, leaving a balance of £38,000 to meet the remaining set up costs. Additional budget provision of £40,000 had been made by EFDC to meet the set up costs for 2006/07 in case the £38,000 did not cover all the Consortium's costs. The consultants estimate that an ongoing budget of around £25,000 (for EFDC) would be required; the main costs would be the periodic publication. Budget provision of £35,000 per annum is currently being included within the Housing Revenue Account from 2007/08.

The Panel thought that it was sensible to limit the expressions of interest per applicant per edition of the free sheet, as there was a possibility that some people would apply for every property they could. It was also a good idea that all six authorities kept to a consistent number; in this case, up to a maximum of three properties per applicant was mentioned. The Panel agreed that their view that there

should be some limit to the number of bids applicants could make should be added to the Portfolio Holders Report as a further recommendation.

The Panel agreed that the word 'separately' should be added to paragraph 16.1 of the draft specification so that it reads "...their share of the costs and should be invoiced 'separately' on this basis."

It was also agreed that about a year after the scheme had been operating the applicants should be re-consulted to find out what they thought of the system and the procedures used.

RESOLVED:

1. The Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel agreed the draft specification on Choice Based Lettings, but with the following comments:
 - They did not want unlimited bids made on properties;
 - The word 'separately' to be added to paragraph 16.1 of the draft specification;
 - A survey of the applicants should be carried out a year into the scheme.
2. The progress made on the implementation of the Choice Based Letting Scheme for the Council's entire vacant social rented properties was noted.
3. The second recommendation of the Portfolio Holders report be altered to read:

"That, following any requested changes made by the partner authorities in the Consortium and/or as a result of the Public consultation, the Head of Housing Services be authorised in consultation with the Housing Portfolio Holder to agree on behalf of the Council the final version of the Specification, generally in line with the draft version."
4. An extra recommendation should be added to the Portfolio Holders Report stating:

"That the Council will not agree to applicants being able to make unlimited expressions of interest."

16. REPORTS TO BE MADE TO THE NEXT MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Choice Based Letting Scheme to be reported to the next Overview and Scrutiny committee meeting.

17. FUTURE MEETINGS

The next meetings of the Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel are:

31 October 2006,
30 January 2007, and
30 April 2007.