

KENNET DISTRICT COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

9TH October 2007

The Current Choice Based lettings Policy and Proposals for a Countywide Policy

Report by Belinda Eastland, Housing Options Manager

Report EPHSM/39/2007

1 Purpose of the Report

To explain how the current choice based lettings policy operates when letting housing association homes in the district. To explain the proposals for a countywide choice based lettings policy.

2 Financial Implication

There are financial implications for the proposed countywide policy. The costs are outlined in the bid document which is to be submitted to CLG on 12th October 07. A copy of the bid is included at the end of the report.

3 Staffing implications

There are staffing implications for the proposed countywide policy. The bid covers the cost of employing an additional member of staff for one year.

4 Legal Implications

The current Choice Based Lettings policy was written five years ago in line with Government guidance on choice based lettings at that time. The Government wanted Authorities to experiment with choice based lettings schemes moving away from points systems and taking a broader account of housing need.

In 2007 the Government brought out a draft code of guidance for Local Authorities choice based lettings schemes which asks authorities to ensure that different levels of need and also cumulative need is taken in to account again. This has placed the homes@kennet's choice based lettings policy open to legal challenge. It is therefore important that this authority moves towards a scheme which will bring it back in to line with current Government guidance. The principles of the new countywide choice based lettings policy does this and the detail of the policy, yet to be completed will adhere to all Government guidance.

5 Risk Implications

There is a risk of legal challenge by customers if the policy is not changed.

6 Background

Established in April 1997, the Kennet Housing Register was intended to be the single register of housing need for all the Kennet district. The Register is the primary access route into social housing in Kennet. The demand for housing exceeds supply and the register exists to enable all households who are in need of rehousing to be included on one waiting list and to maximise their opportunities for rehousing. The Register also acts as an index of the level and type of housing need locally.

Partner Housing Associations

English Churches Housing Group
Guinness Trust
Hastoe Housing Association
James Butcher Housing Association
Jephson Housing Association
Kennet Action for Single Homeless
Kennet District Council
Kennet Housing Society Ltd
Kingfisher Housing Association
Knightstone Housing Association
L & Q Beacon
New Downland Housing Association
Raglan Housing Association
Sanctuary Housing Association
Sarsen Housing Association
Shaftesbury Housing Association
Sovereign Housing Association
Western Challenge Housing Association
Wiltshire Rural Housing Associations Ltd

Range of Stock in the District

There are approximately 7000 housing association homes within the Kennet district for rent. This is made up of flats and houses for general needs households and sheltered flats and bungalows for elderly households. There are also a variety of supported housing schemes in the district catering for the needs of young people and for people with support needs i.e. mental health and those fleeing domestic violence.

Housing Register and Lettings Statistics

The table below shows the numbers and types of households on the Kennet Housing Register as of September 07.

Housing Register Numbers – 3582 households as at 20th September 07.

Household Type	Total
1 Person	1208
Couple (Dependent Children)	655
Couple (No Children)	417
Lone Parent Hhold	615
Older 1 person	346
Older Couple	198
Adult Household i.e Sharers,	143
Total No of Applications	3582

The table below shows lettings statistics.

Period	2006/07	Q1 2007/08
HOUSEHOLDS REHOUSED		
Total	436	140
General housing needs	196	75
Transfers	120	44
Homeless - rehoused from register.	83	12
of these, this number had properties reserved	48	4
Supported housing (not sheltered)	10	3
Reserved for disabled household	3	0
Low Cost Home Ownership	22	1
Sheltered housing - direct offers	16	5
Number of BME Households rehoused	7	4
All Nominations to RSIs	546	213

Procedures & Timescales

The following performance targets have been set for the operation of the Joint Housing Needs Register:

<u>Task</u> <u>Performance Level</u>	<u>Target</u>	<u>Acceptable</u>
From receipt of application form to issue of status confirmation and on-line computer record.	20 working days	90%
All vacancies notified in full to Homes @ Kennet by Thursday, 17:00pm will be advertised in local newspaper the following Thursday		100%
Nominee provided to partner association following close of bidding	2 working days	100%
Notification to Homes @ Kennet office of offer, refusals, acceptances etc.	2 weeks	90%
From notification of change of circumstances to computer record amendment.	3 working days	90%
Home visit (or checks) completed and recorded at least one partner association.	<i>Prior to offer</i>	100%
Nominations (i.e. acceptances by applicants meeting the Kennet nominations criteria).	75% of net relets	
Joint housing register monitoring reports issued by Kennet District Council.	Quarterly	
Response to request for a review of decision to exclude an application from the Housing Register	Acknowledgement within 5 working days giving date for response.	
the application.	This will be within eight weeks of	
Response to a request for a review of a decision on priority status of an application	3 weeks from receipt of the	

7 Current Choice Based Lettings Policy

Choice Based lettings – “homes@kennet”

From February 2002 the Kennet Housing Partnership has operated a choice based approach to lettings. The service is called ‘homes@kennet’.

Registration

The register operates fundamentally as a queuing system, although there are distinct priority categories for different levels of housing need as follows:

Applications to the register are allocated into 3 separate bands –

- | | |
|--------|---|
| Band A | Customers with an urgent need to move to affordable accommodation in the Kennet District |
| Band B | Customers with a genuine reason for seeking affordable accommodation in the Kennet District |
| Band C | Customers who want to move to affordable accommodation in the Kennet District. |

In the first instance, all vacancies are made available through the ‘homes@kennet’ scheme to those in Bands A & B. If a property cannot be let to a customer in Bands A & B it is offered direct to customers in Band C. Priority for direct offers of accommodation are given to those who have a genuine reason for seeking affordable accommodation but have no local connection to Kennet.

Shared ownership properties are available to customers in any band who meet eligibility criteria and have registered an interest in shared ownership.

Prioritising Applications For Vacancies – Waiting Time

Where more than one application is received for a particular property, priority is based on the length of time they have been waiting on the register.

For general needs applicants – date of original application

For transfer applicants – start date of current tenancy

Priority Card System

Applicants with an urgent housing need are awarded a priority card in order to help them resolve their immediate housing crisis as quickly as possible. For certain groups this will be for a time limited period.

Three month time limited homeless priority card

Homeless households who Kennet District Council has a legal duty to accommodate, under the terms of the Housing Act 1996, Part VII, are provided with a priority card for a 3 month period. At the end of this period if

they have not successfully bid for a property they will receive a direct offer of accommodation.

Renewable Homeless Priority Card

Homeless households who Kennet District Council does not have a legal duty to accommodate, under the terms of the Housing Act 1996, Part VII are provided with a 6-month priority card, initially.

Medical/Social Priority Cards

The following groups are awarded a priority card for a 6 month period, initially. If the applicant is unsuccessful in finding suitable accommodation and they continue to have an urgent need to move, the card is renewed for a further 6 months.

Applicants with an urgent medical need to move, verified by professional medical assessment

Applicants with an urgent social/welfare need to move

Existing Housing Association Tenants whom the landlord need to rehouse because of urgent housing management reasons

Applicants who having successfully held their tenancy for a minimum 6 month period, need to move on from supported accommodation.

Refusals Of Offers

Three Month Time Limited Priority Cards - Statutory Homeless

Should a statutorily homeless applicant successfully bid for a property but subsequently refuse the offer made, Kennet District Council discharges their duty under the terms of homelessness legislation, to provide them with accommodation, providing the offer was reasonable.

They have the right to continue to play their priority card for the remainder of the three-month period. If they have been unsuccessful in finding accommodation before the end of that period, they then have to rejoin the waiting list without any priority status.

Renewable Priority Cards

Applicants with renewable priority cards do have the right to refuse offers of accommodation.

However, on the 6 monthly review the Housing Adviser checks to ensure that the applicant does have a genuine need to be rehoused urgently.

Waiting Time Applicants

There is be no penalty for refusing an offer of accommodation which has been made solely because of the applicant's length of time on the Kennet Housing Register or length of tenancy i.e. no priority card has been played.

Property Labelling

Advertisements state the type of household that is eligible to apply for the particular size/type of property.

State eligible household number per size of property

Appropriate age range for type of accommodation e.g. people over 55 years for sheltered housing

Established local connection where there is a s106 agreement.

Disabled adapted properties for people with restricted mobility.

Preference Criteria

In some cases, whilst other households may still be eligible to be offered the property, preference is given to certain types of applicant. For example, local residents in villages or people over a certain age.

However, whilst preference criteria takes precedence over time, they will not take precedence over priority cards. Therefore, a customer with a priority card who has no local connection to a particular parish would be selected before a customer who has a local connection but no card, except where the property is in high demand.

Where the number of bids is below the high demand threshold, the priority card holder with a local connection has preference over a cardholder without the connection.

Local Connection

Local Connection to a parish is established by the following:

Normal residence in the parish for at least 6 out of the last 12 months or 3 out of the last 5 years.

Close family association with parent, grandparent, sibling or child who has been living in the area for at least 6 out of the last 12 months. Consideration will be given to applicants who have a closer connection to other relatives living in the parish e.g. aunt, uncle, step children rather than to their parents, grandparents, siblings or children.

Permanent employment in the parish.

High Demand Threshold

The purpose of the priority cards is to help people with an urgent housing need to move as quickly as possible.

However, a key aim of the Kennet Housing Partnership is to give all customers the opportunity to apply for affordable housing and to give everyone a choice of the most popular properties in the district.

Demand varies considerably between different types of properties in different parts of the district.

We have therefore introduced a system of bidding limits or high demand thresholds, to reflect this variety. The type and location of properties so affected is reviewed annually depending upon demand. It is intended that between 66 and 75 per cent. of properties made available through the bidding system will allow the use of priority cards.

In the case of new build properties, as a result of the popularity of these, the priority limit will not apply to a third of all such properties on any one site. This is to give as many customers as possible a chance of bidding successfully for such a property.

Reserving Vacancies from the Choice Based Lettings System

On the following occasions, suitable vacancies are excluded from advertisement.

A vacancy is required to enable Kennet District Council to discharge their duty to a statutorily homeless household

A vacancy is required for a customer with acute support needs from the Supported Accommodation Register.

A vacancy is required to enable an RSL to decant their tenant from a property due for redevelopment

A vacancy is required to enable a tenant to move-on from accommodation that has been provided through The Farm Cottage Scheme.

A vacancy is required to enable the Kennet Housing Partnership Members to assist with nominations from other agencies.

A vacancy is required because a Kennet Housing Partnership Member has serious management reasons to provide other accommodation.

Excluded Dwellings – Supported Accommodation

Supported accommodation is excluded from advertisement. 'homes@kennet' maintains a separate register of applicants who need this type of accommodation.

The supported accommodation register operates fundamentally as a queuing system, although there is a distinct priority category for those who need to move urgently.

Supported accommodation can be any of the following:

Accommodation within a particular scheme that is dedicated for use by a particular client group e.g. young homeless people, people with learning disabilities, people with mental health problems etc.

Housing Association accommodation that is leased to another statutory agency or managing agent for use by a specific client group.

Private sector leased accommodation that is for use by a specific client group

Housing Association accommodation that is let to a client with acute support needs and a comprehensive package of support.

Protecting Vulnerable Applicants

Identification

Application Form: The application form seeks information about health and disability needs, which might cause an applicant to be vulnerable.

The form seeks information about any involvement with social services, health, education authority or voluntary bodies that might suggest an applicant needs additional support.

All application forms are checked to ensure that support needs are identified. Where the officer suspects that the applicant may be vulnerable, they will refer the case to the Housing Adviser.

Housing Advisers: One of the key roles of the Housing Advisers is to publicise the 'homes@kennet' to Social Services, the Health Authority and the Education Authority and the various local voluntary organisations working with potentially vulnerable applicants.

They have a close working relationship with key workers in these fields to ensure that applicants with additional support needs are being identified and being referred for additional monitoring and assistance.

Support

Housing Adviser: Potentially vulnerable applicants are contacted by the Housing Adviser and invited for a home visit or interview. A telephone interview may be sufficient.

The Housing Adviser seeks to establish what the support needs are and to identify ways of enabling the applicant to participate in the Lettings System.

Professional/Voluntary Advocacy & Support: If the applicant agrees, the Housing Adviser contacts any Health or Social Services Professional or voluntary worker with whom the applicant is involved to ensure that they understand procedures and that necessary support is provided. This could be through monitoring through regular contact or by providing one nominated person to receive correspondence on the vulnerable person's behalf or to assist with applications for vacancies.

Advocacy/Support from Family & Friends: The applicant can nominate a family member or friend to receive correspondence or make applications on their behalf.

Applying for Vacancies on Vulnerable Person's Behalf

Vulnerable customers are offered the option of Kennet Housing Partnership automatically putting their application forward for any suitable vacancy that arises.

Where a customer needs supported accommodation because their housing related support needs are acute, they are registered for supported accommodation only and are not eligible to bid for advertised vacancies.

Right to a Review of a Decision

An applicant has the right to request a review of a Kennet Housing Partnership decision:-

Not to include their application on the Kennet Housing Register ;

To remove someone from the Kennet Housing Register other than at his or her own request

not to prioritise someone's application under the terms of the allocation policy because their behaviour or that of a member of their household affects their suitability as a tenant.

(See Appendix 1 for full policy)

8 Proposals for a Countywide Choice Based Lettings Policy

Background

Since 2003 Kennet District Council has taken the lead in forming a group to investigate the feasibility of a sub regional choice based lettings scheme. Since then work has been undertaken to draft a countywide policy, consult with customers, members and stakeholders, Specify required IT and apply for funding from CLG to take the project forward.

KEY OBJECTIVES

To set up joint services which will improve the experience for our customers, currently 14,000 households between the four districts, simplifying the application process, widening the choice of properties beyond district boundaries and providing seamless access to one housing register across a wide geographical area with the same eligibility, prioritising and shortlisting criteria.

To simplify processes and procedures for landlord organisations advertising their vacancies so that it does not matter which local authority area is involved, the procedures and lettings policy will be the same.

To take full advantage of the economies of scale available through joint commissioning and procurement of services to generate savings to reinvest in service improvement.

Partners to the scheme.

- Kennet District Council
- West Wiltshire District Council
- North Wiltshire District Council
- Salisbury District Council
- 30 Registered Social Landlords operating across the district.

Summary of the Scheme

The key objectives of the scheme are to increase customer choice and mobility and to provide a transparent and easy to understand method of accessing available properties in the sub region. There will be one lettings policy for the whole area.

Currently only 2 of the Districts operate Choice Based Lettings. This scheme will give every customer the opportunity to bid for available properties across the County. All available properties will be advertised as widely as possible and customers will have a range of bidding methods open to them. Homeless applicants will be given the same opportunities to bid as all other customers.

It is not proposed to pilot this scheme in any particular area. However, it is likely, due to their previous experience, that West Wiltshire and Kennet District Councils will be in a position to proceed before North Wiltshire and Salisbury.

It is proposed that both shared ownership and low cost home ownership will be included in the scheme. Two HomeBuy agents are our partners within the sub region and close working will be actively encouraged.

As above, this scheme will take a housing options approach to Choice Based Lettings and, as such will also include the private rented sector. All the District Councils have active Landlords forums and have developed good relationships with private landlords.

Three of the partners have common housing registers in their individual Districts but it is envisaged that our scheme will have one CHR for the whole sub region; work has already begun on a common application form.

All partners are currently working on a common allocation policy which will be adopted across the County.

All partners have undertaken extensive consultation with everyone on our housing registers and this has shown that the numbers of people wanting to move in and out of particular districts is about equal. Therefore we do not propose to introduce a quota system. Some priority will still be given for local connection but it will be for local connection with the sub region rather than a District. Local connection criteria for village properties will still apply where subject to existing S106 planning restrictions.

The expertise of Kennet and West Wiltshire will be shared to provide appropriate support for people who may be disadvantaged by CBL. A joint policy will be in place to assist with identifying these households and enabling them to participate.

A vital requirement of any software we purchase will be the ability to monitor the new scheme closely. We would envisage that this would be an ongoing role for each of the partners and for the Choice Based Lettings Officers Group.

The Countywide Choice Based Lettings Policy – Key Differences

homes@kennet Current Policy	Proposed County Wide Choice Based Lettings
<p>3 Bands Band A Band B Band C</p> <p>Bidding Only Bands A and B can bid</p>	<p>5 Bands Platinum Gold Plus Gold Silver Bronze</p> <p>Bidding All above bands able to bid</p>
<p>Priority Cards Awarded for homelessness, severe medical or social reasons</p>	<p>No Priority Cards No longer applicable - Priority reflected in banding</p>
<p>Local Connection Kennet district only and additional preference to local people on village properties</p>	<p>Local Connection Customers can bid for properties in all districts across Wiltshire, unless S106 (planning restriction)</p>
<p>Registration Date Date of application for general register Transfers - start date of tenancy</p>	<p>Registration Date Date of application for all customers (including transfers) If you move up a band your date will start again</p>

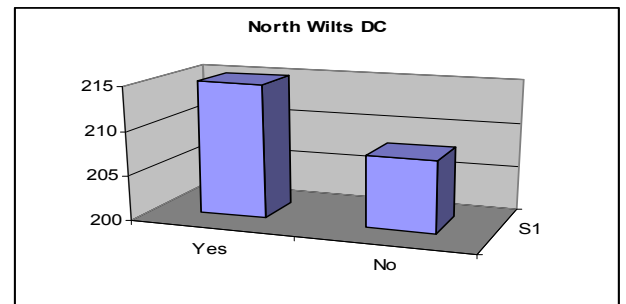
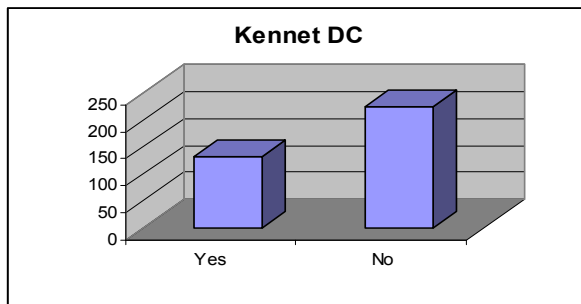
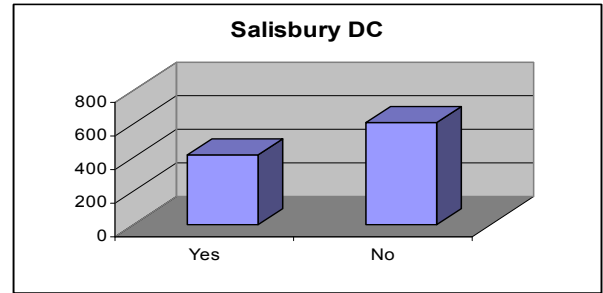
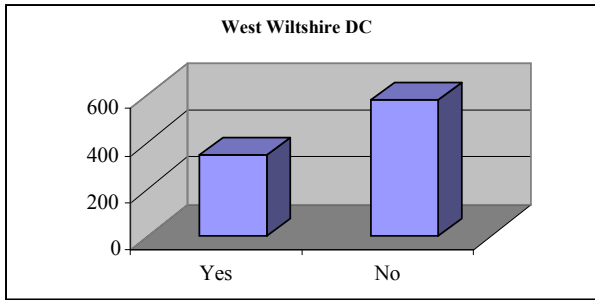
Approval for the Scheme and Consultation

A member consultation has taken place by post and a face to face consultation with member champions from each region has also been held. The proposed scheme does have “in principle” agreement from the housing member/champions in all partner Local Authorities. All four districts are taking the proposal to their relevant committees in December 07 for formal approval.

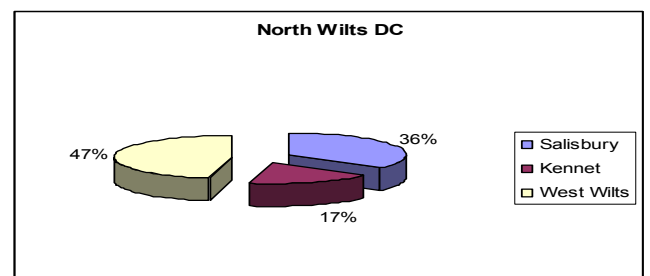
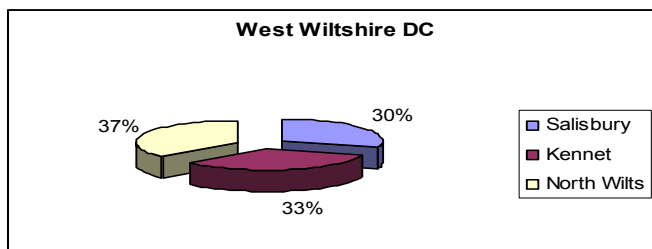
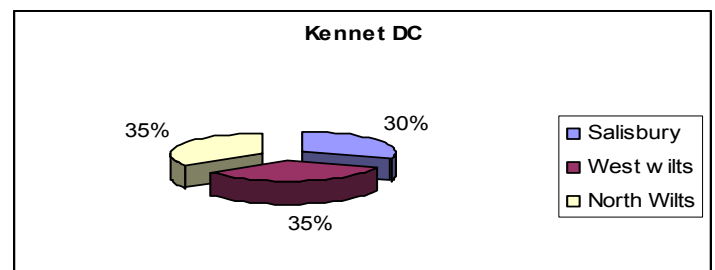
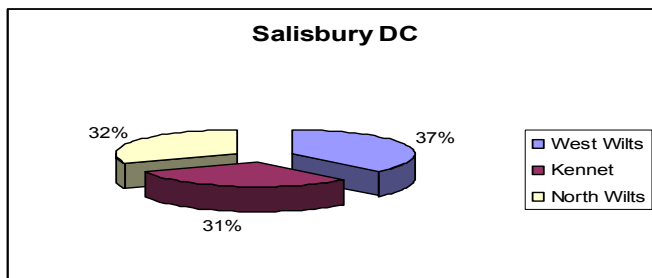
A major consultation has also already taken place across all four districts which has involved face to face consultation at open days across the county. It also involved sending 14,000 questionnaires to all households on the housing register across the region. Salisbury DC also consulted with its tenants as that district still holds its own housing stock.

The results of the consultation are summarised in the graphs and charts below.

We asked: Would you like to apply for accommodation in all districts?



Overall, the applicants in the district are quite happy to apply for accommodation in their own areas; however there is still a percentage of people willing to consider a move across districts and the graphs below highlight the areas in which they would like to move to:



These figures indicate that there is no specific area that will be inundated with people wanting to move there should a regional scheme become available. The equal spread across the whole district would ensure all areas have an equal amount of applicants applying from other districts.