

Title: **Project to develop a Wiltshire Wide Choice Based Lettings Scheme**

Portfolio holder: **Councillor Virginia Fortescue**

Reporting officer: **Graham Hogg and Laura Young**

Key decision: **No**

Purpose

- To support the Council's participation in a sub regional project to develop a Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme across the whole of Wiltshire.
- To inform Cabinet of the likely implications of introducing a Wiltshire wide Choice Based Lettings scheme.

Background

Homes 4 West Wilts has been in operation since April 2005; meeting the Government target to introduce Choice Based Lettings by 2010. The Government are encouraging the development of sub-regional choice based lettings schemes, thereby giving people even greater mobility and choice.

Since November 2006 West Wiltshire District Council has participated in a working group investigating the feasibility of a sub regional choice based lettings scheme.

Work has been undertaken to consult with customers, Members and stakeholders, identify IT requirements and apply for funding from Communities and Local Government (CLG) to take the project forward.

This partnership has been successful in receiving the full amount of funding bid for, £128,000, and must now commence work to develop the project.

A sub regional CBL scheme was instigated prior to any proposals on Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). It is one of the most well developed examples of a service that can be delivered jointly across Wiltshire.

Key issues

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 region.

Importantly for customers there will be one joint common policy developed across the county and a single IT system to access homes across the whole of Wiltshire. It will simplify the processes and procedures for landlord organisations advertising their vacancies as it will not matter which local authority area is involved the procedures and lettings policy will be consistent.

It is proposed that the scheme will adopt a “housing options” approach, which incorporates shared ownership, homebuy, mutual exchange and private renting properties through CBL. Consequently our customers will not only have a greater choice of area, they will also have a greater choice of tenure.

It will be required to facilitate a joint approach to CBL. It is anticipated that the majority of the £128,000 Government grant will fund a new IT system. The three other Wiltshire district councils have seen West Wiltshire’s IT system in operation and would like to see this type of system adopted for a Wiltshire Wide CBL system.

Once a specification has been agreed for the county wide system, the project will follow a procurement process that ensures value for money for all members of the procurement partnership and will meet the procedural requirements of all partners.

The expertise of West Wiltshire and Kennet will be shared to provide appropriate support for people who may be disadvantaged by CBL. It is proposed that a vulnerable applicant’s policy and procedure will be developed to support this.

Effect on strategies and codes

Objective 1 of Meeting Housing Need requires the Council to examine the potential for a Choice Based Lettings scheme that extends beyond the district.

Risk management Implications

Increased cost of Advertising

There is a possibility that the cost of advertising could increase to enable the properties to be advertised across all four districts as there is no single newspaper serving the whole county.

This is considered to be a low risk as we anticipate using alternative methods of advertising, such as notice boards in various outlets (leisure centres, supermarkets, libraries etc). Financial support has been pledged by housing associations in the Homes 4 Wiltshire partnership with their continued agreement to pay a fee for advertising each vacant property.

Increased number of applicants wanting to move to West Wiltshire

As mobility across the county will be less restrictive, there is a possibility that residents in Wiltshire may wish to move to West Wiltshire, however the risk is again considered to be small. Research has been carried out to identify the number of households wishing to move across the boundaries and the numbers to move in and out of each district were evenly distributed. The results of the questionnaire are attached.

IT System

Whilst investigating the feasibility of operating sub regionally, the project group consulted with Abritas (WWDC current provider) to identify the cost associated in extending WWDC's licence/system across all four districts. As the project develops the final cost of the IT may change. It is anticipated that through effective use of soft market testing and procurement the partnership will ensure that the project achieves the best value for money.

Finance and performance implications

The sub-regional choice based lettings group has been successful in its bid to CLG for funding and is now in receipt of £128,000. There are no additional costs to this Council.

The additional capital expenditure will be managed by Kennet District Council and the cost of new software and the grant funding for that software will be reflected in Kennet's capital programme.

Legal and human rights implications

In 2007 the Government produced a draft code of guidance for Local Authorities' choice based lettings schemes.

All choice based lettings schemes should be compliant with the legislation in Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996.

Next Steps

- Develop common policy across all districts
- Develop ICT specification
- Create a joint housing application
- Identify a lean system's approach
- Appoint a project manager and a project assistant
- Agree a project initiation document

Recommendations

That Cabinet supports the development of a sub regional Choice Based Lettings scheme across Wiltshire and the participation of Council officers in the development of that project.

In Particular, Cabinet supports the development of a Choice Based Lettings Scheme that will operate on the basis of a single policy and IT system applying across the whole of Wiltshire.

Prior to the implementation of the proposed CBL scheme a report is brought to Cabinet setting out details of the policy and IT system proposed.