

# **West Wiltshire District Council**

## **Cabinet**

**2<sup>nd</sup> June 2004**

### **Choice Based Lettings**

To update the Cabinet on development of a Choice Based Lettings Scheme.
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#### **1. Purpose**

The purpose of this report is to update Cabinet on the development of a Choice Based Lettings scheme. Cabinet on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2004 considered a report on Choice Based Lettings and it was agreed to carry out further research on this process.

#### **2. Background**

In adopting the 2003 to 2008 Housing Strategy the Council adopted the implementation of a new allocations policy as a priority for action. In January this year the Council held a conference on our allocations policy which was attended by all the major partners. A straw poll taken at the conference and also a written consultation response has overwhelmingly endorsed the Choice Based Lettings approach. Consequently Cabinet considered the matter in January this year and resolved that officers should carry out further research. In recent months West Wiltshire Housing Society has also made known its desire that we should make speedy progress on this project.

#### **3. Key issues**

What is Choice Based Letting Traditionally many councils operate “points” based systems, that allocate points according to need, e.g for overcrowding or lack of facilities. The person with the most points is the person who is offered a home. This is the type of system we currently use and although applicants can state their areas of choice on the application form, when they arrive at the front of the queue, provided it is in their area they simply have to take the next empty home. However, at its simplest, a choice based lettings system can involve advertising all empty properties weekly in a local newspaper. Those who are interested in a home can see what is on offer and bid the vacancy of their choice. The bidder who is offered the house is the person who has been on the waiting list longest. To protect those in acute need such as the homeless or those with severe medical problems, they may be issued with a priority card that moves them ahead of those with less pressing need. Experience of authorities who have run choice based letting pilots is that this system is a lot easier to understand and therefore wins a lot of support from those

on the waiting list. However. A message from all the pilot schemes is that care has to be taken not to leave very vulnerable applicants out in the cold.

Progress The Housing Associations operating in the District were invited to a meeting on 7<sup>th</sup> May 2004 to set the objectives and timetable for the development of this scheme. The group agreed to consider forming a common partnership with set aims and objectives. The group has agreed to work quickly on this and a timetable of monthly meetings has been programmed.

The group agreed the following aims and objectives:

#### AIMS

- To work in partnership to improve access and choice within West Wiltshire
- To make the best and most effective use of new and existing social housing
- To ensure that new homes contribute towards balanced and lasting communities
- Meet the objectives of West Wiltshire District Council's Housing Strategy
- Promotion of equality of opportunity in housing services.
- To provide an open and honest service that is accountable

#### OBJECTIVES

1. To consider the positives and negatives of 6 current Choice Based lettings schemes
2. Produce common housing application form
3. Carry out full consultation with agencies and customers.
4. To continually review the scheme.

Work To Be undertaken Appendix 'A' shows the main tasks with dates each of these tasks have many sub tasks that need to be completed to enable the launch of Choice Based Lettings.

- 11th June 2004 – Consider the best choice based lettings criteria for the District
- August/ September consultation to customers on the best way forward.
- August/September 2004 – Cabinet update
- January/February 2005 – Implementation of IT system
- 31<sup>st</sup> March launch Choice Based Lettings

Support from partners As can be seen from the work already undertaken the work is attracting a good deal of support from our partners. In particular, as the main landlord in the District, West Wiltshire Housing Society has been very anxious to work with us in developing and implementing a successful scheme. Consequently they have agreed to provide staffing support to the project.

Financial implications There are no financial implications at this stage. The Council has already agreed a budget to provide for the acquisition of a software package for an allocations system. Such expenditure will be necessary however the Council proceeds on its allocations system. It will be noted from the above timetable that before any financial commitments are made on the project a report will be brought back to

Cabinet in the summer. As well as any development costs, Cabinet will be briefed on the possible consequences for future revenue expenditure.

#### **4 Conclusions**

The Government has made clear that it sees choice of home as being essential to building sustainable communities and has consequently built a target into the Homelessness Act 2002 to greatly extend choice in lettings by 2010. The Housing Corporation is also keen to support this and are supporting Housing Associations and Councils in delivering more choice. However it is also recognised that the reports on the pilot schemes have only just been completed. Consequently both the Housing Corporation and the Government are realistic about the progress that can be made in the near future.

The positive response from West Wiltshire District Council and stakeholders has put us in the position to move forward and begin development of a scheme. This will give the Council and community a more transparent allocation system.

#### **5 Recommendations**

That the Cabinet notes that progress is being made in developing an understanding of the type of system that will best suit the Council and its partners, and that a further report will be brought to Cabinet by September 2004 recommending the type of scheme that should be introduced in the district. Cabinet also acknowledges the support being offered by West Wiltshire Housing Society that will assist the Council in meeting the target date of 31 March 2005 for the launch of a new lettings scheme.

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