

1. Introduction

Michael Guest Consulting were commissioned to undertake the consultation aspects of the Choice Based Lettings (CBL) project by West Wiltshire District Council on behalf of the multi-agency project team.

This consultation took place over the period from mid August until the end of October 2004. It comprised:

- A series of face-to-face meetings with representatives from statutory and voluntary organisations whose clients are users, or potential users, of the Lettings Scheme
- A conference held on 7th October at which a greater number of people from a wider range of interests participated
- Replies received from a sample of people on the Housing Register and others who had been recently housed via the present scheme. This was in response to a request sent to them asking for their views on the CBL proposals

This report provides you with a summary of the outcome from each of the three elements.

2. Face to face meetings

Between 19 August and 22 October, a number of meetings took place with representatives of statutory and voluntary organisations working with people who are users, actual or potential, of the Allocations Scheme.

People who contributed via this aspect of the consultation were:

Barbara Hearn – Adult and Community Services

Avril Mendel – Learning Disabilities Team

Sue Nash – Youth Offending Team

Shirley Aubrn – Mental Health Team

Frances Burton – Occupational Therapist, WWDC

Veronica Franklin – Probation Service

Abdel Boutarfas – Wiltshire Race Equality Council

Marcell T. – Women's Refuge, Knightstone Housing Association

Clair Wheeler - Supporting People Co-ordinator, Wiltshire CC

Fran Lewis – SPLITZ

Thanks are extended to them for their contribution.

Provisional arrangements had also been made to see the following, but owing to changing commitments, it was not possible in the end to meet with them.

Suzanne Macdonald - Connexions

Marco Van-Tintelen – Action on Homelessness

At each meeting it was ensured that the person being consulted had sufficient grasp of the present and proposed schemes. Their thoughts on the proposals were then discussed.

Set out below is a summary of the outcome from these meetings.

Overall

Everyone with whom the proposals were discussed was broadly supportive of the principles of CBL. Some have had experience of such schemes operated in other localities. Specific mention was made of the 'empowering' aims of CBL and its more 'modern' approach to the letting of affordable housing to rent.

The detail of the discussions in all cases focussed on concerns regarding how more vulnerable people, or those requiring greater support, would fare under an 'advertising based' scheme. The concern centred on whether such people, who range across a number of 'need' groups, may not be able to respond adequately to the bidding process of CBL and hence miss opportunities for housing. Discussions then developed into potential solutions and requests for continued involvement from the consultees.

Comments can be summarised as:

- There being a danger of more vulnerable clients not engaging with the new arrangements
- The Council and other agencies need to be aware who these people are
- There is a need for support and advocacy
- And possibly the need to keep some properties outside of the system (i.e. not advertised, 'held back' for people with special needs awaiting re-housing)

In particular

- People currently in care, hospital, custody, etc.
- Or 'coming through the (care) system'
- People who would find advertising media difficult or impossible
- People who don't or won't engage
- It is recognised by consultees that there are key roles for individual agencies and for individuals in the proposed CBL type approach. These agencies and individuals are:
 - People who are seeking a home
 - Supporting Agencies
 - Carers
 - Housing Advice staff
- Between these there is the need for strong liaison and information

There were key suggestion/request themes from the consultees

- The need to share information with support agencies, including on vulnerable homeseeker's progress
- Regular circulation of the published advertising to agencies
- The need for 'induction' followed by regular training and updating for agencies

3. Consultation with a sample of people on the Housing Register and Tenants who had been housed in the last six months

The aim was to consult a 10% sample of the Housing Register and everybody who had been housed in the last six months. This was undertaken by means of explaining the CBL proposals in writing and then asking for a brief questionnaire to be completed and returned.

Sixty-one questionnaires were received back (a combination of Housing Register applicants and recently housed). The overall reaction of those responding on whether they thought the proposed CBL based scheme would be better or worse than present arrangements was:

<i>Better</i>	<i>Worse</i>	<i>Same</i>
45 (74%)	8 (13%)	8 (13%)

Based on those who responded, this represents significant support from users of the system.

In summary, reasons for support and concern were:

<i>Support</i>	<i>Concern</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choice/better chance of getting what you want (mentioned by the majority responding) • Fairer (mentioned by many) • People with lower priorities may get some chance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to advertising media • Advertising will need to be comprehensive • Process could be daunting for some • Danger of 'queue jumping' • Danger of 'nuisance neighbours' getting housed in 'nice areas' • Less active may miss out • Pushy and demanding may get preference

The sample of homeseekers and those recently housed therefore feel generally that the system would give more choice and be fairer. Of concerns raised, it was noted that several respondents mentioned lack of access to the internet as a problem. There does seem to be a perception that this will be the main means of access to advertising, hence the concern in the table above regarding the need for comprehensive advertising.

4. Conference on 7 October for participants and representatives from Voluntary and Statutory Agencies

Participants worked through a considerable amount of detail in the course of the conference. At two concluding points during the day, a summary of what had been presented as the key themes from discussion groups was given. These were agreed as follows:

Issues that will need to be addressed

The need to ensure that vulnerable people and non-bidders do not get excluded from opportunities for housing. There is a danger that people may be, or may feel that they are marginalised. The new approach will need to ensure that all client groups are reached and that support is given to those who need it.

A robust applications process is needed and this should include a full explanation of statutory and tenancy rights and obligations.

Will people be able to understand the system? How will jargon be dealt with?

There will be added pressure on support staff. Support staff need to be equipped to use the new scheme. Support staff may assist clients with bidding.

There are housing management issues. Will a landlord have to take back previously evicted tenants? Could there be delays in void turnaround times? How will mutual exchanges be incorporated? The best use of the stock should be ensured.

There needs to be a way of ensuring people's change of circumstances are registered where their priority 'banding' may be affected. Is the IT package able to cope? What publicity is proposed?

The conference then went on to consider some suggested ways forward for the new scheme. These are roughly in priority order.

Some suggested ways forward for the new scheme

Vulnerable People

Existing networks should be used and supporters should be kept in the information and progress 'loop'. This should include mailing information via e-mail. The possibility of 'block bidding' for vulnerable clients should be looked at.

Supporting agencies should be educated and remain trained in the new scheme. The possibility of mentoring should be looked at.

Information and Communications

There should be extensive training for all involved. It should be decided whether this is best provided per individual organisation or to mixed groups.

There should be an extensive launch of the scheme, including a roadshow and poster campaign. In particular, local radio should be used.

A mailing list for homeseekers via e-mail should be set up.

Monitoring of non-bidders needs to be undertaken, and help offered.

Jargon must be avoided and plain language always used.

IT processes have to be easy to access for all users. Use of a 'credit card' instead of a letter for registration could be used.

Role of Support Staff

Training is required for all support staff

WWDC contact names for advice and support are required

5. Conclusion

This report has provided you with a summary of the consultation process that has been undertaken on behalf of West Wiltshire District Council and its partners regarding proposals for a Choice Based Lettings Scheme for the district. This has comprised face to face interviews with statutory and voluntary bodies, a questionnaire based sample survey of Housing Register applicants and recently housed people, and a stakeholder's conference.

The principal theme emerging from consultation with other agencies concerns how vulnerable people and those less able to compete can be supported through the proposed system. Mention has also been made and repeated of the need for full information, communication and training for support organisations.

Users of the present scheme are generally supportive of the proposals, commenting that it seems fairer than present arrangements.

Michael Guest
10 November 2004