

West Wiltshire District Council

Cabinet

15 December 2004

Choice Based Lettings

To agree the proposed Choice Based Lettings Scheme.

1. Purpose

To agree the policy for the Homes 4 West Wilts Choice Based Lettings scheme and to give approval for this policy to form the basis.

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. This has since been updated as an objective in the new 2004 to 2009 Housing Strategy to introduce a Choice Based Lettings scheme as well as part of the Corporate Plan. 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 to proceed and has helped by giving staff time and resourcing a consultant to carry out in depth consultation with voluntary and statutory agencies, applicants from the waiting list and recently housed. A further conference was held to consolidate the consultation process and this once again proved successful with feedback showing a positive response to the key points of the draft policy. The consultant, Michael Guest has produced a report of the findings from the consultation and this is attached at Appendix 2. The policy is attached at appendix 1 and will be made available on the Council's Internet site.

3. Key issues

Progress The Housing Associations operating in the District have got together with the Council to form a working group and have been meeting monthly.

The group have considered the following:

- Aims and Objectives of the Partnership

- The name of the Partnership
- The Banding system
- Whether to have a quota system
- Vulnerable client groups
- The Partnerships policy on Choice Based Lettings
- Consulting the Community
- Where and how to advertise the vacant properties

Work undertaken and in progress West Wiltshire Housing Society has kindly paid for the services of a consultant, Michael Guest to carry out in-depth consultation with all the relevant agencies in the District. This happened throughout September and October with a conference held on 7th October. Michael Guest has been updating the Council verbally on issues that needed to be taken into account in the proposed scheme. These have mainly centred around how the scheme was going to make sure vulnerable clients know how to operate the system and get assistance where appropriate. Appendix 2 is the report of Michael Guest's findings.

Negotiations with the Wiltshire Times are taking place to look at the costs involved in having the properties advertised once a week. These costs will be shared between the Registered Social Landlords. Research is taking place on the implications for the two existing staff posts and this involves comparing job descriptions and staff numbers from other authorities already using a choice based scheme.

An implementation working group has been set up to consider the frontline working practicalities this will include the information contained in the application forms, medical assessments and training.

Procurement of software A working group of Council Officers has been set up to oversee the procurement process. 5 suppliers submitted tenders and these have been evaluated. The preferred supplier has been selected and approved.

Draft scheme The draft for the proposed Choice Based Lettings scheme was discussed at the conference on 7 October 2004. The full scheme policy is attached at appendix 1. Key changes to the original allocations policy are: -

- Dealing with applicants with rent arrears and perpetrators of anti social behaviour
- The change from points to a banding system
- The criteria for each band
- Length of time on the housing register is taken into account
- Assistance for vulnerable applicants
- Common housing partnership with one policy and application form
- Applicants take a more proactive role in the allocation process
- Clear right to review process.

Support from partners As can be seen from the work already undertaken the work has attracted a good deal of support from our partners. There are currently 14 partners working with the District Council who have agreed the proposed scheme attached in appendix 1 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 assistance and finance a consultant for the consultation process.

Financial implications Revenue costs arising from implementation will be covered by existing budgets. Capital budgets exist for the acquisition and implementation of software.

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 put us in the position to move forward and begin development of a scheme The partners have worked well in moving this forward quickly and have agreed common working practices. With the recommendations of this report agreed the Partnership will be able to continue moving forward and agree the implementation action plan and keep to the launch date

5 Recommendations

That the Cabinet recommends approval for the proposed Choice Based Lettings Scheme to enable the launch to take place at the end of March 2005. To approve that whilst the scheme is bedded in that the policy be monitored and reviewed on a quarterly basis.

Kate Beckinsale-Smith
Register & Support Team Leader

Councillor Virginia Fortescue
Housing Portfolio

List of Appendices

Appendix 1 – Proposed Choice Based Lettings Scheme

Appendix 2 – Findings of the consultation process – Author Michael Guest Housing Consultant