

Executive

Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings Scheme and Allocation Policy

2 March 2009

Report of Head of Housing Services

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To seek approval to adopt a new Allocation Scheme and to enter into the Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings Framework

This report is public

Recommendations

The Executive is recommended:

- (1) To approve the adoption of the Allocation Scheme as at Appendix 1, effective from 1 June 2009.
- (2) To delegate to the Head of Housing Service in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning & Housing the authority to amend this effective date, if required.

Executive Summary

Introduction

- 1.1 In August 2007 the Council approved Cherwell's participation in developing a sub-regional Choice Based Lettings Scheme (CBL) with Oxford City, Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire. This partnership approach is recognised by Communities & Local Government as good practice. It was also resolved that further consideration would be given to amendments to Cherwell's Allocations Scheme to enable alignment with the policies of the other participating districts in due course.
- 1.2 Initially it was proposed that each local authority would retain its own Allocation Scheme and there would be a separate scheme for the sub-region. This proved problematic and in April 2008 it was proposed that a common framework to provide one Allocations Scheme for all four local authorities and within the sub-region. Customers and staff will find one Allocation Scheme more transparent, easier to understand and easier to explain.
- 1.3 This report details the changes to Cherwell's Allocation Scheme so that the sub-regional choice based lettings scheme can proceed. It was originally proposed to launch this initiative in April 2008, but the approach taken has now been fundamentally reviewed and re-negotiated. It is now proposed to launch the sub-regional scheme, as set out in this report, in the early summer 2009.

Background Information

Progress on Oxfordshire Sub Regional Choice Based Lettings Scheme

- 2.1 In December 2006, the Oxfordshire Housing Partnership (OHP) comprising of Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, and Vale of White Horse District Councils, and Oxford City Council as the lead authority, were awarded £101,085 by the Government to develop a sub-regional framework. Since that time, the project has been overseen by a Steering Group and Project Group, comprising of officers from each authority and other stakeholders.
- 2.2 Vale of White Horse District Council was, at that time, already operating a Choice Based Lettings Scheme. Oxford City and Cherwell District launched schemes in January 2008, and South Oxfordshire in July 2008. All four authorities have selected the same ICT provider to support this work.
- 2.3 In March 2008, a 'Heads of Terms' partnership agreement was signed between all four authorities. A co-operation agreement has also been agreed, covering the operation of the sub-regional framework, subject only to confirmation from each district that their new Allocation Schemes are approved.
- 2.4 Throughout 2008, the project has focused on agreeing a joint banding assessment scheme between all four districts. This has necessitated some detailed consideration and negotiation on aspects of Allocations Policy. Specialist Counsel opinion has been sought on three occasions in relation to this, to ensure that the scheme agreed between all four districts is as robust as possible. An 'Oxfordshire Housing Allocations Policy' has now been agreed by officers of all four districts covering those aspects of Allocation policy that are agreed as common to all authorities and their Registered Social Landlord (RSL) partners. These common elements are now being incorporated into the Allocation Scheme of each of the four authorities. Other aspects of policy, that are not commonly agreed, will also be set out in each authority's Allocation Scheme. Based on this, computer specifications have jointly been signed off with the CBL ICT supplier, and detailed work on mapping current assessment priorities and aligning assessment procedures has begun.

Key Features the Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings Scheme

- 2.5 The key change to the previous sub-regional scheme that was proposed to Executive is that the new arrangement will be fully integrated into the policy of each of the four councils, and there will, in effect, only be one assessment criteria. Previously it was proposed that an additional sub-regional banding scheme would be created, to sit alongside each council's own banding scheme. The sub-regional scheme would only be used to prioritise applicants should they bid for a property from the sub-regional 'property pool'. Now applicants will only have one common assessment, and only one set of prioritisation criteria will apply. This is a far easier to understand system for customers. It is a more aligned arrangement than officers originally expected to achieve at the beginning of the project, and has only been agreed on the basis of extensive negotiations and compromise for all partners.

- 2.6 The differences between Cherwell's previous scheme and the proposed sub-regional policy are set out in Appendix 2. All Cherwell's Housing Register applications will be re-assessed when the sub-regional scheme is implemented.

Sub-Regional Properties

- 2.7 The original intention relating to the properties available for sub-regional bidding remains the same, in that generally each council will make available the following proportion of properties to applicants across the sub-region to bid for:
- 10% of general needs property (four beds or larger and some rural schemes will be excluded)
 - Up to 100% of sheltered accommodation for the elderly
 - Up to 100% of disabled adapted accommodation (Wheelchair Standard or properties with major adaptations, such as a stair-lift)
- 2.8 The agreement is that the number of properties put into this 'sub-regional pool' must also be reciprocal and neutral for each authority, in that the number of Cherwell applicants accepting properties in the other three districts, should equal the number of district applicants accepting property in Cherwell. This will be achieved by advert labelling, if and when required, to determine who can express an interest for particular properties. Performance of each authority in relation to this, and the mix of stock made available to the 'pool' will be monitored and managed through joint arrangements between all four districts. Cherwell will determine which individual properties are put forward to be allocated to applicants within the sub-region taking into account local stock availability and levels of housing demand.
- 2.9 The proportion of general needs properties included in the scheme is thought to be a reasonable amount to 'pilot' this new approach and to gauge interest in inter-district moves. It should give a reasonable amount of vacancies to make the scheme of interest to applicants, whilst allowing all four authorities to ensure the scheme is working for them. The new priority arrangement is easily 'scaleable' in that the percentage of properties allocated to the sub-region could be increased without amendment of the scheme itself. It is proposed that Council are asked to approve the new percentages on an annual basis, when setting the years Allocation Percentage Targets.

Banding Scheme

- 2.10 All councils have now agreed to move to a 5 band priority scheme. This is detailed in the Allocation Scheme at Appendix 1 to this report.
- 2.11 It is proposed that no transitional arrangements are put in place as part of this change. The re-prioritisation of applicants will inevitably effect some cases to advantage and disadvantage but all authorities have agreed that a easily understandable and transparent approach to the new priority scheme is essential, and trying to incorporate any transitional arrangements put forward by each of the four current schemes, would not meet this objective, and would prove impracticable and expensive in terms of ICT and staff time.

Property Selection

- 2.12 The new sub-regional CBL arrangement will operate in much the same way for applicants, in that applicants can continue to make up to three expressions of interest, per cycle, on property they are eligible for. However, as well as expressing

interest for property in the applicants 'own' district, they may now be able to choose properties that they are eligible for in the wider sub-region.

- 2.13 The fortnightly allocations cycle will continue. The 14th day will be closed, and will allow allocations officers in each district time to contact applicants (especially concerning their preferences if they are on the top of more than one shortlist) and to allocate property.
- 2.14 The cycle length will be included in a review of the sub-regional arrangement, in 2009, at least three months after the sub-regional scheme launch, to see whether to retain the fortnightly cycle, change to a weekly cycle, or adopt some other approach.

Key issues for Consideration/Reasons for Decision and Options

- 3.0 The decision to be taken is whether or not to adopt the revised Allocations Policy to enable Cherwell to participate in the Oxfordshire Sub-Regional Scheme as recommended by the OHP. The following options have been identified:

Option One To proceed with the Allocation Policy as recommended in this report.

Option Two To withdraw from the Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings Scheme and continue to operate a CBL Scheme at district level only.

Cherwell could decide not to participate in the sub-regional scheme. If this option is considered there would be implications for Cherwell's reputation, as well as financial and contractual implications with our partner local authorities and software supplier.

Consultations

The Council's work to develop choice based lettings scheme both at district level and as part of the sub-regional partnership has been within a framework of extensive consultation. Consultation has take place with partner housing associations, statutory and voluntary agencies, customers and staff. It is anticipated that consultation will be ongoing.

Implications

Financial: The implementation costs of sub-regional CBL are being largely met from the Government's grant allocation, and some efficiency savings have been made by all four authorities contracting with the same ICT supplier to develop the system. There are no additional budgetary requirements, other than those already budgeted for in 2009/10, as a result of this report.

The operational costs of sub-regional CBL will be the same as for the present CBL system, and will be met within current budget provision. There are no additional staffing requirements.

Should Cherwell decide not to participate in the sub-regional scheme there would be financial implications for the Council. The grant awarded by the Government to develop the sub-regional scheme would have to be repaid; Cherwell's allocation was in the region of £26,000. Additional ICT costs (to be determined) would also be incurred by the Council if Cherwell withdrew from the sub-regional scheme.

Comments checked by Karen Curtin, Chief Accountant – Service & Management Accounts, 01295 221551

Legal:

There are specific legal issues arising from the sharing of personal data which will be managed through an information sharing agreement ensuring compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998. Legal advice and support has been provided throughout the development of the proposed policy"

Comments checked by Liz Howlett, Head of Legal Services 01295 22

Risk Management:

There are no identified risks associated with the recommendations of this report. Any such risks of entering into a partnership with the four other authorities have been dealt with previously and are mitigated through detailed partnership and co-operation agreements.

Should the recommendations set out in this report not be acceptable, there are potential risks however. It will not be possible to re-negotiate an agreement within the timescale available, and any sub-regional CBL launch would need to be delayed, or would exclude Cherwell. This would present a reputation risk, and could incur additional ICT costs, should ICT specifications need to be changed, or should the work for all four districts not be implemented together.

Should CDC decide at a later date to join the scheme, or should the pressure from government to join a sub-regional scheme increase, Cherwell would have lost the opportunity to be involved in the Oxfordshire Sub-regional scheme and influence its structure.

Comments checked by Rosemay Watts, 01295 22[Insert extension number]

Equalities Impact

A full Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) relating to Cherwell's original Allocations and Choice Based Lettings Scheme has already been undertaken. A copy of the EIA is attached as Appendix 3. The EIA covers all the operational matters relating to the revised policy except for the bandings. This will be reviewed within three months of the new policy being implemented.

Comments checked by Grahame Helm, Head of Safer
Communities and Community Development, 01295
221615

Wards Affected

All

Corporate Plan Themes

Priority 1: Cherwell – A District of Opportunity

Aim: Give you advice and support to find a home if you are without one

Executive Portfolio

Councillor Michael Gibbard
Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing

Document Information

Appendix No	Title
Appendix 1	Allocation Scheme 2009
Appendix 2	Main differences to Allocation Scheme 2008
Appendix 3	Equalities Impact Assessment
Background Papers	
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