



Committee and date

Protecting and Enhancing
our Environment Scrutiny
Committee

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Item No

10

Public

Report of the Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Task and Finish Group

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1. Summary

- 1.1 This paper presents the report of the Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Task and Finish Group to the Protecting and Enhancing our Environment Scrutiny Committee. The work of the Group has focussed on the issue of what elements of "local connection" can or should be considered in allocating social housing in Shropshire, and how that might be done in a transparent way so as to avoid the potential for legal challenges to allocations.
- 1.2 The Task and Finish Group has developed its conclusions and recommendations based on the evidence gathered through its work.
- 1.3 The revised Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme is scheduled for adoption by Full Council in January 2013, for implementation in on 1st April 2013.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to consider and comment on the report and recommendations, and endorse them for presentation to Cabinet.

3. Report

- 3.1 The Report of the Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Task and Finish Group is attached as Appendix A
- 3.2 The Draft Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme is attached as Appendix B

4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 4.1 There are no identified issues relating to Risk Management, Human Rights or community associated with this report. Consultation is a key element of effective scrutiny.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 The Task and Finish Group did not focus on specific financial expenditure areas.

Background Papers

- One Page Strategy
- Questions to gather evidence and summary of responses
- Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Task and Finish Group Minutes: 2 and 23 April, 28 May, 11 and 25 June 2012

Cabinet Member/s

Portfolio Holder for Housing

- Councillor M Price

Local Member/s

All

Appendices

Appendix A – The report of the Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Task and Finish Group

Appendix B - Draft Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme

APPENDIX A



Protecting and Enhancing our Environment Scrutiny Committee

Report of the Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Task and Finish Group

June2012

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all those who have answered our questions and queries: Officers of the Council who have supported us in our work and those who have answered our questions and provided us with information.

We were very impressed with the knowledge and commitment of those who have spoken to us and we were particularly pleased to have been able to be involved in this process.

Members of the Task and Finish Group:

Councillor Martin Bennett [Chairman]
Councillor Chris Mellings [Vice Chairman]
Councillor Ted Clarke
Councillor Gerald Dakin
Councillor Vince Hunt
Councillor Gordon Tonkinson
Councillor Tina Woodward

Report

Introduction

This report sets out the findings of the Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Task and Finish Group and the subsequent integration of these findings into the revised draft Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme.

Background

The Protecting and Enhancing our Environment Scrutiny Committee recognises the importance of access to affordable housing and housing allocations to the achievement of the Council's strategic objectives and outcomes, specifically those relating to economic growth, sustainable communities and health and well-being. The Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme is the central vehicle for delivery against these strategic priorities.

The Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme is reviewed on an annual basis, a review which has in previous years been led by a Scrutiny Task and Finish Group. The 2011/12 Review required wide ranging consideration of the operation of the existing Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme, to respond to and incorporate relevant aspects of the Localism Act 2011 and to take account of the impacts of fundamental changes to welfare and housing benefits.

Scope and focus of the work

In view of the range of issues to be considered, it was proposed to spread the work across three groups:

- The *Shropshire HomePoint Operations Group*: to review legal and technical areas
- A *Multi-Agency Stakeholder Group*: to review
 - Issues arising from the Localism Act 2011, other than local connection, financial resources, employment and community contribution
 - Allocation and classification of adapted stock
 - Implications of changes to welfare benefits / eligibility criteria
 - Inclusion of privately rented properties
- A *Protecting and Enhancing our Environment Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Task and Finish Group*: to review
 - Local connection with respect to all stock, not just some new-build
 - Employment needs/opportunities within the local area

- Contribution made to the local community
- Releasing currently under-occupied or adapted properties
- Moving on from supported housing
- Targeting certain income bands

At its meeting on 5 December 2011, the Protecting and Enhancing our Environment Scrutiny Committee established a Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Task and Finish Group to undertake this role.

The role of the Protecting and Enhancing our Environment Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Task and Finish Group was subsequently revised to target its attention with respect to Local connection, financial resources and community contribution. The Chair and Vice-Chair of the Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Task and Finish Group joined the Multi-Agency Stakeholder Group and contributed to discussions regarding Under-occupation, employment, access to employment and economic regeneration and, moving from support housing.

A primary aim of the Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Task and Finish Group was to produce satisfactory and workable criteria that allows local connection to be taken into account when assessing housing need.

What has the Task and Finish Group done?

The Task and Finish Group has met five times over a period of three months. The Group has:

1. Undertaken a desktop review of the existing Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme, schemes from neighbouring authorities, definitions of local connection with planning conditions (s106) and within local lettings plans
2. Taken evidence from the Council's Housing Options service and Landlord Services, the large social housing providers in Shropshire, from the Consortium of Shropshire Tenants (COST) and the Council's Housing Enabling service.
3. Gathered from Members examples of specific cases where local connection has not been taken into account, resulting in local people being overlooked for housing and/or unsustainable housing solutions.
4. Considered in detail options for reflecting local connection, financial resources, community contribution and moving into independent living within the Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme (highlighted in red in the attached draft document)
5. Considered in overview areas addressed by the Operations Group and Multi-Agency Stakeholder Group (highlighted in blue in the attached draft document)

Findings

The Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Task and Finish Group found the following:

1. The ability to give a degree of preference for rehousing to people with a local connection to Shropshire in the context of an open Housing Register is a priority across a range of stakeholders. Consistency with planning conditions (including s106 agreements) and Local Lettings Plans is considered to be important to avoid confusion and ensure clarity. However it was also found that setting criteria which are very restrictive can be counterproductive, rendering properties difficult to let and reducing flexibilities to an unhelpful degree.
2. Inclusion within local connection the need to move to give or receive support, including child care and care for vulnerable relatives, was considered a priority both to support families and to reduce social care costs. This is reflected in the Draft Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme within Local Connection, Direct Lets and, within the Banding, the existing silver band priority has been moved to gold band.
3. The ability to give preference to people with financial resources below a certain level is considered important by stakeholders, as this would ensure the most affordable housing is targeted towards those who have the most limited housing options. Concern was expressed however that social housing could become 'residual housing' with associated neighbourhood problems. On balance, a financial factor consistent with the levels contained in the Council's Single Plot Planning Policy and standard Shared Ownership limits was thought to be appropriate.
4. Awarding a degree of preference on the basis of Community Benefit was found to be a complex area, open to subjective interpretation. The Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Task and Finish Group opted for a cautious approach, at this stage reflecting Community Benefit in terms of employment and 'being a good tenant' and seeking further feedback from the public consultation. It was felt there is scope in future reviews to revisit and develop this aspect of housing allocation.
5. With respect to moving from supported housing, this is currently a gold band priority within the existing Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme. Gold banding has been retained but the criteria extended to include moving from a wider range of supported arrangements, including residential social care settings. This is intended to support moving towards independent community living from high cost residential placements, subject to agreed community support plans.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that those aspects of the Draft Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme which reflect the findings of the Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Task and Finish Group be retained in the draft document for public consultation, specifically:
 - 1.1 That the Council should retain an open housing register but with the discretion to give preference to people with a local connection to Shropshire, as defined in the draft document
 - 1.2 That the housing options available through Shropshire HomePoint should be extended when feasible to include privately rented accommodation and appropriate homes for sale
 - 1.3 That affordable housing should be targeted towards those applicants with financial resources below £63,000
 - 1.4 That the management of housing allocations should where possible seek to enable or maintain support and care arrangements between close family members, as defined in the draft document
 - 1.5 That the management of housing allocations should where possible facilitate movement into settled independent accommodation from a broad range of support or residential schemes, subject to arrangements being agreed for tenancy support
 - 1.6 The Council should adopt a considered and 'paced' approach to the inclusion of 'community benefit' when evaluating preference for housing, initially targeting factors relating to economic sustainability and growth, and also the willingness of applicants to successfully engage with programmes intended to ensure they are prepared to sustain a tenancy effectively.
2. It is further recommended that the Shropshire Affordable Housing Allocation Policy and Scheme be kept under review, along with the range of housing options available through Shropshire HomePoint, to evaluate the effectiveness with which the management of housing allocations and the availability of housing options and choices is able to address the impact of changes to housing and welfare benefits.