

Committee:	Executive	Agenda Item No.:	5.
Date:	6 th September 2010	Status	Open
Category	1. Key decision included in Forward Plan		
Subject:	Choice Based Lettings		
Report by:	Head of Housing		
Other Officers Involved	Housing Innovation Officer Housing Needs Manager		
Director	Director of Neighbourhoods		
Relevant Portfolio Holder	Councillor K. Bowman, Portfolio Holder for Housing Management and Member Development Champion		

RELEVANT CORPORATE AIMS

COMMUNITY SAFETY – Ensuring that communities are safe and secure. – The policy does exclude certain people who cause Anti Social Behaviour or who are involved in criminal activity.

CUSTOMER FOCUSED SERVICES – Providing excellent customer focused services – Feedback from other authorities suggests that customers prefer Choice Based Letting systems to traditional allocations schemes. This is backed up by consultation within the District.

REGENERATION – Developing healthy, prosperous and sustainable communities – Choice Based Letting schemes mean that people only ‘bid’ for areas where they want to live.

SOCIAL INCLUSION – Promoting fairness, equality and lifelong learning. – A main aim of the scheme is to ensure that allocations are made in a fair and transparent way through advertising and feedback

TARGETS

The adaptation of a Choice Based Letting scheme is a specific aim within the Corporate Plan

VALUE FOR MONEY

Not directly from this report, however the software had been procured jointly to reduce costs.

THE REPORT

In March 2010 both the Executive and Scrutiny Committee were presented with draft version of the proposed Choice Based Letting (CBL) scheme. This was part of a period of consultation which also included a written consultation with customers, and open meetings with customers.

The purpose of this report is to update members on the feedback from this consultation, to adopt the policy, and to inform members of an indicative timescale of the introduction of the new CBL scheme and progress made on this.

a. Feedback.

A postal survey was carried out which involved 50% of housing applicants and almost 600 responses were received.

The survey contained questions about the applicants, their views on the current system and their views on Choice Based Lettings systems.

Relevant information from this survey was that 66% of people did not know how many points they currently had and 52% did not understand how their points were made up.

This suggests that information in the current system is not easily understood. However, 94% of respondents were interested or very interested in understanding how long applicants would have to wait for accommodation and 94% were also interested or very interested in knowing which properties become available. This information is more easily available with the proposed CBL scheme.

71% of respondents wanted information on the number of applicants rehoused and 72% wanted information on properties allocated. It is proposed to include this information in the newsletter to applicants.

We also asked people how they would choose to bid for properties. Most people would use the internet; the second most popular method was by telephone and then Contact Centres. Text messaging was the least popular option. The system that Bolsover is introducing does include the option to bid by internet which is a method of contact that is not currently offered. 60% of respondents have access to the internet.

The survey also asked about how people felt about a CBL system. 75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I would be less likely to want to move in the future if I have chosen my new home" 59% of respondents agreed that they would be encouraged to consider other areas and 79% of respondents agreed that a CBL system would give them more choice.

b. The Policy

As seen above, the feedback from the consultation has been supportive of the introduction of a CBL scheme. In particular consultees valued the openness of the proposed scheme and the additional information this would provide.

There has been very little comment on the detail of the scheme, and with the exception of minor corrections there is only one change from the draft version seen by members in March 2010 arising from the consultation.

The one amendment relates to an issue raised by an elected member. This related to how mental health issues were addressed in the policy. The new text clarifies that some priority can be awarded if there is a clear causal link between the current housing and the mental health of the applicant.

There are, however some changes to the way that points are allocated – with a substantial difference for people in highest need. This is due to a limitation in the software and to ensure that there is no ‘overlap’ between applicants at the bottom of one band, and those at top of the next band. This will make no practical difference to the operation of the scheme, and the relative priorities within.

There is also a new section (page 16) which clarifies what constitutes a ‘local connection’. This will only apply to people currently living outside the District with a Social Need which requires them to live within the District.

The rules within the current system where people are awarded points for village connection have been replaced with an area connection, which is easier to understand especially in the context of bidding for properties.

There is also a revised section (pages 28 to 30) which clarifies that points will be deducted when an applicant in priority bands A or B has not actively sought accommodation .

It is proposed to adopt the draft scheme, with the amendments outlined above, as the new council policy.

c. Progress and Timescales

In parallel to producing the policy, officers have been working to deal with the practicalities of introducing this and the back office systems to make this work.

Members will recall that the software to host the CBL scheme was procured jointly with other authorities in the North Derbyshire Housing Market Assessment Area (Bolsover, North East Derbyshire, Chesterfield and Bassetlaw) this resulted in significant saving for each individual authority, and also attracted external funding.

To progress this, officers have needed to make a number of decisions on the scheme which need to be confirmed by members:

Firstly, the scheme is to be called 'Bolsover Lettings'

Secondly, the website that applicants can view properties is:

www.bolsoverlettings.org.uk

This is an external site hosted by Abrisas, the software supplier. There will be a link to this from the main council site at www.bolsover.gov.uk

Other progress to date includes:

- Redesign the application form (in conjunction with PPMG 4)
- Working on the interface with Academy
- Consultation events (as covered above)
- Designing the appearance of the website
- Designing newsletters

Once the policy is accepted there are a number of tasks to be completed prior to 'launch'

- Application forms to be finalised and produced
- Guidance produced for applicants.
- Training on the new system for officers and members
- The software providers need to configure the system to Bolsover's requirements, and this along with the interface needs to be tested
- A full review carried out on all existing applicants.

The software supplier is launching a new version of their software. It is therefore proposed to install the new version before the 'go-live' date. The launch date is targeted for December 2010

ISSUES/OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

To consider whether to adopt the proposed CBL scheme to let Council properties within Bolsover District.

IMPLICATIONS

Financial: Not directly from this report.

Legal: Any allocations scheme must comply with government guidance, legislation and any relevant case law.

Human Resources: Not directly from this report – staffing issues are contained within a separate report to be considered at Council.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. That Members note the positive feedback received on the proposed scheme.**
- 2. That the name of Bolsover Lettings is confirmed for the scheme.**
- 3. The web address is confirmed for the scheme.**
- 4. That Members adopt the draft policy as the Council's allocation policy.**
- 5. That the policy is implemented from the 'go-live' date of the software.**
- 6. In the meantime continue with the existing allocations policy until recommendation 5 occurs.**

REASON FOR DECISION TO BE GIVEN IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE CONSTITUTION

To allow the Council to adopt a Choice Based Letting scheme.

ATTACHMENTS: Y
FILE REFERENCE:
SOURCE DOCUMENT: