

COMMUNITY & SOCIAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

19th June 2013

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF COMMUNITIES & NEIGHBOURHOODS

SUB -REGIONAL CHOICE BASED LETTINGS POLICY

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 For Members to consider and approve the proposal for Melton Borough Council to review its Allocation Policy and make necessary changes in line with the Allocation of accommodation : guidance for local authorities in England issued under Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996 (Part 6) and amendments made to this Act under the Localism Act 2011.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION

- 2.2 **Members to approve the changes to the current Housing Allocation Policy in order to:**

- **incorporate government legislation which will enable Melton Borough Council to allocate social housing with a more flexible and responsive approach**
- **To ensure that applicants in the borough with a genuine need for social housing are given preference on the housing register**
- **Have a more transparent policy as to exclude applicants from the housing register**
- **Meet the impact of welfare reform on vulnerable tenants**

- 2.3 **Members note that once the re-registration of applicants has been completed the new policy will come into force from 30th September 2013.**

3.0 KEY ISSUES

- 3.1 Melton Borough Council formed a partnership with the other districts in Leicestershire, and implemented a Sub Regional Choice Based Lettings Scheme which spans Leicestershire involving local authorities in the area and all registered landlords who have properties in the Leicestershire area in March 2011. The scheme operates around shared statement of agreed policies to ensure a consistent approach to the assessment of housing need within in district of Melton and throughout the county. This shared statement is incorporated into Melton Borough Council's Housing Allocation Policy to ensure the allocation of social housing addresses local housing need.

- 3.2 The partnership recognised that reviews would be necessary to ensure the scheme was meeting its aims and objectives, and the new legislation outlined in the Localism Act gives local authorities more flexibility in setting their own policies to address local needs, such as who should qualify to go on the social housing in their area and define local connection to their borough.

3.3 A steering group consisting of representatives from the partnership and from statutory and voluntary agencies have been working closely together to gather views and experiences of the scheme and analysing the impact of the changes would have on the more vulnerable customers. Workshops were held to identify improvements that could be made to the scheme and to confirm what was working well. The outcome is as follows:

- The scheme is transparent
- Timescales for re-housing have improved
- Home seekers have increased choice and opportunity to move across boundaries
- Alternative languages on line and on the automated bidding telephone line are very useful
- Vulnerable home seekers who are ready to move are empowered to bid on properties of their choice
- Housing Need Bands are easy to understand

Identified areas for improvement, the top three being around:

- system access issues i.e. some home seekers have difficulty accessing a computer, some have literacy issues and support agencies don't always have time to help them
- home seekers have too many bids per cycle (currently three)
- the length of time Priority is awarded for home seekers in urgent housing need (12 weeks) is considered too long

A copy of the newsletter sent to the organisations summarising these meetings is attached at Appendix 1

3.4 In July 2012 a customer satisfaction survey was undertaken and to gain customers views on:

- Information on the scheme was easy to understand including how to bid on the available properties and how their housing is assessed
- Preference on the number of bids they have each cycle
- If they wanted to move within the same district or move to other areas

Responses to the customer satisfaction survey carried out told us that:

- 82% said it was easy to understand the information about available properties
- 62% of customers thought choice based lettings increased their housing options
- 60% had no preference to the number of bids per cycle
- 86% thought it was easy to understand the housing need bands
- 79 % of home seekers wanted to move within the same district/borough

3.5 An Equality Impact Assessment meeting was held on 13 December 2012 and it was generally considered that the proposed changes to the scheme would not have an adverse impact on a particular group and no group would be disadvantaged by the changes.

3.6 The proposed changes are as follows and a detailed description and impact report is attached in Appendix 3:

- Only accepting home seekers on the housing register who have a local connection with one of the Council's in the scheme (unless there are exceptional circumstances e.g. Armed forces personnel, close proximity to bordering villages).

- Time in High Band –reducing from 24 weeks to 16 weeks
- Time in Priority Band – reducing from 12 weeks to 8 weeks
- Number of bids per cycle - reduced from 3 to 2
- Suspending applications from home seekers who have refused three suitable offers of accommodation or failed to attend viewings (without good reason)
- Including transfer home seekers who are under-occupying a home and affected by Welfare Reform in High Band
- Including home seekers in financial hardship who have difficulty in meeting their housing costs in Medium Band
- Including private tenants, tied tenants, and social tenants who are adequately housed and have no medical or welfare need, in Low Band
- Introducing sanctions following 3 refusals of suitable accommodation
- Reducing the number of bids pre cycle from 3 to 2
- Exclusion policies for applicants who have a financial means to meet their own housing needs/ applicants who are unsuitable to be tenants
- It is considered that the changes proposed will help Melton Borough Council address the housing needs of residents who are in genuine housing need and make the best use of our housing stock.

4.0 POLICY AND CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

To meet key priorities:

- To improve housing services in Melton
- To meet the housing needs of vulnerable groups
- To support the delivery of the Community Strategy
- To maximise the use of available resources
- To reduce the number of homeless applicants in temporary accommodation
- To meet the impact of welfare reform

5.0 FINANCIAL AND OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Arbritas management system will have to be updated to allow the bidding and short listing of properties to be carried out accurately and the system enhanced to allow the system to remain transparent and easy to use. Cost will be approximately £7,000 per authority.
- 5.2 The structure of the Housing Options team will have to be reviewed to make sure resources are in place to manage the impact welfare reform will have on housing services and the options available to vulnerable applicants.
- 5.3 An additional administration resource will be recruited from 1st June 2013 to 30th September 2013 to ensure all applicants who re-register are on the system on the live date of the new policy. This will be paid from existing resources.

6 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS/POWERS

- 6.1 There are no further legal implications other than those stated in the new policy.

7.0 **COMMUNITY SAFETY**

7.1 No specific issues identified.

8.0 **EQUALITIES**

8.1 All applications for Housing are dealt with equitably as procedures followed are as laid down in the Council's Allocation Policy. An equality impact assessment has been undertaken and has shown no significant negative impacts.

9.0 **RISKS**

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9.1 **Probability**

Very High A				
High B				
Significant C			1,2,4	
Low D		3		
Very Low E				
Almost Impossible F				
	IV Negligible	III Marginal	II Critical	I Catastrophic

Risk No.	Description
1	Rising House Prices
2	Impact of Welfare Reform
3	Increase of operational costs
4	Not enough accommodation to meet need

10.0 **CLIMATE CHANGE**

10.1 There are no issues relating to climate change arising from this report.

11.0 **CONSULTATION**

11.1 Consultation took place with elected members on and members of the Tenants Forum Executive Committee on

12.0 **WARDS AFFECTED**

12.1 All wards are affected.

Contact Officers: Ronan Browne - People Manager, Janette White Senior - Housing Options Officer

Date: 28/05/2013

Background Papers:

Appendix 1 - Steering Group Newsletter

Appendix 2 – Proposed Changes

Appendix 3 – Allocation Policy Procedure Guidelines

Appendix 4 – Supported/Sheltered Needs Assessment

Committee

X drive/CSA/2013.14/190613/HR- Allocation Policy