

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF HEALTH AND HOUSING
TO THE EXECUTIVE

3RD APRIL 2009

Housing Allocations Policy- Implementation of
Sub-regional Choice Based Lettings Scheme

1.0 Introduction and Report Summary

- 1.1 The Government has a target for housing authorities to establish Choice Based Lettings (CBL) schemes by 2010. The Vale of White Horse District Council (the Vale) implemented its CBL scheme in September 2004. In 2008, Cherwell District Council, Oxford City Council and South Oxfordshire District Council all implemented CBL schemes as a means of allocating social housing.
- 1.2 The Government has also actively encouraged authorities to set up sub-regional CBL schemes across their borders, and offered funding to local authorities to progress this initiative. Such a project has been ongoing in Oxfordshire since 2007, and will be completed in the summer of 2009.
- 1.3 As part of that project, the Councils concerned have agreed to harmonise their allocations policies to ensure a common basis for applicants who qualify for housing across the districts.
- 1.4 This report summarises the proposed changes to the Council's Allocations Policy in order to implement sub-regional CBL.
- 1.5 The report also describes the common operational principles to be adopted by the four authorities.
- 1.6 The contact officer for this report is Lyn Scaplehorn, Team Leader (Housing Advice), telephone (01235 520202 Ext 579), e-mail lyn.scaplehorn@whitehorsedc.gov.uk

2.0 Recommendations

- (a) *that the Executive recommend that the Council adopts the common Allocations Policy as a means of assessing applications for social housing;*
- (b) *that the Executive approve that 10% of all general needs housing be made available for sub-regional allocations, subject to the exclusions and principles described in this report; and*
- (c) *that the Executive approve that all nominations for sheltered and disabled housing be made available for sub-regional allocations subject to the exclusions and principles described in this report.*

3.0 Relationship with the Council's Vision, Strategies and Policies

- 3.1 This report relates to the Council's Corporate Plan and the strategic objective of meeting people's need for housing.
- 3.2 The report implements an agreed action of the Council's Housing Strategy.
- 3.3 The report proposes a new policy relating to the allocation of social housing through the Council's Choice Based Lettings scheme.
- 3.4 The report relates to the affordable housing strand of the Community Strategy.

4.0 Background and Supporting Information

- 4.1 In September 2006, the Oxfordshire Housing Partnership (OHP) agreed that a partnership of four Oxfordshire authorities, comprising Cherwell District Council, Oxford City Council, South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council, submitted a bid to the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) for funding for Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings. This bid was successful.
- 4.2 This bid was promoted to the OHP by this Council since we saw the advantage to applicants that such a scheme would bring, namely to be able to access properties across the County, thus increasing choice, economic and social mobility.
- 4.3 A project group was set up by the OHP to undertake specific tasks and agree operational matters. A Project Manager was appointed and a Steering Group made up of senior management representative from each district, Registered Social Landlord representatives, and a member of the Supporting People team was established to oversee the project to completion.
- 4.4 As part of this project management role, a decision was taken by the Steering Group that a common Allocations Policy be agreed across the four participating authorities as a means of assessing priority for applicants.
- 4.5 The Executive will recall that the Vale amended its own Allocations Policy in 2008. This policy was drafted knowing that further changes would be implemented as part of sub-regional CBL. As such, the changes to the Vale's current Allocations Policy are minimal.
- 4.6 As well as a common Allocations Policy the Steering Group has reached agreement on other operational arrangements to better implement sub-regional CBL.
- 4.7 Finally, as well as agreeing partner issues, there are some aspects of Vale policy that are individual to the Vale, namely around the treatment of key workers. This report proposes a methodology to apply this aspect of the Vale's policy.

5.0 The Common Allocation Policy

- 5.1 A common Allocation Policy has been devised which all four Authorities will use in order to assess applications for housing in its district.

- 5.2 At present the Vale's scheme uses six Bands to determine housing need. Priority within the Band is determined by date of application and applicants with a local connection are prioritised above those without a local connection.
- 5.3 The common Allocations Policy will instead have five Bands, labelling each Band numerically (1-5) so as to distinguish it from all four existing schemes which label bands alphabetically.
- 5.4 Priority within the Bands will be determined by date of original application except for Band 1 where "effective date" (the date that they were placed in their most recent need category or band) will determine priority.
- 5.5 Each Band of the common Allocations Policy contains a number of categories of housing need. These categories were designed to reflect the "reasonable preference" categories of housing need contained within the 1996 Housing Act as required by law.
- 5.6 The Executive will note that reduction in the numbers of bands from 6 to 5 will result in potential alterations in applicant's priority. In practice, however, officers are confident that the banding priority for the overwhelming majority of applicants, and particularly those in high need, will not alter.
- 5.7 The Executive will also note that some additional categories of housing need have been incorporated to allow for the fact some of the partners still own their own housing stock, for example giving priority to releasing voids for maintenance works.
- 5.8 Finally, for those properties allocated to the sub-regional scheme, an applicant's local connection will be to the sub-region, so an applicant in the Vale will be deemed as also having a local connection to each of the three other districts and vice versa.

6.0 Sub-Regional Allocations

- 6.1 Each year, a percentage of general needs properties available to let will be made available for sub-regional lettings. This means that for *that* percentage of properties, applications can be made by applicants from all four partner Housing Registers.
- 6.2 In the first year of operation, this will be 10%; and the policy proposes that this amount can be varied each year by the Steering Group which oversees the operation of sub-regional lettings in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing.
- 6.3 The remaining 90% of general needs properties will be made available to applicants who are on the Vale's Housing Register only.
- 6.4 The number of properties to be made available will be calculated using the previous three years' voids figures. Properties will be representative of size, type and location of voids during the previous 3 years. The manager responsible for allocations in each district will usually select properties.
- 6.5 Certain types of properties may be excluded from the sub-regional scheme dependant upon demand in this district. These are:
- properties with 4 or more bedrooms
 - properties in locations which very rarely become available

- 6.6 In addition, properties developed as part of rural exception sites that have specific local restrictions on allocations will also be excluded.
- 6.7 These exclusions are to either enable the districts to meet local demand for particularly scarce properties or to reflect the fact that restrictive allocations policies are enshrined in the planning permissions for the properties
- 6.8 In addition, all sheltered properties will be advertised through the sub-regional scheme, as will all disabled properties that have had substantial adaptations. However, all districts will be allowed to exclude such properties where there is a high local need for such a property.
- 6.9 General needs properties will be let on a reciprocal basis, i.e. the number of households moving into a district through sub-regional CBL will be equal to the number leaving that district.
- 6.10 Reciprocity will be closely monitored, both internally and by the Steering Group. If one Authority area re-housed a higher number of applicants than those leaving, it reserves the right to reduce the number of vacancies available for sub-regional bids.

7.0 Key Workers

- 7.1 Under the Vale's current Allocations Policy, key workers are placed in Band D. The Council aims to let 5% of all vacancies to Band D applicants so as to assist key workers. This methodology of assisting key workers is unique to the Vale.
- 7.2 Under the common Allocations Policy, there is no Band specifically for key workers.
- 7.3 However, under the proposed changes the Vale can continue to assist key workers by advert labelling specific properties advertised on CBL. This means that 5% of advertised vacancies would be advertised as being available to key workers only.

8.0 Risk assessment

- 8.1 The project has been partly financed by Government with capital and revenue contributions from the four councils. In addition, staff resources have been allocated to the project in service plans.
- 8.2 The project management methodology included a risk assessment covering non completion, finance and impact upon the partnership, and all risks were identified and mitigated to acceptable levels.
- 8.3 There is also a political risk of applicants finding the alterations confusing. Officers will manage this via a programme of intense communication with Members, applicants and key partner agencies.

9.0 Financial Implications

- 9.1 Funds have already been granted to cover both the capital costs and on-going revenue costs of implementation off the sub-regional scheme as described in this report.

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HEAD OF HEALTH AND HOUSING

Background Papers: Existing Allocations Policy
Draft Sub-Regional Allocations Policy