

Report of: Community Housing Business Manager

To: Executive Board

Date: Monday 5th November 2007

Item No:

Title of Report : Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings including changes to the Allocation Scheme



Summary and Recommendations



Purpose of report: To seek approval to establish a Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings Scheme including the adoption of a revised Allocation Scheme; the entering into agreements with District Councils in Oxfordshire; and the incurring of expenditure from the Government's Sub-Regional CBL grant award



Key decision: Yes


Portfolio Holder: Councillor Patrick Murray (Improving Housing)




Scrutiny Responsibility: Housing Scrutiny Committee


Ward(s) affected: All

Report Approved by:

 Councillor Patrick Murray (Improving Housing)
Michael Lawrence, Strategic Director

 of Executive's Weekly Business Meeting

Jeremy Thomas – Legal and Democratic Services

 an Smart – Financial and Asset Management

Policy Framework:

Providing more Affordable Housing

Service Improvement

Reducing Social Exclusion

Recommendation(s):

Executive Board are asked to consider this report and to make the following recommendation to full Council:



- (1) Approve the adoption of the revised Allocation Scheme at Appendix 2, effective from 1st January 2008
 - (2) Approve the Assessment Scheme for Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings at Appendix 3 for inclusion in the Allocation Scheme, effective from the launch of the sub-regional scheme
 - (3) Delegate to the Business Manager, Community Housing, the authority to agree the effective date for the implementation of sub-regional choice based lettings and the adoption of the Assessment Scheme for Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings. This date is to be 16th April 2008 or within a period of three months following this date
- In addition, Executive Board are asked to:
- (4) Authorise Officers to enter into Agreements with the District Councils, including the signing of the Agreement included at Appendix 4

Background and Context

- 1 This report relates to introducing a sub-regional element into our Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme whereby customers will have increased opportunities to move across local authority boundaries
- 2 In addition to tasking all local housing authorities to be operating CBL by 2010, the Government is also encouraging councils to help enable greater mobility between local authority areas through sub-regional CBL schemes
- 3 In December 2006, the 'Oxfordshire Choice Based Lettings Partnership', comprising of Vale of the White Horse District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Cherwell District Council and Oxford City Council (with Oxford City as the lead authority), were awarded £101,085 by the Government, following a competitive bid, to help set up a sub-regional scheme
- 4 Officers from these four Councils, together with local Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and other stakeholders, have been meeting for the past year to secure agreement and to develop proposals for such a scheme
- 5 The Council will launch its Choice Based Lettings scheme in early January with the first 'bidding cycle' starting on Wednesday 9th January 2008. This has been the matter of previous reports, most recently to Executive Board on 16th April 2007 and to Council on 21st May 2007. Allocations using the old policy will cease on 24th December 2007
- 6 We are currently in the final stages of CBL implementation. The

Information Communication Technology (ICT) is in its build stage and is expected to be ready for user testing by November. A User Guide is currently being consulted on. The finished copy will be sent to all applicants on the Housing Register in December

- 7 All four Councils are using the same ICT supplier and many elements of the ICT are being shared between all four Councils, giving better value for money. The CBL website will be a 'common hub' which has the ability to manage the CBL schemes for all partners. Telephony equipment will also be shared, with all customers using common telephone numbers for telephone and text bidding
- 8 Cherwell District Council is proposing to launch its CBL scheme at the same time as Oxford City Council. Vale of the White Horse District Council is already operating a CBL scheme, but will switch over to this 'common hub' arrangement in April 2008. South Oxfordshire District Council will be also be launching its CBL scheme in April 2008

Sub Regional Choice Based Lettings

- 9 This project is spilt into two phases. The first phase is to implement a sub-regional CBL scheme, proposed for April 2008. The second is to develop this further, following a review of phase one, including the development of more housing options; the development of joint application forms and other literature; and allowing for greater sub-regional mobility by expanding the pool of properties in the 'sub-regional pool'. The second phase is expected to run from mid 2008 to end 2008. This report principally concerns phase one. A further report will be prepared in 2008 relating to further proposals

Sub Regional CBL Project

- 10 The partnership is operated using the PRINCE2 model with a Steering Group and a Project Team. RSLs and other stakeholders are involved at both levels. All four local authorities need to be in unanimous agreement on key decisions for these to be implemented. An Agreement has been drawn up to formalise this arrangement for the project, this is as indicated at Appendix 4.

Sub Regional Property Pool

- 11 It is proposed that only certain void properties in each local authority area are identified for sub-regional CBL (i.e. that eligible applicants from the other partner authorities can bid for these, in addition to properties in their own area). These properties effectively become the 'sub-regional pool'. The remaining voids being allocated by local authorities (or RSLs where the authority does not have 100% nomination rights)
- 12 It is proposed that the sub-regional pool comprises of the following:

- 10% of all general needs stock (4 bed or larger properties and certain rural schemes excluded)
 - 100% of all sheltered accommodation for the elderly
 - 100% of disabled adapted (wheelchair standard and properties with major adaptations such as a stair-lift)
 - Other properties with a lower level of disabled adaptation (if the local authority wishes to include it)
- 13 A key factor in this arrangement is that, for general needs properties, it must be reciprocal and be neutral for each authority over the year (i.e. the number of Oxford applicants accepting properties in the districts should equal the number of district applicants accepting properties in the city). This will be achieved by advert labelling on sub-regional pool properties, if and when required, to determine who can bid. In relation to sheltered and disabled adapted properties, first preference in allocation will be to applicants with a local connection to that area
- 14 Each authority is also expected to make available a mixture of general needs stock, comprising of a representative range of their voids – in terms of size and type, and also the level of demand (i.e. that not only low-demand properties are offered out sub-regionally). Performance with respect to this will be monitored and managed to achieve a proportionate mix
- 15 The reasons why it is being proposed to make available the above properties into the sub-regional pool are as follows:
- General Needs – to make this scheme work, it requires a reasonable number of units to be offered to applicants. At the same time, it is recognised that this phase is essentially the first ‘pilot’ of this approach. This needs to be reviewed and evaluated, and the partners involved need to be assured that it works for them and is worthwhile. In addition, we have little data as to the customer demand for cross-district mobility, as this has been very restricted in the past. 10% is thought to be a reasonable figure to start the scheme with. Due to the very high demand for four bed and larger accommodation, such units are excluded. Also excluded are specific rural schemes that have been built with specific covenants to house local people only
 - Sheltered Accommodation – all four authorities have some low demand sheltered units and demand for these units are significantly lower than for general needs. As such it is proposed that all sheltered property is opened up to the sub-region – although a preference will be given to persons with a local connection to the area, above those relocating from other districts
 - Disabled Adapted Property – there are very few fully adapted units and very few people requiring them. When a need for such a unit is identified however, this is usually a priority and it is often difficult to find a property that matches the requirements. This sometimes

results in expensive adaptation work being required. By creating a larger pool of properties and people, this matching should be improved. We will also use the Occupational Health service to help in these allocations, and this service operates across local authority boundaries, so this approach is better suited to their work. As for sheltered accommodation applicants with local connection will be prioritised over those with no local connection

Sub Regional Allocation

- 16 Applicants on the housing registers of any of the partner authorities may bid for any sub-regional property that they are eligible for, under this proposal
- 17 This has required agreement to be obtained between officers of all the districts on common assessment approaches; eligibility criteria; bidding rules; etc for the sub-regional element of these allocations. It is proposed that Oxford City Council's Allocation Scheme is amended to include these, when allocating to Oxford properties within the sub-regional property pool – as it is set out above. The other three District Councils will amend their Allocation Schemes, on the same basis, over this same time period also. The proposals are detailed at Appendix 3
- 18 Applicants will be restricted to just one sub-regional bid per bid cycle (plus up to three bids for Oxford property outside of the sub-regional pool). All applicants will be informed as to how they have been assessed for sub-regional and what they are eligible to bid for. In addition, the website will clearly identify this, and customers can be further advised about this when they bid through other methods. When applicants bid for a property, applicants will be deemed to have made an application to the Housing Register of the authority in which that property is located.

Sub Regional Banding

- 19 When applicants bid for sub-regional properties, a common method of assessing their relative housing need is required. Each authority currently has their own priority system as part of their Allocation Scheme, as follows:
 - Cherwell: A 4 band scheme
 - Oxford: A 6 band scheme (replaced points from July 2007)
 - South: Currently points, but moving to 5 bands by April 2008
 - Vale: A 3 band scheme (plus a fourth band for key workers) – proposing to add an additional band or two by April 2008
- 20 Through detailed and thorough negotiations, officers have secured common agreement on a 5 band scheme for this purpose. This is attached as Appendix 1 to this report, with annotation showing the differences to the Oxford City Council scheme. This agreement is

considered workable by officers, and by far the best outcome that Oxford could expect from this dialogue

Allocation Scheme

- 21 Council approved a new Allocation Scheme in May 2007 to be effective from the CBL implementation date. This is now planned for 1st January 2008. In order to properly incorporate the sub-regional element of CBL, a new Allocation Scheme has now been drafted. A distinct sub-regional CBL section has now been created
- 22 It is proposed that the Business Manager, Community Housing (or any role succeeding to this) be delegated to implement this sub-regional section, when a firm start date for Sub-Regional CBL is agreed with the other Districts. At present, 16th April 2008 is proposed and is being worked towards
- 23 In redrafting the Allocation Scheme, a number of minor changes have also been incorporated. These are generally to improve clarity and do not change policy, however, the following amendments should be noted as they could be considered more than 'editorial' changes:
- Band D (section 4.5.1) – Persons in the City's main homeless hostels will be assessed as meeting this criteria. Representations from these hostels have recently been made, as they consider that persons in their second stage move-on accommodation will fall outside this criteria, and will therefore be in a lower band. Such clients would therefore lose priority by making 'progress' within the project. This was seen as a risk to the work of the projects and it had the potential to limit throughput in the hostels. It is proposed to expand this criteria to explicitly include persons in any of the accommodation operated by the homeless hostels
 - Rent Arrears and Overlooking persons who shortlist (section 5.8) – These statements have been reinserted having erroneously not been included in the second Allocation Scheme adopted in May. The policy is the same as used in the previous Allocation Scheme
 - Hard to Lets (section 5.15) – A minor change has been made to allow for action to be taken if recent lettings indicate that a void is likely to be hard to let, but without having advertised that particular void
 - Accommodation Size Guide (Appendix IV) – An option available to applicants with four dependants – that of requesting that they be considered for a three bed house, was omitted from the previous matrix

Consultation

- 24 Housing Scrutiny Committee considered this proposal on 11th October 2007 and endorsed the approach. Customer and stakeholder feedback relating to CBL throughout the project has been positive

Financial Implications

- 25 The cost of this project will be met from the CLG contribution of £101,085, plus contributions from each local authority. As the implementation of the separate CBL schemes for Cherwell DC, Oxford City Council and South Oxfordshire DC are inextricably linked to the sub-regional ICT set-up, the majority of their contributions are from identified CBL project budgets. Appendix 7 of Appendix 4 to this report outlines the overall financial schedule relating to this project
- 26 A significant proportion of the CLG grant is being used to fund the management of the sub-regional project. Oxford City Council will manage this using the CBL Project Officer currently in post. That officer is currently undertaking about 15 hours work per week for the Partnership. It is proposed that this work becomes full time throughout 2008, and that the term of the contract is extended accordingly
- 27 There are no additional budget pressures for Oxford City Council as a result of this report. Any expenditure can be contained within existing budgets
- 28 The CLG funds will allow us to not only develop a sub-regional scheme as part of our initial CBL scheme set-up, but will also fund joint expenditure on other functions, such as new translation techniques (visual video clips on the website) that we may not otherwise have sufficient funds to develop

Legal Implications

- 29 It is proposed that the changes required to implement this sub-regional scheme are written into a revision to the Allocation Schemes of each of the local authorities
- 30 In addition to this, specific agreements are to be entered into with the other districts, regarding the management of the project and the operation of the scheme. The latter is likely to comprise of a Co-operation Agreement and will include protocols for joint assessments and joint working; information sharing; monitoring and review

Recommendations



That the Allocation Scheme is revised to allow for Sub-Regional Choice



Based Lettings, including the adoption of a separate Sub-Regional Assessment Scheme, (to run in parallel to Oxford's own banding scheme,) as set out in this report

- 32 That Oxford City Council enter into an agreement with Vale of the White Horse District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, and Cherwell District Council to run this project, including arrangements for the spending of the CLG grant
- 33 That Oxford City Council enter into an agreement with Vale of the White Horse District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, and Cherwell District Council to operate the sub-regional scheme on an agreed basis
- 34 That the sub-regional pool of properties is as identified in this report, and that the result of this, over a year, is planned to be neutral for Oxford City Council's General Needs properties, in terms of an equal number of applicants going out of the city to the number of applicants coming into the city
- 35 That officers continue to plan the implementation as set out in this report, namely that we implement sub-regional CBL from mid-April 2008 or as soon as practicable following this date
- 36 That officers review sub-regional CBL after six months of implementation and work to develop joint working further, on the basis of this, through the rest of 2008, including developing common forms and literature for the sub-region; increasing housing options available to applicants through CBL (including private sector lets and further promoting mutual exchanges); and increasing the percentage of general needs properties put into the sub-regional pool

List of Appendices

- 1 Sub-Regional Banding Scheme (with differences identified)
- 2 Allocation Scheme (*circulated separately, but with one copy in the members room and further copies available on request*)
- 3 Assessment Scheme for Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings
- 4 Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings Agreement

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Background papers:

None