

CABINET ITEM COVERING SHEET PROFORMA

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO CABINET

15 MARCH 2007

**REPORT OF HOUSING AND
COMMUNITY SAFETY
SELECT COMMITTEE**

CABINET DECISION

Housing – Lead Cabinet Member – Councillor Leonard

REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENT OF CHOICE BASED LETTINGS

1. Summary

This report informs Cabinet of the outcomes of the review of the development of choice based lettings undertaken by the Housing and Community Safety Select Committee between September 2006 and February 2007.

2. Recommendations

It is recommended to Cabinet that subject to detailed consideration of the financial and delivery options:

1. in principle Stockton Council adopts a Choice Based Lettings scheme for allocating its property.
2. the Stockton Choice Based Lettings scheme is developed further in the context of the Tees Valley Sub-regional scheme; and that the necessary IT system is procured through the appropriate joint tendering exercise.
3. the sub-regional scheme is developed on the basis of a common overarching policy and the development of a Common Housing Register; and that the common policy be developed to reflect the features as set out in Appendix 1.
4. a detailed feasibility study be undertaken by Tristar Homes on the preferred option of a one-stop shop approach to deliver choice based lettings in Stockton Borough, taking full account of necessary expenditure, the qualitative and quantitative cost-benefits that will accrue, and with due regard to existing and proposed Council service provision; and that this should be examined by the Committee at the first meeting of municipal year 2007-08.
5. the Suspensions Policy in relation to the Choice Based Lettings scheme be based on the approach adopted by Erimus Housing, as set out in Appendix 2.

6. other Housing providers in the Borough and sub-region be encouraged to participate in the Choice Based Lettings scheme.
7. the possibility of introducing a sub-regional Disabled Persons' Housing Service be further investigated by the Tees Valley CBL partnership.
8. a comprehensive consultation process is undertaken by Tristar Homes in order to provide both customers and staff with an understanding of the new scheme and to ensure ease of access for all once it is implemented.

3. Reasons for the Recommendations/Decision(s)

The topic was identified as an area meriting a scrutiny review because of the need for Stockton to respond to the national agenda for choice based lettings.

The Committee developed the following objectives for the review:

- to examine the opportunities offered by choice based lettings
- to assist with development of a choice based policy for the Borough
- to examine the possibilities with regard to developing a sub-regional scheme

The attached report outlines the results of the Committee's work.

4. Members Interests

Members (including co-opted members with voting rights) should consider whether they have a personal interest in the item as defined in the Council's code of conduct (paragraph 8) and, if so, declare the existence and nature of that interest in accordance with paragraph 9 of the code.

Where a Member regards him/herself as having a personal interest in the item, he/she must then consider whether that interest is one which a member of the public, with knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard as so significant that it is likely to prejudice the Member's judgement of the public interest (paragraph 10 of the code of conduct).

A Member with a prejudicial interest in any matter must withdraw from the room where the meeting is being held, whilst the matter is being considered; not exercise executive functions in relation to the matter and not seek improperly to influence the decision about the matter (paragraph 12 of the Code).

Further to the above, it should be noted that any Member attending a meeting of Cabinet, Select Committee etc.; whether or not they are a member of the Cabinet or Select Committee concerned, must declare any personal interest which they have in the business being considered at the meeting, and if their interest is prejudicial, they must also leave the meeting room during consideration of the relevant item.

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HOUSING – LEAD CABINET MEMBER – COUNCILLOR LEONARD

REVIEW OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHOICE BASED LETTINGS

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DETAIL

1. The Housing and Community Safety Select Committee agreed to examine the issue of choice based lettings and how Stockton Borough could respond to the national agenda.
2. Choice-based lettings (CBL) is a new method of allocating social housing. CBL schemes give people more choice in where they want to live by allowing people to apply (or 'bid') for advertised social housing vacancies. Applicants are allowed to see the full range of available properties and can apply for any to which they are suitably matched. Housing authorities are still required to ensure that reasonable preference is extended to certain categories of applicants, for instance those who are homeless or who have medical need. Existing CBL schemes generally provide for this by placing applicants into priority 'bands'.
3. The Housing and Community Safety Select Committee examined the subject over a 6-month period in order to determine how Stockton Borough Council should respond to the national agenda.
4. It is a Government target for all local authorities to operate CBL schemes by 2010, and for these schemes to include housing associations and the private rented sector. The Government also wishes to see CBL schemes developing at the sub-regional and regional level.
5. The Committee concluded that choice-based lettings had advantages over the current method of allocating social housing in Stockton Borough and has the potential to deliver real benefits to residents; it represents a shift towards a much more customer focussed approach.
6. During the course of the review, it became clear that due to the timescales of the Tees Valley sub-regional project, Stockton Borough Council's Cabinet would be required to make a decision in March 2007 on whether to give approval for Stockton's commitment to membership of the sub-regional scheme. The Committee recognise the additional benefits likely to be achieved through membership of a Tees Valley sub-regional scheme in terms of customer choice and economies of scale, and conclude that Stockton should give full commitment to the project.
7. The Committee noted the significant differences between existing, points-based method of allocation and choice based lettings; and that a comprehensive consultation process would need to be made in order to prepare both customers and staff for the introduction of choice based lettings.

FINANCIAL AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Financial

A detailed study of options for delivering a scheme in Stockton in order to identify costs associated with implementation would need to be undertaken; these costs would include training, consultation and general development (including advertising).

Membership of the sub-regional choice based lettings scheme will entail projected spend of £23,152, primarily to cover ICT costs. This has been accounted for in 2007/08 Housing Revenue Account.

Legal

Local Authority housing allocation policies are governed by the Housing Act 1996 and the statutory Codes of Guidance.

RISK ASSESSMENT

The development of choice based lettings is categorised as low to medium risk. Existing management systems and daily routine activities are sufficient to control and reduce risk.

COMMUNITY STRATEGY IMPLICATIONS

Community Safety and Well-Being - Promotion of safe and sustainable communities.

CONSULTATION INCLUDING WARD/COUNCILLORS

Initial consultation has taken place with staff and customer liaison groups at Tristar Homes Ltd. A period of extensive consultation would need to be initiated if scheme is given approval.

Peter Mennear
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Background Papers

Ward(s) and Ward Councillors:

Property