

Housing & Community Safety Select Committee

A meeting of Housing & Community Safety Select Committee was held on Friday, 8th December, 2006.

Present: Cllr J M Roberts (Chairman); Cllr Mrs S Fletcher, Cllr M Frankland, Cllr T Laing, Cllr W Noble, Cllr R Rix, Cllr B Woodhead.

Officers: P K Bell, P J Mennear, J Trainer (LD); C Wood (DNS); D Pickard (Tristar Homes Ltd).

Also in attendance: J Kett (Sub Regional Choice Based Lettings Co-ordinator).

Apologies: Cllr D Brown, Cllr B Jones, Cllr Mrs E Nesbitt, Cllr W Noble, Cllr N Teasdale, Cllr Mrs A Trainer and Cllr S Walmsley.

955 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Mrs Roberts declared a personal/non prejudicial interest in respect of agenda item no.4 – The Development of Choice Based Lettings as she was a member of the Tristar Homes Management Board.

Councillor Woodhead declared a personal/non prejudicial interest in respect of agenda item no.4 – The Development of Choice Based Lettings as he was a member of the Tristar Homes Management Board.

956 Draft minutes of the meeting held on 23rd November 2006.

The draft minutes of the meeting held on 23rd November 2006 were agreed as a correct record subject to the inclusion of the following two paragraphs:-

"It was agreed that Housing Services would provide a skeleton framework allocations policy. This would be presented to Members in early 2007.

It was also agreed that Tristar Homes would provide a skeleton framework for delivering the policy with associated costs. This would be presented to Members in early 2007."

957 The Development of Choice Based Lettings - Evidence from Julia Kett (Co-ordinator for the Tees Valley Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings Scheme.

J Kett (Sub Regional Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Co-ordinator) was in attendance at the meeting to give evidence for the Development of Choice Based Lettings.

J Kett reported that the Government was keen to see CBL operate on a wider scale. It wanted to see local authorities and housing associations working in partnership with private landlords to create sub regional and/or regional CBL schemes. The Government also wanted to promote a wider range of housing options alongside CBL schemes, such as partnership arrangements with private landlords, shared ownership and low cost home ownership options.

In July 2005, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) confirmed that

local authorities would be able to bid for a share of the £4 million that had been made available in order to fund new sub-regional and regional CBL schemes. The government saw the potential benefits of larger, cross-local authority schemes as follows:

- Improved value for money by enabling the scheme partners to share ICT and advertising costs.
- Cutting costs and complexity for larger housing associations being involved in several different schemes.
- Significant benefit for customers in that a larger pool of available housing is created, giving customers more choice.
- Larger schemes can lead to more effective use of housing stock where there are areas of high and low demand within a sub-region.
- Larger schemes can dismantle artificial boundaries and recognise real, existing housing and labour markets. (Bolton's 'homesforyou' service has 20% of applicants on the housing register coming from outside the local authority area.)

There were various challenges to the sub-regional agenda:

- Deciding on the approach. For example, would a scheme be based on a single 'back office' administrative system but with each authority operating its own policies in its area, or would a scheme have a single 'front office' system with applicants able to apply for properties across the sub-region.
- Overcoming the concerns of key stakeholders as to whether their requirements would be marginalised, e.g. Local authorities may fear that a wider scheme may not be able to meet more local needs.

With regard the Tees Valley Sub Regional CBL Scheme it was reported that Middlesbrough Council with the support of the sub regional partners submitted a bid last year to the ODPM, as part of the first round of bidding. The bid was successful and the sub regional CBL partnership received funding of £105,000 for the development of a sub regional CBL scheme across the Tees Valley.

A steering group had been convened to make strategic decisions on the development of the sub regional CBL agenda. The steering group met regularly and was made up of representatives from each of the partner organisations and the traditional RSL sector. J Kett had been appointed as Sub Regional CBL Co-ordinator to assist the partnership in delivering the sub regional CBL implementation plan.

With regard Private Landlords an event was being arranged in order to make private landlords aware of the sub-regional Choice Based Lettings agenda. A flyer had been sent to all known private landlords in the sub-region. This was not only to promote the event but also to check what other subjects landlords were interested in, so that the event could be shaped around what they needed in order to encourage greater attendance.

The Tees Valley CBL Partners were:-

- Tristar Homes
- Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
- Middlesbrough Council
- Erimus Housing
- Coast and Country Housing
- Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council
- Hartlepool Borough Council
- Housing Hartlepool
- Darlington Council

A Feasibility Study for a Tees Valley Sub Regional Choice Based Lettings Scheme that had been produced by J Kett had been circulated to Members prior to the meeting. The Study had also been circulated to all the Tees Valley CBL Partners. Each Partner/RSL had also been requested to complete a proforma to ascertain exactly what they would want from a CBL Scheme with regard to I.T.

Members felt that the Feasibility Study was an excellent document which had helped Members understand how a Tees Valley CBL Scheme would work.

Members raised questions which centred on which Partners had indicated that they would definitely join a Tees Valley CBL Scheme and what the effect would be if Partners dropped out. J Kett responded by outlining that the Feasibility Study had only recently been finished and that all the Partners were now being given the opportunity to digest the Study and that the initial feedback was quite promising.

Member also raised questions regarding the governance of a Tees Valley CBL Scheme. J Kett outlined that they were looking to explore a common allocations policy which could be slightly amended to fit each different Authority as each area has its own local issues. Also they were listening to Government Guidance. There would also have to be a host for the I.T that would be needed for a Tees Valley CBL Scheme but this would only be backroom and the allocations would still be local.

Members also felt there would need to be a firm grip on cost and that these should not be allowed to escalate.

C.Wood (SBC - Housing Manager) reported that both SBC Housing Services and Tristar Homes Ltd were in favour of a Tees Valley CBL Scheme and that it would be open and transparent. She also felt that the Government Statutory Guidance awareness needed to be raised.

C.Wood also reported that she would present for Members information a skeleton of the parts which were statutory and the parts which would be Stockton parts which could be influenced by Members. The new scheme should be about having the information to make informed choices.

J Kett outlined that the Department for Communities and Local Government had produced a report which would be very useful for Members to read.

D Pickard (Tristar Homes Ltd) reported that the process of consultation with their customers would begin late January 2007.

Whilst there had to be a formal consultation process at some stage it was felt that by engaging with as many of their customers and potential customers as early as possible within the implementation period it would resolve some of the reported difficulties that other CBL organisations had experienced since their inception. Namely use of the bidding system, accessibility and understanding. There had to be total transparency within the consultation period too.

It was a feature of many CBL reports that there were sections of the community who did not use the bidding system so with the planned road shows the whole ethos and structure of what CBL was and how it would affect people would be explained. This would be in the form of 'dummy systems' so that customers could use the system and see how it would work, and also some of the peripheral issues that would affect someone's decision to bid for a property in an area of perceived "problems".

There would be 3 'road show' consultation events where the system would be demonstrated; one each in Stockton, Billingham and Thornaby. Support services would be present. The exact dates were still to be confirmed. It would be a two-way process; Tristar would take the opportunity to explain the topic and also collate customer feedback. Tristar also planned to evaluate the pre-event advertising.

In addition there would be discussion on:

1. Promoting a wide range of housing options (e.g. shared ownership, low cost owner occupation, the private rented sector and mobility schemes)
2. Making more and better information available about other related housing services e.g. care and repair/staying put initiatives and adaptation services
3. One-stop shop and advice centres
Marketing properties and neighbourhoods in low demand areas including targeting new groups of potential customers

It was felt that Stockton On Line should be included when the Tees Valley CBL Scheme is being developed.

With regard training it was reported that Erimus Housing had a rolling training programme which included groups such as Age Concern and Asia Ladies Group. Tristar Homes Ltd had already picked up on this and was putting together some likely costs of a training programme.

J Kett invited Members, Officers and some Tristar Homes customers to Erimus Customer Groups to try the new system and get a feel of how it works.

It was agreed that the meeting scheduled for 11th January should be re-scheduled to allow time for the policy options to be worked up by SBC's Housing Options team, the operational options to be produced by Tristar and

also to have their consultation results available.

CONCLUDED that the evidence received from K Kett (Co-ordinator for the Tees Valley Sub Regional Choice Based Lettings Scheme be noted.

958 Work Programme 2007/08.

Members were presented with the items that had been suggested by Members for possible future reviews. They were as follows:-

1. Anti Social Behaviour/Housing Enforcement Issues.
2. Support for the homeless and new tenants.
3. Traveller Provision.

The Scrutiny Officer requested that if Members had any items that they wished to be considered as possible future items for review that they forward them to her.

CONCLUDED that the possible items for future reviews be noted.