

Overview and Scrutiny Task Group - Housing Allocations Policy

Tuesday, 6 January 2009

Present: Councillor Mike Devaney (Chair) and Councillors Julia Berry, Alistair Bradley, Pat Haughton, Kevin Joyce, Marion Lowe, June Molyneaux, Rosie Russell and Stella Walsh

Also in attendance: Zoe Whiteside (Strategic Housing Manager), Ian Aldred (Housing Enabling Manager) and Ruth Hawes (Democratic and Member Services Officer)

09.01 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Harold Heaton and Roy Lees.

09.02 DECLARATIONS OF ANY INTERESTS

No Members declared an interest in respect of items on the agenda.

09.03 BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE ALLOCATIONS POLICY

The Chair welcomed Zoe Whiteside (Strategic Housing Services Manager) and Ian Aldred (Housing Enabling Manager).

Officers gave a presentation outlining the draft allocations policy and choice based lettings policy.

The allocations policy gives clear guidelines and publicises how the Council will prioritise allocations of social rented housing stock and covers nomination to Housing Associations, of which there are twelve Registered Social Landlords in Chorley. The draft policy is currently subject to a twelve week consultation period.

All Local Authorities must by law give 'reasonable preference' to the categories of applicants, including people who are homeless, people living in unsanitary, overcrowded or unsatisfactory housing and people who need to move on medical or welfare grounds.

The main difference between the two policies is the move away from the complex points system. Currently, people who apply for housing with the Council are assessed and given a point score of between 0 and 35. 0 being an applicant who is not threatened with homelessness, no medical, adequately housed and no local connection with 35 being statutorily homelessness.

The proposed scheme will use a transparent banding system. There will be four bands that replace the 35 points, accurately reflects to the Housing Act and is believed to be easier to understand for customers.

The four bands will consist of:

Band 1 - Urgent Need due to additional preference or cumulative need

Band 2 – Need to move – Reasonable preference

Band 3 – Recognisable Need

Band 4 – None of the above but would like to move

Members discussed the "local connection" and suggested that existing tenants who had requested to transfer to another property or area should be given first choice on properties that became available rather than new tenants. Officers explained that a potential Choice Based Letting policy would assist with this.

All customers who are on the Council's Housing Register would be transferred to the new banding system and letters will be sent advising of their new status on the list. Currently there are 1100 customers on the list and a review is currently being undertaken to assess numbers of those losing priority as a result of the new policy. The results of this would be presented to the next meeting.

It was noted that there would be no duplication of people under the new policy. Currently people are on the Council's list and lists held by Registered Social Landlords.

The type of property most in demand were two and three bedroom houses.

The Council's nomination rights to Housing Association properties would remain the same, although there would be an increase in control from the Council to ensure that an appropriate mix of households in housing need are offered accommodation. The policy is reflective of a potential Choice Based Lettings policy and will hopefully be adopted across the sub-region.

Choice Based Lettings

Choice Based Lettings is a fundamental change to the way rented accommodation is allocated. Traditionally, an officer would 'offer' available accommodation and the client would not be involved in the process. This meant that properties in low demand areas would primarily be offered to homeless households and nationally it is believed that this type of working has contributed towards areas of high unemployment, high teenage pregnancy rates and high anti social behaviour.

Choice Based Lettings empowers applicants by allowing them to 'bid' or 'express interest' only in properties they wish to be considered for. It can work like an Estate Agent, where all available properties are advertised and applicants can view them. Within the Corporate Strategy there is a task to establish a Choice Based Lettings scheme.

During the last 12 months, the Strategic Housing team have been liaising with our Housing Association partners to gauge interest in participating in such a scheme. A Commissioning Group was established and consisted of the Council and 3 Housing Association partners (Chorley Community Housing, Accent North West and Places for People) which account for over 97% of social rented stock in the borough.

The group considered the options available to establish the project. Following interviews with sub regional partners, Selectmove 'Preston and South Ribble Choice Based Lettings was chosen as a preferred partner. Under Choice Based Lettings, Local Authorities still have nomination rights to Housing Association properties. Each Local Authority partner is responsible for monitoring performance in their own area. To ensure that households who are in housing need are allocated a property, there would be a single allocation policy, agreed by all partners and the Local Authority would monitor performance.

Since establishing Choice Based Lettings in Preston and South Ribble, they have reported a decrease in temporary accommodation use and also a decrease in waiting time for households who are in housing need.

£30,000 has been secured from the Department for Communities and Local Government to implement Choice Based Lettings. This will be used to create an "estate agents" in the Union Street offices with advisors to guide customers through the process.

RESOLVED – That the background information be noted.

09.04 CONSIDERATION OF THE ALLOCATIONS POLICY

Exclusions

Members considered the draft policy document and suggested that the exclusion criteria be set subject to consultation.

Customers who did not hold a visa for this country would not be eligible to join the housing register.

It was noted that the Council are not able to require customers to move from a property if they no longer need social housing.

7.30 Councillor Julia Berry left the meeting.

Members discussed provision for people who are homeless. Officers advised that if there was no room in Chorley or there were special circumstances e.g. in domestic violence cases the Council would approach other Local Authorities to accommodate the customer. Work is done proactively to prevent homelessness within the Council.

In response to a query officers reported that advice on financial management has been given to customers and the Council would be developing this service. In the current financial climate and national problem of repossessions the Council would like to give customers help and advice to keep their home. The benefits team are good at identifying problem cases and having the benefit paid direct to the landlord where applicable.

The Neighbourhoods Directorate have powers where private rented houses are not kept in good condition and the private landlord forum is used to address issues such as this. It has been identified that fuel poverty is high in private rented properties and that tenants can be scared to report issues. This may also be helped through choice based letting. An accreditation scheme was under consideration for private landlords to enable them to advertise their properties along with those from Registered Social Landlords.

RESOLVED –

- 1. That the comments on the draft Policy be taken forward.**
- 2. To present information to the next meeting on:**
 - I. Customers who would lose out with the introduction of the scheme**
 - II. If a customer was behind on the rent and then caught up how does this affect whether they are penalised.**
 - III. Consultation responses received on the draft policy to date.**

09.05 THE WAY FORWARD

The next meeting of the task and finish group would be held on Thursday, 5 February 2009 at 6.30pm.

Chair