

CHOICE BASED LETTINGS SCHEME – RECOMMENDATION FROM STRATEGIC HOUSING PANEL

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WHAT BENEFITS WILL THESE PROPOSALS BRING TO COPELAND RESIDENTS

They will enable the Council and its housing service users to join a Cumbria-wide scheme for the allocation of social rented homes provided by Registered Social Landlords.

WHY HAS THIS REPORT COME TO THE EXECUTIVE?

It is a request from the Strategic Housing Panel on 11 August 2010.

RECOMMENDATION:

The report includes, attached as Appendix A, the proposed allocations scheme for Cumbria Choice, the emerging sub-regional choice based lettings system for Cumbria.

On 11 August 2010 the Strategic Housing Panel resolved to request the Executive to recommend the Allocations Scheme for adoption by Full Council. If adopted, it would replace the Council's existing scheme when Cumbria Choice goes live, anticipated in February 2011.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Under the Housing Act, 1996, as amended by the Homelessness Act, 2002, every local housing authority must have a housing allocations scheme whether they retained their stock or transferred it to a Registered Social Landlord (RSL). The scheme must by law include a statement of the authority's policy on offering services users a choice of housing or the opportunity to express their preferences about housing that might be offered to them.
- 1.2 For an authority like Copeland, which transferred its stock in 2004, an "allocation" effectively means the nomination of someone to be an assured tenant of housing held by an RSL. In practice, the Council's nominees will all be found in Bands A & B, the highest priority bands in Appendix A.

- 1.3 Allocations are governed by part 6 of the Housing Act, 1996, as amended. Published schemes must include a determination of priorities between applicants and for setting out clearly the procedures to be followed in allocations. There are two essential principles that must be embedded. They must demonstrate the methods of assessing applicants' needs and must identify those in the greatest need. The Council determined its present allocations scheme in 2009.
- 1.4 The duty to keep a Housing Register was abolished by the Homelessness Act, 2002, but in practice the Council needs access to a list of applicants in order to give meaning to its allocations scheme. The Council endorsed the Home Housing Group's register in 2009 because the Group had the largest stockholding and waiting list of any RSL in the Borough.

2. Cumbria Choice

- 2.1 The new operating concept of the scheme is that service users "bid" for advertised vacancies. It ensures that all new social housing tenants chose their home on their own initiative (instead of the provider's), thereby encouraging the development of sustainable communities in social rented housing.
- 2.2 Following extensive reports from 2008 to the Strategic Housing Panel and Executive the meeting of Full Council on 24 June 2010 resolved to join the Cumbria Choice partnership. All six housing authorities in Cumbria plus eight RSLs have now joined.
- 2.3 The Cumbria-wide policy and project consultation began in May 2009 with the production of a newsletter for stakeholders. It continued throughout that year and into 2010.
- 2.4 Membership involves a common allocations scheme for Cumbria which, when adopted, will replace every District or Borough Council's own scheme and the schemes operated by the RSLs.
- 2.5 An earlier draft allocations policy was reported to the Strategic Housing Panel on 10 February 2010 and the Executive on 9 March. Between February and May it was subject to public and stakeholder consultation.
- 2.6 The amendments made in light of the consultation were numerous but mostly concerned with improving the clarity of policies which are subject to detailed legislative requirements and government guidance. The changes made referred to:
- equality, diversity and accessibility
 - eligibility and exclusions (with reasons)

- priority bands and acute needs
- disability and specifically adapted vacant homes
- local connections with the District in which vacancies are situated
- customers review requests.

2.7 The resultant policy was reported to the Strategic Housing Panel on 27 May 2010 but was then subject to further external legal proofing, which was completed before the last report to the Panel on 11 August.

3. Equality impact assessment & draft accessibility policy

3.1 An equality impact assessment has been completed by the Cumbria Choice Project Manager. It examined the potential impact of the policy on minority and disadvantaged groups in terms of age, gender, race and ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation and religion or belief. Rural parishes were included because of reduced internet access, remote areas and limited public transport. An action plan has been produced.

3.2 There is also a draft accessibility policy as at June 2010. It is a guide to the type of help and support people may need, and which will be provided, to use the system. The policy will be developed in parallel with the action plan of the equality impact assessment.

4. What are the legal, financial & human resources implications?

4.1 There are no financial and human resources implications arising from this report that cannot be managed within existing budgetary provision. In respect of legal a joint choice based lettings scheme between local authorities is not unusual. The risk of challenge arises from the substantive content of the scheme itself. Housing allocations are governed by part 6 of the Housing Act 1996 and statutory guidance relating both to housing allocations (Fair and Flexible – December 2009) and choice based lettings (August 2008). Legal advice has been received from housing consultants in preparing the draft scheme and as far as possible the scheme has been drafted in a manner which reduces the risk of challenge.

5. How will the proposals be project managed and how are the risks going to be managed?

5.1 There is a multi-agency Project Board to manage the scheme, including associated risk management, supported by a full-time project manager. Copeland is represented on the Project Board.

6. What measurable outcomes or outputs will arise from this report?

- 6.1 The report and recommendation are in accordance with the Council's action plan following the Audit Commission's housing inspection report of 2008 and the re-inspection report of 2010.
- 6.2 The Council's housing service users will have access to a Cumbria-wide lettings scheme based on the statutory principle of choice and in accordance with a government target of all housing authorities adopting a choice based system by 2010.

List of Appendices : Cumbria Choice Based Lettings Scheme; Allocations Policy, June 2010.

List of Background Documents:

Housing Act, 1996, Part 6, as amended by the Homelessness Act, 2002.