

# COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

## DATE: 24<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER, 2017

### SUBJECT :

### INTRODUCTION OF A 'CHOICE BASED LETTINGS' PROCESS FOR COUNCIL HOUSING IN CARMARTHENSHIRE

#### Purpose:

The purpose of this report is to outline the advantages for moving to a 'choice based lettings' (CBL) process for our homes.

#### To consider and comment on the following issues:

To recommend to Executive Board that the process for letting homes is changed in favour of a Choice Based Lettings approach.

#### REASONS:

- We have recently reviewed how we prioritise the allocation of social housing. A new Access to Social Housing Policy was approved by Council in December 2016. The new policy was implemented on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2017 and it is therefore timely we consider any appropriate changes to the letting process.
- A 'choice based letting' process involves advertising vacancies and inviting expressions of interest from those on the Housing Choice Register. The process provides more choice, offers more transparency and encourages those seeking re-housing to become more active in the process by taking responsibility for their housing situation.
- As part of the review of the Access to Social Housing Policy, members highlighted concerns about not being informed about when a vacancy/letting occurred. A choice based system will resolve this as vacancies will be openly advertised.

#### To be referred to the Executive Board/Council for decision:

Exec Board Decision Required - Yes – 27<sup>th</sup> November, 2017  
Council Decision Required - No

#### Executive Board Member Portfolio Holder:

Cllr. Linda Evans (Housing Portfolio Holder)

<b>Directorate</b> <b>Communities</b> <b>Name of Head of Service:</b> <b>Robin Staines</b> <b>Report Author:</b> <b>Jonathan Willis</b>	<b>Designations:</b> <b>Head of Housing &amp; Public Protection</b>  <b>Advice and tenancy support manager</b>	<b>Tel Nos.</b> <b>01267 228960</b> <b>01554 899232</b>  <b>E Mail Addresses:</b> <a href="mailto:Rstaines@carmarthenshire.gov.uk">Rstaines@carmarthenshire.gov.uk</a> <a href="mailto:jnwillis@carmarthenshire.gov.uk">jnwillis@carmarthenshire.gov.uk</a>
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: 24<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER, 2017

## SUBJECT: INTRODUCTION OF A 'CHOICE BASED LETTINGS' PROCESS FOR COUNCIL HOUSING IN CARMARTHENSHIRE

The Council recently introduced a new Access to Social Housing Policy. This policy sets out how we prioritise the allocation of social housing. It prescribes two priority bands. This ensures applicants are afforded reasonable preference in line with statutory guidance. Within a band, further priority is awarded to (in priority order):

- Local connection with, and time spent in, Carmarthenshire.
- Time spent in a particular community area.
- Time on Housing Choice Register.

The Allocations policy only determines *whom* we house. This is based on statutory guidance and priority. This report details *how* we let the property, which is in our gift. The current process for letting a property involves identifying the highest priority household based on the allocation policy. When a vacancy arises an applicant is contacted and an offer made. Quite often, the highest priority applicant does not wish to take up the offer (usually due to a change of circumstances that we are not aware of, or they feel the property is inappropriate). If an applicant refuses a reasonable offer without good reason they are deferred from the register for a twelve month period (following the outcome any potential appeal).

An alternative approach to letting involves a 'choice based' approach. In this process vacancies are openly advertised rather than the applicant being offered the property. This is beneficial as it:

- is open and transparent regarding our vacancies.
- ensures applicants who express an interest in a particular property want the home rather than accept it because there is a penalty if they refuse.
- is more likely the successful applicant will accept the property and stay longer (making for more sustainable tenancies and communities)
- gives us real-time planning data regarding the popularity/desirability of our homes which should influence the asset management strategy and affordable homes commitment
- reduces staff time spent identifying applicants
- reduces property refusals
- complements our 'do it online' programme.

The way in which an applicant expresses their interest in a property is commonly known as 'bidding' on a home they are interested in. The whole process is, preferably, undertaken online and is therefore available 24/7. However, for those who do not have access to the internet we would be able to take expressions of interest ('bids') over the phone for applicants. An applicant can express their interest against each home they are suitable for. For example,

if a family is eligible for a 2 bedroom home, they would be able to express their interest in all the 2 bed properties advertised for letting. Having access to the internet is important in terms of the successful implementation of the process, as adverts will have photographs, details of the property, local amenities and rent costs.

According to the office of National Statistics Wales, 84% of households in Wales have digital access and/or use the internet at home. In Carmarthenshire we have 83% of households with access to the internet, so we do not anticipate many applicants could not access the internet at home, via council outlets. However, we would always support the vulnerable few who would not be able to access the internet.

We have a clear corporate commitment to providing services digitally via the 'do it on line' campaign. The success of this programme is highlighted in the last Annual Report which states that there were 882,669 visitors to our website and a 13.5% increase of online payments in 2015/16. Therefore the take up of on-line services is increasing and CBL would help to meet the corporate online agenda.

While we wish to deliver, as far as possible, this service digitally, it is recognised that not everyone chooses to receive services in this way. To ensure access to the process is open to all members of the Housing Choice Register, we plan to:

- Allow expressions of interest (bid) via the telephone.
- Offer vulnerable applicants the opportunity to allow someone to bid on their behalf. This could be their family or member of staff supporting their application such as a housing officer, social worker, local member or any trusted person the applicant has given the appropriate permission to.
- Members can access an appropriate link to determine what properties are available.
- We will ensure the weekly list of properties is available in all our public buildings, and will work with third sector organisations and local businesses to gauge their interest in helping us to promote the available homes.
- We are investigating the possibility of a bi-lingual recorded telephone message that will list the available properties.
- Text alerts can be developed to make applicants aware of properties in their area of choice. We will also develop a process to accept bids by text.
- We can accept expressions of interest by way of printed post cards or generally in writing, however, they would need to arrive by the deadline for shortlisting which will be publicised
- Expressions of interest can also be accepted in 'Y Hub' or in customer service centres.

To ensure the most vulnerable have access to the service, we will make expressions of interest on behalf of applicants to ensure that they have as equal access to available properties. We will introduce a system where we will ensure applicants prior to being allocated a home receive pre-tenancy support and advice as appropriate to their circumstances. This pre-tenancy work will involve setting up appropriate rent payment methods, benefits advice, and how to express an interest in properties that we advertise. We would consult with the person to see if they would like us to do express an interest for them however, there will be very few people who would not be able to play some part in the process.

This does not affect the Allocation Policy. Priorities in terms of allocation within a band and between the bands will not change. We will apply the allocations policy to identify the successful applicant. There will be no limit to the amount of properties an applicant can bid on, but they will only be able to bid once on each home and only on the home that meets their needs (so a single person couldn't bid on a 3 bed house). Being it will be mainly digital, this will not add to overall costs.

It is anticipated that the time needed to give applicants an opportunity to bid, usually up to 5 days, can be planned whilst the existing tenant is in situ and can span a weekend (therefore not affecting the overall void period). Local authorities that have adopted a CBL approach for letting have not seen a negative impact on void turnaround times. The clear benefits on voids will be the time saved in contacting uninterested applicants as prospective applicant is actively seeking a home, rather than waiting to receive an offer from us.

We have discussed the proposal with the local housing associations who have yet to formally commit to the scheme. However this does not change their commitment to the shared allocation policy and housing choice register. It will be the individual organisations' choice in terms of how properties are let, however the same benefits will be afforded to them.

The following table identifies issues with the existing process and identifies what Choice Based Lettings can do to resolve:

What issues have we identified with regard to the existing letting process?	What CBL can offer to resolve?
<b>Fairness and transparency</b> -We contact a small number of applicants directly.	All vacancies are publically advertised where all applicants can express an interest.
<b>Informing members about vacancies</b> -Members have indicated they are not always informed about vacancies when they arise.	Publically advertising homes we have available will inform all members about all vacancies as and when they arise.
<b>Applicants get limited choice</b> -Currently applicants get one offer and if they refuse they are deferred from the register for a six month period. Feedback suggests applicants feel pressured into accepting a new home in these circumstances.	Applicants have a clear choice as there is the onus on them to make a bid on new homes that become available. Applicants can also see the limited supply of new homes. This will help them make informed choices.
<b>Can contribute to more requests to transfer or numbers of households who give up a tenancy</b>	Applicants have more choice in terms of where they want to live which will promote more sustainable tenancies and communities.
<b>Raised expectations about the availability of social housing</b> - Applicants have no idea of the number of properties that become available as a whole or in particular areas.	Publically advertising vacancies will help educate potential applicants with regards to actual number of vacancies that arise.
<b>Time it takes to make a letting</b> - In some cases applicants haven't provided up to date contact details. We therefore spend a significant amount of time attempting to make contact with some applicants. This has an impact on the time it takes to get a home re-occupied.	Onus will be on the applicant to make contact with us and keep their details up-to-date. However, we will need to build in a 3 to 5 day time period to allow a reasonable time for applicants to make a bid. This does not necessarily increase the overall void time.

**Recommendation:**

We move to introduce a system of Choice Based Lettings.

DETAILED REPORT ATTACHED?	NO
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# IMPLICATIONS

I confirm that other than those implications which have been agreed with the appropriate Directors / Heads of Service and are referred to in detail below, there are no other implications associated with this report :

Signed: **Robin Staines**

**Head of Housing & Public Protection**

Policy, Crime & Disorder and Equalities	Legal	Finance	ICT	Risk Management Issues	Staffing Implications	Physical Assets
<b>YES</b>	<b>NONE</b>	<b>NONE</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NONE</b>	<b>NONE</b>

## 1. Policy, Crime & Disorder and Equalities

- The Council have agreed a new Access to Social Housing Policy which sets out how we prioritise social housing. Those who make bids for vacancies under a Choice Based Lettings approach will be subject to the agreed allocations scheme. The aim of the scheme is to improve tenancy and community sustainability.

## 2. Legal

- Changing to a Choice Based Lettings approach will not affect our legal duties concerning allocations or rights of applicants. Processes need to be in place to ensure we meet our equality duties.

## 3. Finance

- Please see below.**

## 4. ICT

- The Northgate Ohms System which we currently use to manage the Housing Choice Register can be adapted to link with the Council's website to allow for Choice Based Lettings. The estimated cost will be a one off amount of £50,000.

## 5. Risk

- The main risk involves the impact of introducing CBL will have on void turnaround times. A 3-5 day timescale will need to be built in to allow the vacancy to be advertised and applicants to make a bid. This impact can be minimised by advertising vacancies when we receive notice from the existing tenants. In addition properties will be advertised over the weekend.
- A clear advantage will be the reduction in time taken by officers to make contact with applicants which has been problematic because applicants have not updated contact details.

# CONSULTATIONS

I confirm that the appropriate consultations have taken in place and the outcomes are as detailed below

Signed: Robin Staines

Head of Housing & Public Protection

## 1. Local Member(s)

Local members will be informed of the change and workshops to provide an update be made available upon request.

## 2. Community / Town Council

Not applicable.

## 3. Relevant Partners

Housing Associations have been consulted in relation to possible options for change. Further consultation will be necessary subject to political approval.

## 4. Staff Side Representatives and other Organisations

Not applicable.

## Section 100D Local Government Act, 1972 – Access to Information

List of Background Papers used in the preparation of this report:

**THESE ARE DETAILED BELOW**

Title of Document	File Ref No.	Locations that the papers are available for public inspection
Carmarthenshire County Council – Access to Social Housing Policy	Housing General Files	Council Website - Democratic Services