

**WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**  
**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**THURSDAY 28 SEPTEMBER 2017**  
**CHOICE BASED LETTINGS REVIEW**  
**REPORT OF THE GROUP MANAGER FOR REVENUES AND HOUSING SUPPORT**  
**(Contact: Jon Dearing, Tel: (01993) 861221)**

The report is for information.

**1. PURPOSE**

To update Members on the progression of Choice Based Lettings at West Oxfordshire District Council since its implementation in October 2016.

**2. RECOMMENDATION**

That the content of the report be noted.

**3. BACKGROUND**

- 3.1. In December 2015 Cabinet approved the twelve month trial of a Choice Based Lettings approach to the allocation of social sector accommodation within the District; and procurement of the associated software in partnership with all of the Gloucestershire District (system known as `Homeseeker Plus`).
- 3.2. There was a commitment to implement the new approach and software in collaboration with Gloucestershire partners and this was achieved (with implementation costs coming in under budget) in October 2016, when the new process and website went live.
- 3.3. There were some minor teething issues with the implementation, mainly around delays in assigning customers priority bands. However, we were able to ensure that we had the resources in place that meant no customer was delayed in being able to make bids on accommodation; while still achieving the stated efficiency savings.
- 3.4. The Member consultation prior to implementation highlighted two main concerns:
  - i. That the Council would lose local control over its allocation process,
  - ii. That vulnerable customers would be disadvantages as a result of the digital nature of the new process.

However, the local allocations policy has continued to be in operation and no households have been allocated accommodation within the District without a verified local connection to West Oxfordshire.

Furthermore, since October 2016 we have received 15,688 bids on properties, and 15,463 of those were made through the online system – which is an astounding 98.65%. 201 bids were placed using our `auto-bid` system (where the system automatically places bids for people unable to do so themselves, using the information that we have gathered from the applicant) and the remaining 24 were made by staff on behalf of the applicant. This demonstrates that people of West Oxfordshire have embraced the system and are using it successfully.

3.5. The original (December 2015) Cabinet report is attached as Background Papers. This report includes a significant amount of detail in relation to the scheme, the system/technology, the partnership approach and the Allocations Policy. In terms of the twelve month review the four Appendices provide feedback from different perspectives, as follows:

- Appendix A: Homeseeker Performance Data,
- Appendix B: CBL Customer Feedback,
- Appendix C: CBL Cottsway Housing Association Feedback, and
- Appendix D: CBL Officer Observations.

#### **4. ALTERNATIVES/OPTIONS**

- 4.1. The Council could revert to the previous, manual, points-based system. However, this would mean losing the transparency that customers now benefit from; increased staffing costs and would undoubtedly cause confusion for customers.
- 4.2. The Council could seek to deliver an alternative Choice Based Lettings system. However, there would be no advantage to the customer and would lead to significantly increased costs.

#### **5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1. As part of the CBL implementation the new system resulted in an annual saving of £38,222 in staffing costs.
- 5.2. There is a system `support and maintenance` charge of £9,000 per annum; meaning that a return to the previous points based system would result in an increased cost in staffing of £29,222 per annum as the previous delivery method was so resource intensive.
- 5.3. It should be noted that the £9,000 `support and maintenance` fee also includes a contribution to the Partnership (as we operate the system in collaboration with all of the Gloucestershire Districts). This covers the cost of operating the customer appeals process. A return to the points system would therefore increase costs in relation to the administration of appeals.

#### **6. RISKS**

- 6.1. There may be a reputational and a financial risk to the Council if it returned to the previous allocation approach.
- 6.2. The Homeseeker Plus allocations system is a partnership between West Oxfordshire District Council and all of the Gloucestershire Districts; and in terms to the Publica Housing Authorities is therefore partnership-wide. A return to the previous allocation approach would therefore cause partnership management and administration problems.

#### **7. REASONS**

- 7.1. The provision of affordable housing is an objective within the Council Plan and a statutory duty.

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Background Papers:  
None