

Report for Resolution

Report to Cabinet
21st September 2011

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Report of Head of neighbourhood housing services
Subject Review of the Home options partnership board

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to ask members to agree to withdraw from the Greater Norwich home options partnership board (GNHOPB) and to agree to the creation of a Norwich home options service with effect from April 2012.

Recommendations

Cabinet is recommended to

- (1) Issue a six month notice to withdraw from the Greater Norwich Home Options partnership scheme, in accordance with the partnership agreement;
- (2) Approve the development of a business case and a continuity plan to form the basis of the new Norwich home options service;
- (3) Approve the creation of an interim Norwich home options service based on the current service to run from April 2012 for one year.
- (3) Agree to a review the council's allocations policy, in consultation with residents, and to carry out a detailed impact assessment on any proposed changes to the service from 2013 onwards.

Financial Consequences

A detailed business plan will be produced to assess the full financial impact of the changes.

The current service costs the council £409,000 to run; it is envisaged, subject to the business plan and following a recent LEAN review of the service that the interim and long term arrangements will be deliverable within existing budgets.

Risk Assessment

The partnership agreement requires partners in the home options scheme to give six months notice of their intent to withdraw from the Partnership.

A full risk assessment of setting up a Norwich scheme will be developed as part of the business and continuity plans.

Strategic Priority and Outcome/Service Priorities

This report helps to meet the strategic priority “Safe and healthy neighbourhoods – working in partnership with residents to create neighbourhoods where people feel secure, where the streets are clean and well maintained, where there is good quality housing and local amenities and where there are active local communities”

Cabinet Member: Councillor MacDonald - Housing and Adult Services

Ward: All

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Background

1. In November 2007 the Greater Norwich home options scheme was formed. This partnership agreement enabled a consistent approach to be adopted when letting social housing across the three local authority areas (South Norfolk, Broadland and the city council). It also allowed development costs to be shared. The scheme operates in partnership with social landlords and enables the local authorities to recover 40% of their costs from those registered providers who are partners in the scheme. The current scheme is hosted and run by Norwich City Council on behalf of the other partners.
2. Choice based lettings (CBL) is a process whereby applicants on the housing register can bid for properties across the three local authority areas. There are restrictions on the type of property an applicant can bid for and applicants are graded in relation to their need. Applicants bidding outside the local authority they are registered with are subject to a reduced preference banding.
3. CBL has developed over the years and all three of the local authorities either have, or are, undertaking a review of their service. These reviews have had implications for the over-arching home options partnership. They have highlighted the fact that there is scope to improve the current arrangements, remove duplication and possibly reduce costs.
4. Arising from the review undertaken by South Norfolk the home options partnership board agreed at their meeting in July, to dissolve the partnership. This means that the partnership will cease to exist as of April 1st 2012. From that date each local authority will have to manage its own housing register and allocations policy.
5. As both a local housing authority and a landlord this has significant impact on the council and this report seeks cabinet approval for the development of detailed business and continuity plans in order to create a Norwich home options scheme.

Policy Implications

6. The current allocations policy is sub-regional and will continue to operate until April 2012. After that date the council would, following a review, be able to make changes to it.
7. In establishing a 'Norwich offer' there is an opportunity to refresh the policy and address Norwich specific issues which are not covered in the sub regional document. The demise of the partnership could provide the scope to revisit the way the council allocate properties and ensure that this reflects the needs and aspirations of both Norwich residents and the council as a landlord.
8. These are two separate tasks; so it is proposed to make minimum operational changes from April 2012 to ensure service continuity. It is then recommended that a full consultation on the council's allocation policy takes place with any agreed adjustments implemented from April 2013.

Implications for registered providers

9. The CBL system is recognised by the registered providers as a way to fill voids quickly, effectively and with clients in the most need. The end of the greater Norwich scheme will mean that separate negotiations will need to take place with registered social landlords to enable them to use the new Norwich option, should they so choose.

Business case

10. A full business case for the Norwich home option scheme will need to be prepared which will take into account, staffing resources, I.C.T and income generation potential from RSLs using the system.
11. The business case will also be in part shaped by the outcomes of the LEAN review for the council's wider housing options service.

Implications for service users

12. The ultimate aim of this approach, an interim solution, followed by a more detailed review, is to ensure that what the customer sees and does is largely unchanged in the first instance.
13. The current home options scheme does allow cross authority mobility but this is still dependent on supply and demand. From April 2012 there will be a need for a new agreement on the process of 'client mobility'.
14. The option of mutual exchange will still be available and new reciprocal arrangements for nominations with each district council can be explored.
15. The end of the partnership has no impact on sub-regional homelessness work. A GNHP sub-regional homeless strategy has recently been agreed, the scope of which is unaffected by home options.

Next steps

16. A sub-regional project team will now be set up to facilitate the dissolution of the partnership to ensure the transition is carried out with as little disruption to applicants, partners and stakeholders as possible. Appropriate communication to all stakeholders will be a priority.
17. A detailed business case and continuity plan will be developed for the Norwich home options scheme.
18. A project group, including stakeholders, will be set-up to review allocations policy, using the existing policy as a model.
19. Initial negotiations with registered providers will commence as soon as the partnership is formally dissolved.

In conclusion

18. The greater Norwich housing partnership home options scheme has been a well received service which has been valued by customers across the sub-region. However the local authority partners have agreed to dissolve the partnership with effect from April 2012. The end of the partnership means that the council can completely review and refocus the current approach to allocations and to develop a 'Norwich Offer'. This offer will be based on a remodelled service and policy to meet the specific needs and aspirations of Norwich residents, while maintaining relationships with partners and addressing resource issues