

NORTH EAST DERBYSHIRE DISTRICT  
COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

THE ALLOCATIONS EXPERIENCE  
REVIEW

APRIL 2014

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## **Chairs Foreword**

I am pleased to present this report on behalf of the Healthy Communities and Well Being Scrutiny Committee. It details the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Committee from its review of the Allocations Experience.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all stakeholders involved in the review for their advice, support and cooperation throughout the review process and in particular, the staff of the service who took the time to speak to members of the Committee. I would also like to thank the officers who provided presentations on the Choice Based Lettings System which were very informative and helped the Committee understand the process and issues surrounding the customer's experience. In addition the views given by tenants who attended a meeting of the Committee provided a valuable insight into the experience on the ground.

In conclusion I would like to thank members of the Committee and Sue Broadhead our Scrutiny Manager for the work they undertook in gathering evidence and co-ordinating the review.

## **Review Panel**

The review panel comprised the following members:

Councillor B Ridgway	(Labour) Chair
Councillor P Antcliff	(Conservative)
Councillor J Austen	(Labour)
Councillor G Butler	(Labour)
Councillor C D Huckerby	(Conservative)
Councillor D S Oxspring	(Conservative)
Councillor S Peters	(Labour)
Councillor T Reader	(Labour)
Councillor J Windle	(Labour)

## **1. Recommendations**

- 1.1 That consideration be given to the incorporation of the proposals contained in section 6.2.1 of the report as part of the review of the website.
- 1.2 That further consideration be given to how abortive bids could be reduced including a form to capture this data so that appropriate advice can be given.
- 1.3 That consideration be given to the use of a highly visual statement being used to inform bidders they would only be contacted if they were one of the three bidders invited to view a property.
- 1.4 That consideration be given to displaying management lets in a separate section of the property list.
- 1.5 That consideration be given to hard to let properties being clearly advertised in newsletters so people can bid for them knowing their circumstances.
- 1.6 That consideration be given to property adverts including more detail to help people make more informed choices when bidding.
- 1.7 That wider publicity be given to the availability of the exchange list/facility.
- 1.8 That timescales on relet properties being redecorated be given more prominence.
- 1.9 That Member training be provided on how the allocations system works including a practical demonstration of using the system.
- 1.10 That consideration be given to how more help could be provided for younger tenants.
- 1.11 That the comments from the organisation supporting women fleeing violence in section 6.2.8 of the report be considered.
- 1.12 That the issues raised regarding the increase in demand for the Council's Housing Options Team (HOT) due to an increase in homelessness should be monitored to ensure its capacity to respond.

## **2. Introduction**

- 2.1 At its meeting on 31st May, 2013 the Healthy Communities and Well Being Scrutiny Committee agreed to undertake a review of the Allocations Experience.
- 2.2 It was felt timely to review how this process was operating following revisions made to the Council's Choice Based Lettings and Allocations, changes in Welfare Reforms and to respond to concern raised by members.

### **3. Scope of Review**

3.1 The review aimed to:

- Review how the Allocations process is working
- Look at the customer experience of using the process
- Examine general perceptions of fairness, transparency and user satisfaction with the process
- Consider the impacts on the service arising from Welfare Reforms Legislation
- Identify any areas for improvement

### **4. Method of Review**

4.1 The review panel met on six occasions to consider the scope of the review, key issues they wanted to discuss and key people they wished to interview.

4.2 The review panel interviewed a wide range of officers from both Rykneld Homes and the Council who were involved with the Allocations Process. They also spoke with the Portfolio member. An advert was also placed in both Rykneld Homes and the Council's newspapers inviting people to submit their views and/or attend a focus group with the Committee. Members of the Tenants Federation were also invited to take part in the review but regrettably no comments were received.

4.3 One issue that the Committee were keen to clarify from the start of the evidence gathering was that the review was concerned with the Choice Based Letting Scheme, which is the method by which properties are advertised for rent. The Allocations Policy, which determines eligibility for council housing and how priority status is awarded, had been subject to a separate review. Whilst there was clearly a link between the two this review was focussed on the customer experience of the Choice Based Lettings system.

### **5. Evidence and Research**

5.1 The following documents were considered as part of the review:

- Scene setting presentations on:
  - The Allocations Experience -Rykneld Homes – Val Denham, Housing Options Officer
  - The Council's Choice Based Lettings and Allocations Policy NEDDC -Rebecca Slack, Housing Strategy and Enabling Manager and Di Parker, Housing Strategy Officer
  - Homelessness and Homeless Prevention Process –NEDDC -Carl Griffiths, Private Sector and Housing Options Manager

- Presentation on Choice Move - Choice Based Lettings – The Customer Journey by:  
Daniel Peck – Choice Move Team Leader Rykneld Homes  
Kirsty Evans – Independent Living and Support Team Leader Rykneld Homes
- Allocations policy
- Application form and associated letters
- Guidance Leaflet Choice Based Lettings \_ Rykneld Homes
- Examples of CBL properties advertised between 15/01/2014 and 21/01/2014
- Satisfaction Survey Results
- Previous Rykneld Homes Review information from focus groups held with bidders/tenants 2008.
- Performance Information

## **6. Key Findings**

### **6.1 Strengths**

- 6.1.1 Evidence was provided of various forms of communication that Rykneld Homes undertake in relation to the Allocations process. These ranged from newsletters, information packs, large print documents, minority language formats, CD's and face to face contact. An Information booklet was available on request and in all area offices. Officers at Rykneld Homes also spend a lot of time explaining the procedures to people. With regard to IT facilities these included the Rykneld Homes/Choice Move website and the NEDDC website. The organisation also worked with elected members who inform Rykneld Homes of emerging issues. The panel did receive a couple of comments that Rykneld Homes could still communicate more. Whilst this is always true the level of communications appeared considerable.
- 6.1.2 The panel were given a copy of the Choice Based Lettings application form to review. This form had been revised recently and appeared to be easier to complete than previously. However, the panel still felt that the application was a long document but understood the reasons why the information was being collected.
- 6.1.3 The Review Panel wished to consider how people found the experience of using the Choice Based Lettings system and whether there was anything more that could be done to improve this process. From comments made by interviewees people appeared to generally understand the system, although this was not everyone. There was recognition that some people still have difficulty with seeing their name at the top of the bidding list at the beginning of the week but then falling down as bidders with more need appear. Several stakeholders interviewed from Rykneld Homes advised that they take action to visit and talk people through this process. Where people bid unsuccessfully advice is provided about ways to increase their chances by widening their areas of choice. It was accepted that some people will not wish to take this action. Evidence was provided from two tenants that attended the committee

that they found the bidding system easy to use. They found staff easy to talk to, very polite and people answering the telephones helpful. They also commented that they found the pack of paper work easy to work through.

- 6.1.4 In the main the evidence was positive that the process works well from the applicant's experience. The Review Panel receive feedback from the people using the process, including survey results that are analysed to identify any dissatisfaction expressed. It was accepted that there will always be some people dissatisfied because they do not get the house they want and the supply is limited. Regardless of this it is important to try to make the process as easy as possible. There was still an issue of some people thinking the process is first come first served. Rykneld Homes stated that they had undertaken a lot of work trying to get this message across but some applicants did not understand that the process was based on people's needs. However, it was concluded that the majority understand and when they did not they would approach members or Rykneld Homes.
- 6.1.5 Evidence provided suggested that access to information was working well and advice was provided from trained staff. A number of stakeholders commented on the special arrangements provided for vulnerable people using the process. This included auto bidding for elderly people or people who had no computer facilities or were unable to use one. Help and advice was also provided by the financial inclusion team on budgeting where it was requested and appropriate.
- 6.1.6 The process was considered by all stakeholders interviewed or contacted to be fair open and transparent. Details of properties were advertised openly and information on properties let was provided for users of the system. Details were also made publically available of which bands properties have been let to following the bidding process. It appeared from examination that tenants had more control of where they wanted to bid subject to properties being available. They can also see why they end up in a certain position on the list, although as stated earlier this is not always understood.
- 6.1.7 The Review Panel was keen to establish whether the system could be accessed easily by vulnerable people. Evidence was provided of help available for vulnerable people including a number of case studies that highlighted how the Service supports tenants, their family and carers. Details of the groups of people for who extra help was available was provided for information together with information on how Rykneld Homes endeavour to identify people who may need assistance accessing the Choice Based Lettings system. These included those aided or supported by a statutory or voluntary agency and people being asked whether they need support. Any support workers working with the applicants were encouraged to accompany clients on viewings.
- 6.1.8 Staff also make a judgement that people may need assistance at the point of application to the housing register and identify those who are not bidding or bidding for unsuitable properties. People can also indicate on the tenancy forms whether they require further support. Vulnerable tenants were

telephoned by Rykneld Homes in their first week of a tenancy and received a visit within four weeks. There was also the facility for Rykneld Homes to bid for people on an automated system if they have difficulty using the system. Information was emailed to keep people informed. People can also request contact and help on the application form. The help provided depended on vulnerability. Where appropriate visits are made to people and referrals are made to other agencies where necessary.

6.1.9 Stakeholders from Rykneld Homes were questioned on how they balance the needs of a business against the needs of tenants. Comments received included:

- It was important to operate the business but the organisation is still very much people focussed despite having a business head;
- Tenants come first, service is focused on people, it is people centric;
- Have to have a business head but never lose sight of tenants. Would not be here without tenants;
- Work is done with households to help them sustain their tenancy;
- People usually let us know if they have an issue. When things go wrong try to understand why and then help;
- Involve tenants and residents when review things, usually through focus groups;
- Important that we get tenants feedback rather than officers;
- Have a limited number of properties so have to be managed properly, needs to be a balanced approach.

6.1.10 Evidence was provided on how the new let able standard was working. A Tenant Scrutiny review by Rykneld Homes had been undertaken and the feedback from tenants was provided. The results indicated that tenants were satisfied with the process and the new standard of their homes. There was a much better decoration provision which had been well received by tenants. Rykneld Homes felt it gave people a good start and was improving people's lives. It was recognised the works had caused a backlog but the panel was informed that this would be cleared in six months as new contractors were being recruited. Some properties have structural issues so this may have a knock on effect on this timescale. There had been an effect on rents in the first instance until the backlog was cleared. The decision to implement the new standard had been taken as it would pay dividends and cut maintenance long term.

6.1.11 The relationship between the Council's Housing Strategy and Enabling Team including the Housing Options Team and Rykneld Homes was

discussed. It was generally felt that the relationship worked well and that the Choice Move Team and wider staff at Rykneld Homes were open and approachable.

- 6.1.12 Evidence provided of training provision included in-house training, work shadowing, reading material provided and discussed at team meetings. It was considered important that staff have understanding of the range of issues such as mental health, safeguarding and probation. All new staff were inducted, annual reviews of training needs were held, and delivery was measured at 1:1 interviews. Performance was tested against core competencies for the job. Training was provided internally and externally and where possible job vacancies were advertised internally to encourage development.
- 6.1.13 The review was concerned with the Allocations process but there was obvious links that were made by stakeholders to the Council's Choice Based Lettings Allocations Policy. Comments were made that generally the policy was working quite well. There had been some issues as it evolved but these have been addressed. The review of the application form for Choice Based Lettings had thrown up some issues.
- 6.1.14 The Council carries out regular reviews of its Choice Based Lettings and Allocation Policy including an extensive review during May – December 2012 in light of the Government's Welfare Reforms, most significantly the introduction of the under occupation charges for council tenants on housing benefits.
- 6.1.15 The Council's Housing Strategy and Enabling Team has also monitored the impact of the changes resulting from the review and a report was recently taken to Cabinet. These policy changes included new procedures around downsizing, equity levels and mutual exchanges. Cabinet agreed that the changes to the policy were working but wished to continue to monitor the impact of welfare reforms on the allocation of Council housing.

## 6.2 Areas for Improvement

- 6.2.1 The Review Panel were advised that the website was currently being reviewed. A large part of the process was IT based but the panel felt that additional work on the website to provide a more electronic based solution would prove beneficial. Of course this would need to sit alongside other methods for people who cannot or do not wish to use IT. A review of the website pages found some areas not completely up to date and a couple of links not working correctly, although the links were fixed quickly. Two Rykneld Homes officers attending the committee discussed some enhancements that were being considered for the website, resource permitting. The data on the system was being refreshed and looked at to ensure consistency. How Rykneld Homes reach customers was also being reviewed. The application form was mainly paper based rather than being completed online and this was an area that was being investigated. The use of portable scanners was another option. Terminology was also being

considered, an example given was the replacement of the words 'effective date' with 'waiting time' in an effort to make the process easy to understand. The Review Panel supported these proposals and would like to see them implemented.

- 6.2.2 There was still evidence of abortive bids being made even on properties that were not eligible for the bidder. Rykneld Homes officers were aware of this and found it frustrating as work had been done to improve this issue. The number of bids allowed has been reduced from six to three. The IT system had also been adjusted to stop some bids being wrongly made. This was currently being tested to see whether this is helpful. Refusal rates were at 40% two years ago but following analysis and measures taken this had been reduced. However, despite the efforts made the review panel asked whether there was anything else that could be done to improve this. One suggestion put forward by a stakeholder was that for unsuccessful bidders consideration could be given to the design of a different form to capture this information. Linked to this was ensuring people understood when they would be contacted following a bid. It was suggested that the use of a highly visual statement could be used to inform bidders they would only be contacted if they were one of the three bidders invited to view a property and the subsequent successful bidder offered a property.
- 6.2.3 The officers from Rykneld Homes interviewed consistently advised the panel that bidders were contacted when they made a number of bids unsuccessfully. Whilst there was no evidence that this was not routinely happening two tenants who were interviewed said that they had made a large number of bids without success but when they were finally contacted the officer was under the impression that they had only made two. They also said initially they were unclear that they could bid for Housing Association properties. The panel did not have any collaborative evidence to assess whether this was an exception but include the comment for information purposes only.
- 6.2.4 Comments were made regarding management lets. There was a general feeling that these were not well received by tenants because seeing the property on the general list raised people's expectations but then they became unavailable. It was acknowledged that these were necessary and legitimate allocations. A suggestion was made that these properties would be better advertised in a separate section.
- 6.2.5 There was a couple of other areas where suggestions for improvement were made by stakeholders. The question was asked whether hard to let properties could be clearly advertised in newsletters so people can bid for them knowing their circumstances. The provision of more detailed adverts so people can make informed bids was also raised. This might help the refusal rate. Additionally, wider publicity of the exchange list/ facility was put forward and timescales made more prominent on relet properties being decorated.

- 6.2.6 The panel received a very informative presentation on the Choice Based Letting website including a practical demonstration of working through the process. It was felt that this would be very useful for other members and help their understanding of how the system worked. This could also help them deal with queries raised from constituents.
- 6.2.7 Another improvement discussed was that consideration be given to how more help could be provided for younger tenants. For example looking at their profile could improve tenancy failure rates. A view was expressed that some young people did not get the support they needed early on and this could impact upon their tenancy later on.
- 6.2.8 A questionnaire had been sent to a number of agencies to seek their views on how the system worked for their clients. On the whole the response received was positive about the access and functionality of the system. Women fleeing violence commented that in their experience most women using the Choice Move Scheme find it fine and considered the process for the most part fair, open and transparent. One issue raised was that it was not always possible for women fleeing violence to have all the required documents available and they hoped the verification process allows for this.
- 6.2.9 The Housing Options Manager referred to figures from 2010 that showed that dealing with homelessness cost £5,500 per household whereas to prevent homelessness the cost was £1500. Following the downturn in the economy, coupled with other factors such as the impact of welfare reforms, there has been a noticeable increase in presentations to the Housing Options Team.

## **7. Conclusions**

- 7.1 The review panel heard views from a wide selection of stakeholders during this review. On the whole they concluded that the Choice Base Lettings system was working well and was generally understood by bidders. There were many examples provided of efforts Rykneld Homes were making to communicate with its stakeholders and support vulnerable groups.
- 7.2 However, there were some areas for further improvement. These were mainly concerned with reviewing how information was provided for bidders and enhancing the arrangements in place for vulnerable people.

## 8. Stakeholders Engaged During the Review

Lee Bloomfield	Director of Operations - Rykneld Homes
Angela Smith	Housing and Support Services Manager - Rykneld Homes
Rebecca Slack	Housing Strategy and Enabling Manager - North East Derbyshire District Council
Carl Griffiths	Private Sector and Housing Options Manager - North East Derbyshire District Council
Val Denham	Housing Options Officer - Rykneld Homes
Councillor E A Hill	Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing Strategy and Social Inclusion

Focus Group of bidders

Questionnaire to external agencies