

# Norwich City Council

## SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

### BRIEFING PAPER for meeting to be held on 13th November 2008

#### Impact of Choice Based Letting on Void Turnaround Times of Council homes

##### Background

1. The Government have given clear instructions to Local Authorities and Housing Associations to change the way in which properties within social rented housing are let. With this in mind the Greater Norwich Housing Sub-Region decided an effective Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme would bring considerable benefits to applicants, the local authorities and Landlords. Following a successful bid for government funding to develop and implement a sub-regional CBL system, the Greater Norwich Home Options scheme went live on 29 November 2007.

##### Impact to Void turnaround times

2. Now that CBL has been live for some months, an analysis of void turnaround times over a 6 month period has been completed and compared with the same six month period of last year.

Month 07/08	Amount of properties let	Live turnaround figure		Month 06/07	Amount of properties let	Live turnaround figure
December	108	26 days		December	119	59 days
January	80	33 days		January	113	64 days
February	103	31 days		February	125	48 days
March	126	22 days		March	90	54 days
April	92	26 days		April	106	52 days
May	79	26 days		May	102	46 days
Totals	588	Average 27 days			623	Average 54 days

Note: Above times are LIVE figures, recalculated to work within Calendar days and not working days as previously for 06/07.

On the face of it the above table shows a considerable improvement to the void turnaround time, however, it is important to note that considerable work had gone into improving the process and performance of the void turnaround and so not all improvements are as a result of the implementation of CBL. If an analysis of the turnaround figures six month prior to CBL is made (which coincide with a time when improved working procedures were taking place), it shows that the implementation of CBL resulted in a 4 day improvement, however some 100 fewer properties were let during that period. Please see table below:

Month 07/08	Amount of properties re-let	Live turnaround figure
July	115	40
August	112	32
September	107	30
October	125	28
November	114	30
December	108	26
Totals	681	Average 31 days

### **CBL benefits**

3. The reduction of 4 days within the letting time of properties can be attributed to the stream lined offer process that CBL presents. Prior to CBL offers were decided by NCC staff and despatched singularly to individual applicants. Monitoring feedback from applicants of offers made was very limited and time intensive. Under the CBL process the top five eligible applicants for any given property are invited to a multi-viewing of the unit, if the top applicant refuses it is offered to the next highest applicant and so on. This process saves considerable time, especially for those properties which have historically been more difficult to let because of their location or type.

### **Issues with CBL**

4. If the property is not accepted by any of the first five applicants, officers within the Home Options Team compile a second short-list. Due to the weekly advertisement cycle of CBL, it is imperative that this work is prioritised, as any

delay will lead to a requirement for the property to be re-advertised with a subsequent 17 days being added to the void turnaround time.

The move to allow applicants a further 48 hours after a viewing, to decide whether or not they wish to accept a property, is adding extra days to the void turnaround time. This is further compounded if after the 48 hours the applicant decides not to accept property. However, giving applicants time to make, what is a very important decision, is good practice and affords longer term benefits of contributing to agendas such as the creation of sustainable communities.

## **Conclusion**

5. The CBL process has helped to streamline the void process but as with most new systems it is not without its problems. CBL is however a more transparent and customer focused way of allocating social housing, giving applicants choice and autonomy in deciding where they want to live.

## **Accessibility of Home Options**

6. Choice Based Lettings schemes which place the onus on the applicant to make a bid for the property of their choice, represent a significant departure from old style allocations policies, where the individual is a passive recipient of a paternalistic system of matching applicant to property. Concerns about the ability of less able applicants to access such systems have however been widespread.
7. During the development stage of Home Options the scheme's Project Manager, set up a Vulnerable Users Working Group, where the views of both future vulnerable users and the agencies who work with and support such applicants, were sought in order to overcome potential barriers to individuals accessing the scheme. Before the scheme was launched over 400 individuals from across Greater Norwich were trained on how the scheme works. Amongst this 400 were included staff from a huge array of agencies who work with vulnerable clients. In addition every household on the scheme received a comprehensive 'Scheme User Guide', detailing exactly how the scheme works. This guide was described by the Housing Quality Network, who recently carried out a mock inspection of the Council's Landlord Services, as 'very helpful'. During the summer of 2007, the Home Options team began work on compiling an 'Assisted User' list, made up of those who without further assistance would not be able to access the scheme. This included housebound individuals without internet access and who it would be necessary to send details of advertised properties on a weekly basis.
8. In April 2008 the scheme's Partnership Board, raised concerns about the numbers of households who despite being eligible to bid, had not done so. At

that time only 39% of those eligible to bid had placed a bid. This percentage was not untypical of schemes throughout the country. In response to this, a short letter and questionnaire was sent out to all households in the gold and silver bands and to all households registered in need of sheltered housing irrespective of their banding status. In total 1,486 households in Norwich received this mailing of which 677 completed and returned the questionnaire. The results to questions were as follows:

**Do you know about the council's Home Options scheme?**

	Yes	No	Total	Percentage 'No'
All ages	462	118	580	20%
Over 60's only	298	86	384	22%

**Do you know you have to bid for properties instead of waiting for them to be offered to you?**

	Yes	No	Total	Percentage 'No'
All ages	426	158	584	27%
Over 60's only	277	110	387	28%

**Do you still wish to be on the housing register?**

	Yes	No	Total	Percentage 'No'
All ages	535	77	612	13%
Over 60's only	342	67	409	16%

**I did not know I should be bidding, I was waiting for an offer**

All ages	129
Over 60's only	92

**I do not know how to see which properties are available**

All ages	171
Over 60's only	133

**I do not know how to bid**

All ages	172
Over 60's only	128

**I know how to bid but I am not able to do so**

All ages	72
Over 60's only	49

**I have seen the properties and know how to bid but have not seen a property that I like yet)**

All ages	133
Over 60's only	71

These figures clearly show that those aged 60 and over are less likely to know how to bid or view properties using CBL than those aged under 60. This may be linked with the comments received from those aged 60 and over, a significant proportion of which state that they have 'no Internet access' or 'do not know how to use the Internet'. It seems that this age group are less aware of the other options available to them for accessing the scheme believing it to be purely Internet based and therefore not accessible to them.

The final part of the questionnaire invited individuals to leave a comment, these have been split into the following categories:

- Not wanting to move at present
- Can't use a computer/no access to a computer
- Have been away/unwell so has not bid
- Nothing suitable so far
- Doesn't understand the bidding process
- Understand process but need/can't get help
- Didn't receive information about the scheme/bidding
- Have since received help from Home Options/family member
- Can't get to properties
- No longer at this address
- Other

In response to this short but highly informative customer feedback the following amendments have been made to the service.

- All new applicants to the scheme over the age of 60 or who have indicated on their application form that they have a physical or mental disability are telephoned as part of the assessment process to enquire whether they will need assistance with the bidding process.
- All individuals who indicated through the questionnaire that they did not understand the process were telephoned and sent another copy of the scheme user guide.
- Through feedback from the questionnaire the Home Options Team compiled a 'very assisted list' of individuals who need special care and support in accessing the system, this can on occasion include the placing of bids on individuals' behalf.

- The weekly property brochure is being redesigned to make it more user friendly.
- Every opportunity is being taken to promote the scheme, from November's edition of Tenant Talk to Citizen and the Council's Sheltered Housing Forum.
- When promoting the scheme all articles detail the alternative methods of accessing the scheme, with the website now mentioned as the last method. In the past the website was always listed first. We now realise that this emphasis on the website has inadvertently restricted access for certain individuals.
- A full Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out on the scheme and officers are working through removing any barriers which may restrict access for clients.
- Officers are exploring the potential of Digital TV as a method for some older people and vulnerable households to view properties and make bids. This method of accessing the scheme has been available since March 2008, however, it has to date been underused.