

Appendix A. Progress against the 25 recommendations of the Sustainable Scrutiny Review of Choice based lettings.

Recommendation 1: *That a Sub-regional Choice based Letting (CBL) scheme is not supported unless it can be demonstrated that its introduction will have a positive impact on the availability of housing in the Borough.*

Complete- Reported as no further action required

Recommendation 2: *That proposals are put forward to ensure that all Housing Associations in the Borough release 50% of their empty properties for allocation through Key Choices.*

Reported as completed. All RSLs operating in Rotherham provide 50% nominations. This is monitored through quarterly performance meetings with each RSL. Housing Associations with more than 250 units/bedspaces is required to complete a log of lettings on a digital software database called COntinuous REcording System (CORE). The number of nominations is recorded on CORE and the results are considered at the performance meetings. At least 5 of RSL's offer 100% nominations, including South Yorkshire Housing Association, Archers, Anchor, Sadelok and Great Places. RMBC have 100% nominations with all new build housing association properties. 100% nominations for move on accommodation and are working with Supporting People accommodation providers to raise awareness of availability.

Recommendation 3: *That the Allocations Policy makes explicit reference that the caring responsibilities of non-domicile carers can be taken into consideration when determining the applicant's housing category.*

Reported as completed. The Allocation Policy now makes reference to the Adult social care assessment through revised Allocation Policy procedures. This has improved the outcome for the customer as following assessment of their application in respect of requesting to move to provide support; a priority will be awarded if the following information is received:

- Assessment identifies that care and support is given to the customer daily
- Care given must be personal care e.g. assisting with bathing, dressing, medication etc.
- Confirmation of the support given to be obtained by Social Care Assessment (if one undertaken by Adult Services)
- Distance to provide care and family commitments will be taken into account

Recommendation 4: *That this Scrutiny Panel receives further reports on how under-occupancy in social housing can be addressed.*

Reported as completed. On 1st March 2010 Cabinet Member for Housing and Neighbourhoods and on 11th March Sustainable Scrutiny Panel considered an under occupancy report and gave approval to introduce under occupancy incentives to encourage tenants that are under occupying large Council houses to downsize.

Recommendation 5: *That the impact of the Allocations Policy is regularly monitored by this Scrutiny Panel.*

Reported as continuous: Key Choices continues to provide regular briefings to Members on changes to the Allocation Policy. An “All Member Seminar” regarding the Allocation Policy was held at the Bailey Suite in January 2010.

Recommendation 6: *That further reports are presented to the Scrutiny Panel on options for social housing (including the future options for Council Housing)*

Reported as complete for the purpose of the CBL scrutiny review: The options appraisal process for council housing management is currently being scoped out and once it is clear what options are under consideration, appropriate reporting processes will be determined. Progress reports relating to 2010 Rotherham Ltd’s performance on managing empty homes will be provided to Scrutiny Panel as required.

Recommendation 7: *That action taken towards the recommendations of 2010 Rotherham Ltd’s empty homes service review ‘every day counts’ (April 2009) be monitored and reported back to the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Panel in due course.*

Reported as complete for the purpose of the CBL scrutiny review: A report was presented to Scrutiny Panel on progress with the recommendations from the Scrutiny review of void turnaround times, on 3rd June 2010. Recommendation 7 was to complete the ‘every day counts’ action plan and report back on progress. The only remaining action is to review the process of backdating tenancy commencement dates – this is now underway and progress will be reported back to Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Panel later in the year.

Recommendation 8: *That a system for the introduction of ‘real-time’ feedback be introduced as a matter of urgency. This feedback should include property specific information, relating to which need group it will be offered to and an indication of the length of time on the housing register needed to be able to qualify for the shortlist.*

Reported as 'on target': Abrisas an ICT Software solution has now been procured and is being reconfigured inline with Rotherham's Allocation Policy. The expected completion date is December 2010. The software package will allow customers to bid for properties that they are eligible for and provide real-time lettings feedback, giving the customer a queue position.

Recommendation 9: *That robust measures are put in place to ensure that the Housing Register is up to date, accurate and effective database of customers. To support this, that a random check of cases takes place throughout the year to ensure that the database is continuing to be effective.*

Reported as continuous: On 14th December 2010 Cabinet Member for Housing and Neighbourhoods considered a report "**Rotherham's Housing Register**" which outlined the current position regarding the Housing Register in Rotherham and included information regarding best practice. Progress made includes:

- A bi monthly training programme for staff within 2010 Rotherham Ltd and the Council has been implemented to raise understanding of inputting and updating of housing applications
- The Abrisas system includes the housing register module which will manage the housing register; each application will be reviewed annually.
- Weekly reports have been developed to inform of real- time numbers on housing register, bidders and non bidders.
- Weekly reporting tools have been developed that highlights "inputting errors." The officer who has made the error is contacted to discuss, if there is a training issue appropriate support/training is implemented.
- Random checks of applications are undertaken by the Housing options Coordinator. The checks monitor input error, mandatory information such as full name, date of birth, address and ethnicity and additional information recorded on the "notes screen."

Recommendation 10: *That the current appeals procedure against removal and/or re-assessment of registration date, be reviewed to ensure that they are adequately meeting the needs of customers, and that this system is clearly outlined to applicants.*

Reported as complete: Progress made; Information regarding the Housing Register Review process is now included in the Allocation Policy Summary Booklet .

Recommendation 11. *That a review of the effectiveness of the Key Choices Property management is undertaken.*

Reported as complete: A review of this service was finalised in February 2010. This was undertaken by the Home Services Manager in conjunction with the Private Sector Manager and the Finance department. A five year business plan

has been revised and maps out the strategic direction for The Key Choices Property Management team (KCPM) – formerly known as the Rotherham Quality Landlord (RQL) for the period April 2009 to March 2014.

Recommendation 12: *That full equality monitoring of successful and unsuccessful bidders is undertaken (not just on the basis of ethnicity) to inform service improvement and that the Equality Impact Assessment is updated on the basis of this information.*

Reported as complete: An Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) has been completed. The strengths are that there are consolidated accountable teams ensuring a consistent service for all customers, adverts give clear information relating to the property, rent details and local area, there are clear service standards which have been reviewed and updated with stakeholders. Customers completed the equalities monitoring questions on the Fair and Flexible questionnaire, 88.9% answered this question, 70% were female, 64% were between the ages of 18 to 54, 14% had a long term disability, 14% were Carers, 92% were White British and 3.4% declared they were lesbian or gay, and 0.9% declared they were bi-sexual.

Recommendation 13. *Explore whether an alternative title to “Direct Homes” can be developed which is more ‘user friendly’, descriptive of its purpose and is easily understood by the public.*

Reported as no further action required. During November 2009 a consultation exercise focussed on Direct Homes. This captured customers understanding of Direct Homes, customers told us that they understood what a “Direct Home” was and no alternative name changes were made. The recent changes to the allocation of low demand bungalows have substantially reduced the numbers of direct homes and have practically eradicated them.

Recommendation 14. *That work is undertaken to improve the information given to existing and potential applicants to ensure that there are clear, simple instructions about how and where to bid (so customers bid on properties that they are interested in); and the rationale for prioritisation of bids*

Reported as complete: Progress made:

- Reality Checks regarding the information given to existing and potential applicants are undertaken by the Service Quality Team through Customer to Customer questionnaires at Key Choices Property Shop on a monthly basis
- A Summary guide which details a step by step guide has been reviewed and republished. This is displayed at the Key Choices Property Shop and Neighbourhood Offices and is included with the acknowledgement letter sent to new applicants.

- Develop an occupancy level guide. This is posted out to the customer with a housing application acknowledgement letter and is also included in the training schedule.
- Details of what type of accommodation is in each locality of Rotherham is available on and this is also displayed in a range of outlets.
- An explanation to customers of what properties they are entitled to is a design feature of Abritas which is expected to be in operation March 2011. This will help customers avoid wasted bids and increase the understanding what type of properties they are eligible to bid for. i.e The system wont allow single people to bid for houses as they are not eligible for this type of family accommodation.
- Key Choices are working closely with Children and Young People Services in the development of a Joint Protocol for 17/17 year olds who need accommodation and support. A project group has been established to work closely with the Early Intervention team to develop information about leaving home which will targeted at 16/17 year old. As part of the consultation process other agencies who work with young people such as Rush house, Action Housing and Action for Children will be involved. The joint protocol will be completed by December 2010.

Recommendation 15: *That the website is redesigned using best practice from other authorities. As part of this redesign, the feasibility of 'virtual tours' and links with other public services should be explored.*

Reported as complete: Other Local Authority website have been researched. We have utilised best practice from a variety of sources and the Key Choices website now includes; still photo shots have been taken of areas of the Borough, the website has links to information for the local areas on the individual property adverts; information is retrieved through "Up my Street, Council Tax Band, there are links to Planning with details of planning applications in the local area. Virtual tours are a design feature of Abritas, however the feasibility of virtual tours may not be practicable as the advertisements are produced whilst the previous tenant is still in occupation.

Other actions include:

- Additional customer self service telephone lines have been installed in the Property Shop
- Due to the increase in volume of customers accessing the Property Shop, the layout of the shop floor has been reorganised. Comments from customers and staff have been positive, citing that improvements with the layout have made the shop more customer friendly by improving customer flow.

Key Choices Property Shop



Recommendation 16: That systems are put in place to 'quality assure' the information published via the web and other avenues to ensure consistency.

Reported as completed: Quality checking systems are in place to ensure all property adverts are quality checked and signed off by the Housing Options Manager before publishing. Fortnightly meetings with 2010 Empty Homes Manager and Housing Options Manager have been implemented. Quarterly programme of reality checks are implemented and conducted by the Customer Inspectors the results are published in a Customer Excellence report.

Recommendation 17 Customer feedback forms should be located in a more prominent position on all web-pages, including those hosted on the 2010 Rotherham Ltd website.

Reported as completed: The feedback form has been moved to a more prominent position on the Key Choices Website

Recommendation 18 That consideration be given to giving fuller descriptions of properties, including indication of garden sizes.

Reported as completed: The property adverts have been reviewed and now includes the following information; room sizes, type of adaptations, property type and number of bedrooms, if the property is furnished or not, if pets are allowed or not, local lettings policies, utility suppliers, eligibility rules i.e. families and couples are eligible for houses. The garden description includes open or enclosed – to front and rear. Further information regarding the size of the garden is to be requested from the Empty Homes team within 2010 Rotherham Ltd at the next liaison meeting. Still photographs are also displayed.

Recommendation 19: That the weekly results sheet also reports the status of previously advertised properties that are awaiting allocation.

Reported as complete: The weekly results sheet has been expanded to capture all voids where the property has been advertised. The results are published on the internet, in the Key Choices Property Shop and in Local neighbourhood Offices.

Recommendation 20: *That proposals are put forward to improve communications and working processes between Key Choices Team and 2010 Rotherham Ltd. This should include measures to ensure that bids received at outlying offices and by telephone are recorded and communicated.*

Reported as complete: Fortnightly liaison meetings have been established with the Housing Options Manager and Coordinator and 2010 Rotherham Ltd Empty Homes Manager and Voids Controller. Customers will be able to view the status of their previous bids on the new ICT CBL system. Mystery Shopping exercises and a Quarterly programme of reality checks have been implemented and conducted by the Customer Inspectors. The mystery shopping exercises have awarded the Property Shop have awarded “Gold Status”. The full details of the inspection results are published quarterly as part of a “Customer Excellence report for Independent Living.

Recommendation 21: *That information given out at Neighbourhood Offices is comprehensive and consistent. To support this, training should be undertaken with relevant officers in central and Neighbourhood Offices to ensure that they are aware of current developments and processes; this should be updated on a regular basis to address any issues of staff turnover.*

Reported as complete: Considerable resources have been committed to train staff on all lettings issues. A bi monthly timetable of free training is offered by Key Choices team to all RMBC and 2010 Rotherham Ltd staff that provides advice to customers regarding rehousing. The training includes the Allocation Policy, Choice based letting processes and ICT training of how to register and update a housing application. The take up of the training has been high.

Other actions include:

- Further work has also taken place to streamline systems and procedures with 2010 staff.
- A reporting tool has been developed which highlights errors that individual staff have made when inputting a housing application. The staff member who has made the error is contacted by the Key Choices team and actions taken – i.e. if there is a training need, the team will organize work shadowing or attendance to the training sessions.
- All new 2010 Rotherham Ltd staff whose role is offering customers advice regarding rehousing now attends a full day in the Property Shop as part of their induction.

- Implement monthly mystery shopping activities at Neighbourhood Offices conducted by the Customer Inspection Service team. The results are published in the Customer Excellence report.
- The Service Quality team are undertaking customer journey mapping through Home Truths Diaries.

Recommendation 22. *Ensure relevant and appropriate information about local lettings policies and the housing history of prospective tenants are communicated to RSLs/private landlords.*

Reported as complete: All Local lettings Policies are reviewed every 6 months and these are published on the internet. Currently the RSLs undertake their own interviews with customers following receipt of the shortlist. A common housing application has been developed in conjunction with Housing Associations. The new housing application will be launched in conjunction with Abris in March 2011. The application form includes a joint information sharing protocol which will comply with data protection legislation and will enable each RSL's to view the housing history of prospective tenants.

Recommendation 23: *That the process for advertising properties via local media is examined to ensure it is the best use of staff resources and provides value for money.*

Reported as complete: To ensure we get better value for money, processes have been established to ensure that the properties are advertised within the weekly cycle giving careful consideration to ensure the property is advertised in the termination period ensuring that there is no impact on void relet times.

We are constantly reviewing the advertising costs. The cost for the Key Choices Property page is £500 for each page per week (distributed to 29,000 households) as opposed to £1000 per week for the mailing list, (distributed to 1,000 households) and £1600 (which includes potential discount of 20%) for Rotherham News.

An analysis of how many customers purchase the advertiser to specifically view Key Choices Property page has been undertaken.

Profile and volume of customers:

- Older People tend to prefer to use the Advertiser to view adverts
- 1006 customers were asked through an online and face to face survey where they currently look to find accommodation in Rotherham, 27% (279 people) told us that they only used the Advertiser, 46% (464 people) used the Property Shop, 10% (110 people) used their Local Neighbourhood Office, 52% (526 people) the Key Choices website and (9& (91 people) didn't respond.

What we can do to get better value for money is:

- Review the frequency of advertising in the Rotherham Advertiser and utilise any savings to pay for a resettlement activity to assist customers offering advice on a range of housing options, including private rented, housing association and home ownership. This work will continue to be explored by the Key Choices Manager.

Recommendation 24: Review the information sent to all Councillors so that they are well placed to answer any housing queries from their constituents. Drawing on good practice from several wards, Members should be encouraged to work closely with Housing Champions to organise 'housing surgeries' to address specific issues about the application process.

Reported as complete: The information has been reviewed and currently 2010 Rotherham Ltd provide information on empty properties at a local level to Elected Members and Key Choices. This has been implemented by linking with Neighbourhood Champions weekly estate management updates. Letting results are published on Key Choices web page and emailed direct to Elected Members.

Recommendation 25: That regular Member briefing/ information sessions on housing related matters are held, particularly following any significant changes to policy.

Reported as continuous:

- Briefing session for Sustainable Scrutiny Panel regarding the impact of the Allocation Policy and proposals for change was undertaken on 10th December 2009 and an All Member Seminar on 12th January 2010.
- On 31st July 2009, Communities and Local Government issued a consultation paper regarding the Allocation of Social housing. The consultation paper was called "Fair and flexible - To ensure that we involved local residents in this debate we implemented a survey which captured the views of local communities. Over one thousand customers completed and returned a survey/ questionnaire; the results have been clearly analysis, and are reflected in proposed changes to the Allocation Policy and Local Lettings Policies. The Allocation Policy has now been amended inline with the demands and aspirations of local people, whilst also giving priority to those in the greatest housing need. The changes that have been adopted are; the introduction of a rural priority lettings policy; we have set aside a proportion of vacancies for applicants in employment; we have increased the quota of properties advertised to the General Band from 10% to 20%. An Elected Member Briefing has been distributed regarding the results of Fair and Flexible consultation.

- Continue with Community Surgeries which are lead by 2010 Rotherham Ltd in Neighbourhood Offices.