

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO CABINET MEMBER

1. Meeting:	SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL
2. Date:	16 TH SEPTEMBER 2010
3. Title:	<i>Choice Based Lettings – Improving the Service from a Customer Perspective</i>
4. Programme Area:	Neighbourhoods and Adult Services

5. Summary

This report provides details of progress made against the recommendations of the Sustainable Scrutiny Review into Choice Based Lettings (CBL) – *improving the service from a customer perspective*. All the recommendations of the CBL Scrutiny Review have been actioned. The report was initially endorsed by Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Panel and Performance and Scrutiny Overview Committee at their meetings of 16 July 2009 and 24 July 2009 respectively and Cabinet on 23rd September 2009. Progress against the actions was presented to Cabinet Member for Housing and Neighbourhoods on 30th November 2009, and later to Sustainable Scrutiny Panel during December 2009. It was agreed that a progress report would be provided in 6 months to both Cabinet Member next meeting on 19th July 2010) and then Sustainable Scrutiny Panel on 16th September 2010. (See Appendix A)

6. Recommendations

- **BOTH CABINET MEMBER AND SUSTAINABLE SCRUTINY PANEL AGREES THAT THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SUSTAINABLE SCRUTINY REVIEW HAVE NOW BEEN ADDRESSED BY RMBC AND 2010 ROTHERHAM LTD.**

7. Proposals and details

7.1 Overview

Scrutiny reviews were carried out of void turnaround times and the Choice-Based Lettings (CBL) process during 2009. The aim of the scrutiny review was to find out the customer experience of the Choice Based Lettings (CBL) Service and to identify any gaps in the service and any areas of work for further development. The term “choice based lettings” is used to mean that an authority uses an advertising scheme as part of its housing allocation policies.

The review report made 25 recommendations, and progress was reported back to Cabinet Member and Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Panel during November and December 2009, at which point all of the 25 recommendations had been actioned. It was agreed that a further progress report would be provided in June 2010. A summary of progress is provided at section 7.2.

7.2 Progress against the recommendations of the scrutiny review

A summary of progress is listed below with a more detailed analysis outlined in Appendix A.

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.

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

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

Reported as completed.

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

Reported as continuous.

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 continuous: Quarterly reports submitted on progress against 2010 Rotherham Ltd's improvement plan, and a final report will be presented in late 2010 on future delivery of council housing services.

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 completed. The Scrutiny Review of Voids was reported with details progress to Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Panel on 3rd June 10.

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'

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 'audit' of cases takes place throughout the year to ensure that the database is continuing to be effective.*

Reported as continuous work.

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.

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

Reported as complete.

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.

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 complete.

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

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

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.

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.

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

Reported as completed.

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

Reported as complete.

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 completed.

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 completed.

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 completed.

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 completed.

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 completed.

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

Reported as continuous reporting.

8. Financial implications

8.1 A number of the review recommendations have incurred financial implications. These included the review of the housing register and provision of more information, such as the Allocation Policy Summary booklet and additional space for advice published in the Rotherham Advertiser property page. This has required the Key Choices service to carry out further exploration to identify funding streams. The opportunity for other landlords to promote their properties with the Key Choices letting scheme, incurs additional costs for advertising and staffing resources. The costs of the revised Allocation Policy Summary Guides are £1600 and £350 (utilised when required) for an additional Property page in the Rotherham Advertiser.

8.2 Whilst increasing housing options consideration of all resource implications has been taken into account including the set up and annual costs of ICT CBL software solutions. The set up costs of Abris (€86K) has been funded in 2009/10 through the Housing Investment Programme and the annual support costs to manage a Common Housing Register and all aspects

of the Choice based lettings functions is funded through the Housing Revenue Account (£20K) However some of the costs will be offset by income generated by recharging other landlords advertising charges for properties other than nominations.

8.3 The opportunity for other landlords to promote their properties with the Key Choices letting scheme, incurs additional costs for advertising but these costs are recouped through recharging arrangements.

9. Risks and Uncertainties

9.1 There are risks associated with not utilising local media to market empty properties. The risks include meeting customer expectations, lack of understanding of the processes which affects the reputation of the Council associated with people waiting for a home, increasing the volume of face to face enquiries visiting the Key Choices Property Shop – currently averaging at 2000 customers each week and the number of telephone enquiries has increased to 100 per day.

9.2 Availability of affordable, quality housing is a key concern for customers and Elected Members. With high demand for housing, it is important that the process for allocation and letting is transparent otherwise it may damage the public perception of the Council and its partners.

10. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications

There are a range of policy and performance implications associated with this report:

Performance implications

- Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA)
- Impact on Performance measures such as NI 156 – “reduction in use of temporary accommodation
- 2010 - BVPI 212 targets
- Audit Commission’s Key Lines of Enquiry and TSA standards
- 2010 Improvement Plan,
- 2010 Void Management Processes.

Policy implications

- Community Strategy and Corporate Plan
- Housing Strategy
- Allocation Policy – Fair and Flexible guidance
- Homelessness Prevention Action Plan
- Single Conversation (Homes and Communities Agency)

11. Background Papers and Consultation

Background papers

- Scrutiny review report for Choice-Based Lettings process and Voids Scrutiny review (reported separately)
- HQN publication “ *What does excellence look like in Allocations and Lettings*”
- HQN publication” *Managing Housing Registers in England*”

Consultation

Officers within RMBC and 2010 Rotherham Ltd have been consulted on the content of this report. A range of information and evidence has been provided and included in the report from:

- The Sustainable Scrutiny Panel
- Customers through a Fair and Flexible survey – 1147 completed surveys
- Development and Solutions Group
- Independent Living (NAS) and 2010 Rotherham Ltd Away day which was focussed developing an improvement plan
- Neighbourhood and Adult Service’s Finance Manager

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