

Board

24 February 2009

Your Choice Homes Update

Report by Director of Tenancy Services

Decision and Information	Area Implications	All
Executive Summary	<p>This report updates Board on the planned programme of work with regards to lettings and Your Choice Homes (YCH). This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working in partnership with Newcastle City Council and other organisations to improve access to housing across all tenures • Working with partners to link housing options to employment and training • Improving mobility across the sub region • Increasing choice, opportunity, advice and support for those in the greatest need <p>This report also seeks Boards approval to establish a Local Lettings Plan to allocate new build bungalows. This will cover:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 bungalows in Throckley; • 2 bungalows in Coxlodge; • 13 bungalows in North Kenton. 	
Recommendations	<p>Board is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • comment on the scope of the programme of work; • approve the approach to the allocation of new build bungalows for rent. 	

Business Implications	
YHN Mission and Strategic Objectives	<p>This report supports all YHN Strategic Objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and care to communities • Three star excellent services • A quality workforce • Refurbishing and building homes
Value for Money/Efficiencies	<p>This underpins work being undertaken to ensure that we continue to deliver better and bespoke services to our customers using existing resources.</p>
Resources (financial, property, technological or	<p>It is envisaged that the majority of the work will be delivered within existing budgets.</p>

human)	<p>Additional resource may be required to support staff training and changes to documentation and IT systems due to some of the planned changes.</p> <p>We continue to explore external funding opportunities and through partnership working expect to realise efficiency savings.</p>
Impact on Services/Performance	The majority of the work is aimed at improving access to advice, information and support for customers, whilst improving their opportunities for housing. This will have a positive impact on the scope of what can be provided for customers and improve performance through a more co-ordinated joined up approach.
Outcomes for tenants/leaseholders	New and existing Tenants and Leaseholders will have a much more robust process, which recognises those in the greatest need for housing and ensures that they continue to have choice and opportunity bespoke to their needs and aspirations.
Risk (reputation, relationship)	<p>Failure to ensure that the lettings service meets emerging legislation and good practice will damage YHNs reputation and ability to sustain positive feedback from the Audit Commission in relation to Allocations.</p> <p>Failure to ensure that new build properties are let in a way that makes best use of stock and ensures sustainable communities will potentially damage YHNs reputation.</p>
Environmental	Processes being considered should ensure that the Lettings Service continues to minimise its impact on the environment.
Legal Implications	Failure to ensure that the Lettings Service meets legislation, guidance and good practice may open the organisation up to challenge.
Equality and Diversity	All changes will be subject to an EINA which will ensure equal access to all customers.
Stakeholder Involvement/Consultation (planned or already carried out)	Consultation is a major part of the planned work and will be integral to any changes to the service. This will include statutory consultation and planned consultation and involvement of key stakeholders.
Background papers	Your Choice Homes – Lettings Policy Lettings Programme Structure
Contact officers	John Urwin – Manager, Housing Needs/Your Choice Homes ext 22024

Your Choice Homes Update

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report gives an update on the work being carried out with regards to lettings and Your Choice Homes (YCH). This includes:
- Working in partnership with Newcastle City Council and other organisations to improve access to housing across all tenures, improve mobility across the sub region and increase choice and opportunity.
 - The proposed arrangements for the allocation of new build bungalows in the city.

2. Background

2.1 How the Policy Works

Your Homes Newcastle is the name given to the City Councils Lettings Policy. This is a Choice Based Lettings Policy (CBL). The Government defines CBL as 'allocation policies and procedures which incorporate an advertising scheme'.

We have operated the Lettings Policy since 2003. The policy was formed around seven key principles:

- To enable the customer to take the initiative to find a home by bidding for the homes that are available.
- To provide information about the social rented market to enable customers to make informed choices.
- To give information about the property and surrounding neighbourhoods.
- To ensure that systems are in place to support vulnerable groups.
- To have clear and transparent labelling of properties so that customers know who we will allocate a homes to.
- That the methods of communication are high quality and easy to understand.
- That at each stage of the process customers will be given bespoke housing advice and support.

The Government has recently released further guidance about operating a CBL policy and these will help shape the future direction of the policy. The only performance target set by the Government is for all councils to be operating a CBL scheme by 2010. However, they would also like to see:

- An emphasis on sub regional schemes with cross-boundary mobility.
- Partnerships and collaborations in the development and running of scheme with a wide range of agencies.
- Alignment of CBL with housing options.
- The incorporation of private rented stock.

The Your Choice Homes service can be accessed from any housing office, either in discussion with a member of staff or by using the IT terminals provided. We also run a Property Shop from a high quality city centre

location. Registrations and bids can be made online and in an average month 20% of bids are made by customers online. In addition, the Your Choice Homes website receives an average of 16,157 visitors a month. Information about available homes is available in the local evening newspaper, The Evening Chronicle and property posters are displayed in over 100 other locations across the city.

Customers are selected using a simple short-listing process which places those in the greatest need to the property at the top of the list.

2.2 Key Areas of Success

Your Choice Homes became the first CBL service in the country to be awarded a Charter Mark for excellent customer service in 2006.

It is the only CBL scheme in the Tyne and Wear region to advertise other Housing Association and Private Landlord properties. In addition, we also advertise and signpost customer to low cost homeownership schemes in the city.

YCH Chair the Tyne and Wear Sub Regional CBL Group and wrote a bid for funding to Communities and Local Government in October 2008. This was successful and we have secured £148,647 towards developing a sub regional approach to CBL across Tyne and Wear.

We have worked with customers to improve the information we provide. This ensures they are clear about how the scheme works, what accommodation is available to them and how long they are likely to wait for a home.

YCH was integral to the work which set up the Pathways Process, including the Hospital Discharge Post, which was first established by YCH.

Through the teams 'housing needs' function we work with the city council to understand the housing market and ensure that the Lettings Policy fits with their Housing Strategy and future plans for the city.

Our Health and Welfare Team, with seconded Health Professionals from Social Service, the Health Trust and PCT ensures that customers can live independently for as long as possible and that YHN assists in meeting the wider health and social care agenda.

2.3 Areas of Improvement

We are seeking to introduce the following service improvements:

- In April/May 09 a Mutual Exchange Scheme will be introduced via the Sub Regional CBL group.
- In February 09 a new approach to dealing with applications will improve performance across YHN.
- We have reviewed the approach to Housing Options with the council and a new delivery framework will be put in place in February 09.
- Work is ongoing with the Private Rented Project in Newcastle and across Tyne and Wear to strengthen access to private rented accommodation for our customers.
- We aim to introduce an under-occupation incentive scheme in April 2009.

3. Lettings Programme Structure

3.1 In partnership with the City Council, YHN reconfigured the programme of work in relation to Allocations and Lettings.

The purpose of this was to provide a structured and co-ordinated strategic approach to the City's housing allocation scheme, Your Choice Homes, by:

- monitoring delivery of the allocation scheme;
- responding to changes in legislation;
- understanding demand and supply for social housing and delivering appropriate responses to make best use of existing stock and maximising the availability of accommodation offered through Your Choice Homes;
- facilitating regeneration and tackling worklessness;
- ensuring the needs of vulnerable people are met;
- providing appropriate advice and support on housing options;
- working with sub regional partners to develop responses to housing need and create efficiencies/

3.2 Key Areas of Work

The programme has 8 key projects:

The objectives of these projects are to:

- Monitor demand and supply for social housing in order to identify actions required in terms of policy, delivery and commissioning to make best use of existing stock, meet housing needs, and create efficiencies.
- Develop a new allocation policy which responds to changes in the allocations code of guidance and identified drivers for change.
- Complete the regeneration and relocation process and determine a process for the delivery of local lettings policies required to help regenerate identified estates.
- Develop policies to free up or make best use of housing stock
- Ensure the allocation scheme is aligned with the homeless strategy to prevent homelessness and ensure people are supported in finding and maintaining accommodation.
- Work with sub regional partners to improve mobility, in particular to address employability and care needs and to reduce procurement costs.
- Determine a service model for providing advice and support on housing options to those who need it.

3.3 **Benefits of the Programme of Work for our Customers**

Benefits will include:

- We will have an improved understanding of housing demand and supply of social homes to ensure we take timely and appropriate action.
- We will deliver an allocation policy which complies with relevant legislation, takes account of those in the greatest need and contributes to sustainable communities.
- We will consider introducing local lettings plans/arrangements which create sustainable communities, which will be balanced but take account of local needs.
- We will introduce a designation process, tenant's incentive scheme and increase the availability of private rented accommodation advertised through Your Choice Homes to improve opportunity for customers.
- We will ensure that vulnerable people are helped to access and maintain housing via the housing pathway, gateway and family intervention project.
- We will ensure that people will have greater access to housing through a sub regional mutual exchange scheme which will reduce the demand on CBL. Shared procurement costs will result in reduced costs for YHN and will include shared good practice and information sharing protocols.
- We will determine the best delivery mechanism for housing advice and support on housing options.

4. **New Build Bungalows – Local Lettings Plan**

The allocation of the new bungalows gives YHN an opportunity to meet a number of objectives. These include:

- Maximising use of stock in the area
- Creating opportunities for customers with a connection to the area
- Supporting community sustainability

The City Councils Lettings Policy sets out provision for YHN Area Boards to agree Local Lettings Plans. Given this in the first Local Lettings Plan to be established Main Board is being asked for approval.

4.1 **Local Lettings Plan - Proposal**

All the new build bungalows on the 3 sites will be advertised via the Your Choice Homes scheme and will initially be short listed in line with the Lettings Policy, giving preference to those in urgent and immediate need to move. However, for the new build properties only the following additional selection criteria will apply.

- First preference will be given to existing council tenants eligible for bungalow type accommodation, who live in the area (defined by the management area) or who have a connection to the area, where they are under occupying their home by 2 or more bedrooms.
- Second preference will be given to existing tenants eligible for bungalow type accommodation, who live in the area (defined by the management

area) or who have a specific connection to the area.

- Third preference will be given to any customer eligible for bungalow accommodation.

5. Consultation

- 5.1 In terms of the Lettings Programme extensive consultation will be carried out in the majority of the areas of work. This will not only satisfy statutory consultation. But also ensure that all stakeholders assist in informing service developing and understand the changes that are being made.

Newcastle City Council has been consulted with regards to the Local Lettings Plan and has agreed the approach being proposed.

6. Key areas for YHN and Board moving forward

- 6.1 There are a number of issues for YHN to consider which may be appropriate to bring to Board for further discussion. These include:

- New Lettings Policy and its impact

Board may wish to consider the impact on community groups, ICT systems, processes, literature and staff training.

- Sub Regional CBL

Board may wish to consider the new initiatives being recommended, progress made against the groups objectives and the outcomes for customers.

- Housing Options

Board may wish to consider the scope of the Housing Options Service, the benefits for our customers and for YHN, what partnerships will be established and the potential impact on staffing and structure.

- Regeneration and Relocation Policy

Board may wish to consider the impact of the City Councils approach to regeneration and relocation, the benefits and the potential issues for YHN in terms of stock management.

7. Recommendations

- 7.1 Board is recommended to:

- Comment on the Lettings Programme and mechanism for updating Board on progress.
- Agree the Local Lettings Plan for the new build bungalows.

8.0 Next Steps

- 8.1
- Begin implementation of Lettings Programme and identified actions
 - Local Lettings Policy will be used to let new build bungalows and incorporated in to ongoing work to review the Lettings Policy.