



Older People and Choice Based Lettings

A report from Overview & Scrutiny





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Reports that have been submitted to Council can be downloaded from www.birmingham.gov.uk/scrutiny.



Preface

By Councillor Susan Barnett

Chair Health and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee



In March 2012 the former Housing and Urban Renewal Overview and Scrutiny Committee completed its investigation into choice based lettings and older people. I am pleased to be able to now present the report and recommendations to Council.

Members embarked on this piece of work following a report in October 2011 which indicated that although many over 50s were registered to use Birmingham Home Choice, the Birmingham scheme by which applicants and tenants wishing to transfer can bid for available social housing, they were less likely to make bids than younger people. At that time in Band B, 57% of over 70s registered had not participated.

Our focus was on how older people can better access Birmingham Home Choice and our key recommendation is that the Directorate needs to be more proactive and consistently contact older people in the high priority bands who have not made a bid in the previous six months to ascertain why and, where necessary, provide further support and advice to enable them to participate.

We recognise the need to work smarter and recommend greater collaboration across Council Directorates and strengthening links with our partners to ensure that those who work with older people understand Birmingham Home Choice and can provide appropriate support.

This report recommends improving the information about available properties, in particular up to date information on any adaptations, so that those bidding on properties have sufficient information on which to place a bid. We would welcome consultation with users in this piece of work.

We note that Extra Care housing vacancies are not included on Birmingham Home Choice and suggest further work is undertaken to ensure greater consistency and clarity on the range of routes older people can access housing, including the Wise Move scheme, to ensure access is as transparent as possible.

Finally I would like to thank members of the former Housing and Urban Renewal Overview and Scrutiny Committee: Roger Harmer (Chair), Ken Wood, Councillor Vivienne Barton, Councillor Eddie Freeman, Councillor Shafique Shah, Councillor Ziaul Islam, Councillor Majid Mahmood, Councillor Iain Bowen and co-optees Connie Cooper- Jones, Maureen Inger and Joan Goodwin.

I would also like to thank in particular all those who gave evidence to the review and also the scrutiny officers.



Summary

In October 2011 Members of the former Housing and Urban Renewal Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a report on the good progress of Birmingham Home Choice. This is the choice based lettings scheme by which applicants and tenants wishing transfers can bid for available social housing. The information received indicated that although many over 50s were registered to use Birmingham Home Choice they are less likely to make bids than younger people. Members wished to investigate this and this report presents their findings and recommendations.

The roll out of Birmingham Home Choice since 2010 has been successful with over 10,000 lettings having taken place in this way. The properties included in the scheme are the majority of City Council homes (except in the extra care schemes), those of Midland Heart and Family Housing Association, plus the other registered social landlord properties for which the council has nomination rights.

A snap shot from the Homes and Neighbourhoods Directorate in October 2011 identified that 35% of current applicants had not participated in the choice based letting scheme by placing a bid. Our focus was on older people in priority Band B as they have significant housing needs and should have a good chance of being allocated a suitable home. However, in Band B just 20% of under 50s do not participate, compared to almost three times that (57%) of over 70s.

The Committee concluded that further steps could be taken by the Directorate to enable older people to participate in the bidding process. It found that following registration, the majority of applicants, including older people, are required to navigate the system and take control of the process themselves. This report recommends that monitoring and intervention is improved with regards to older people who are not participating. The Directorate needs to be more proactive and consistently contact older people who have not made a bid in the previous six months to ascertain why that is and, where necessary, provide support or advice.

The report recommends that further consultation be carried out with older people regarding their experiences of Birmingham Home Choice; the information required about properties with, or suitable for, adaptations; and whether changes can be made to the website to make it easier to use.

Members note a number of links with other Directorates and external partners which could be strengthened to ensure that people working with older people have an understanding of the system and to ensure that older people can get timely information and support. Within the Council this includes the Library Service and the Community Links Service (within Adults and Communities Directorate). Externally, this includes health workers.

The report recommends the Directorate review the Birmingham Home Choice helpline and access to the newsletter to assess whether older people's information and support needs are being met.

Finally, concerns were raised about there being different routes for older people to access housing (e.g. Wise Move and the Extra Care allocations process) in addition to Birmingham Home Choice. It is recommended this be reviewed to increase consistency and clarity.



Summary of Recommendations

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R01	That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing develops a more proactive approach to dealing with older people in the high priority bands A and B who have not participated in Birmingham Home Choice in the previous six months.	Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing	December 2012
R02	That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing explores what additional support could be made available to older people on the housing register to encourage a move within Birmingham Home Choice (building on the good practice existing within the Directorate of the Clearance and Wise Move teams) and the resource implications of this.	Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing	December 2012
R03	That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing consults with the over 60s on the housing register regarding their reasons for being on the register, satisfaction with the process and, if applicable, reasons for non-participation.	Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing	December 2012
R04	<p>That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing explores further opportunities for advertising Birmingham Home Choice and up-skilling Council staff and key partners to support older users to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying officers (including those in the Community Links Service) and partners who would benefit from a better understanding of Birmingham Home Choice; using and creating opportunities (including training and mailings of information) to up-skill them and encouraging them to cascade information; and implementing cost effective ways of informing them about the scheme on an ongoing basis; Encouraging officers to develop local solutions, building on existing networks and local knowledge, to advertise local voids and target marketing to eligible older people and professionals (such as GPs and District Nurses) working with older people; and Exploring the possibility of using care centres and other suitable venues for holding events to publicise the service to partners and local communities. 	Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing	December 2012



	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R05	That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing explores whether more needs to be done to ensure all older people have access to the Birmingham Home Choice property newsletter, such as sending it to care centres, and exploring the additional resources required of distributing the newsletter to more residents.	Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing	December 2012
R06	That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing reviews the existing Birmingham Home Choice helpline and its resourcing.	Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing	December 2012
R07	That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing explores how further information about property adaptations, scope for adaptations and suitability for older people could be provided through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consulting with users on improving the information on available properties; • Aligning the stock condition survey to meet this need and incorporating relevant information into the Birmingham Home Choice system; • Encouraging the development of local information alongside the stock condition survey to fill gaps over the five year survey period and to ensure that data is updated as appropriate; and • Increasing the scope of the symbols used in the Birmingham Home Choice property data to incorporate information relating to adaptations and suitability, whilst also ensuring that such information is provided in text form. 	Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing	December 2012
R08	That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing ensures there is on-going dialogue with the Library Service especially with regard to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Community Libraries Service Review and proposed opening hours; sharing information about weekly patterns on the Birmingham Home Choice web use, and any potential changes to the weekly bidding cycle; • Opportunities for extending information and support through the Home Library Service; and • Reviewing the use of the Property Shop in the central library, including quantifying its use and impact. 	Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing	December 2012
R09	That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing includes guidance in Birmingham Home Choice information on assisted and management bidding to help applicants with support needs.	Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing	December 2012
R10	That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing consults with older people regarding improving use of the website.	Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing	December 2012



	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R11	<p>That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing ensures access to housing for older people is as transparent as possible by exploring:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The opportunities for ensuring that all social housing options for older people are noted within Birmingham Home Choice publicity; • Whether it is possible to include any of the extra care housing vacancies within Birmingham Home Choice (whilst acknowledging the need to balance care needs); and • How links can be strengthened between landlord services and Wise Move to be able to promote the service to tenants who may be seeking to move to more suitable accommodation; provide additional support to such tenants to enable them to move; and facilitate consistent advertising of the support which Wise Move can offer. 	Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing	December 2012
R12	<p>That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reports progress towards the achievement of these recommendations to the Health and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee in December 2012. Subsequent progress reports will be scheduled by the Committee thereafter, until all recommendations are implemented. • Reports to Health and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the Directorate's own review of the first 12-18 months of the Birmingham Home Choice (an interim report in December 2012 and a final report by February 2013). • Reports to Health and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee regarding the findings and the action plan relating to older people following updating of the Equality Assessment for Birmingham Home Choice. 	Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing	December 2012



1 The Aim of the Report

- 1.1 This work commenced after a report to the former Housing and Urban Renewal Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 20th October 2011. Members were concerned as there appeared to be evidence that participation rates by older people in Birmingham Home Choice is lower than other age groups. They wanted to investigate this and to determine, if it is a systematic problem, and if so, what should be put in place to address it.
- 1.2 That report indicated that older people participate in the system significantly less than the under 50s. Our focus was on applicants in the Band B priority group (those with severe but less urgent housing needs) as those are people who should have a good opportunity of obtaining a property.
- 1.3 This data showed the numbers who had signed up to the scheme, but had not participated (made a bid). Only 20% of under 50s had not participated, compared to 39% of 50-60s and rising to a majority (57%) of over 70s.
- 1.4 This review draws on that report; an evidence gathering session on 9th January 2012; a demonstration of the website and automated telephone line on 14th February; attendance by the Chairman at a City-wide Older People's Reference Group meeting; and research carried out by the Scrutiny Office on how choice based letting schemes operate elsewhere.
- 1.5 The key questions which the Committee set out to review were:
 - How are older people informed about Birmingham Home Choice?
 - Are the formats in which properties are advertised accessible for older people?
 - Are there any other processes that older people have to use to secure social housing?
 - Are the bidding methods accessible to older people?
 - How are older people proactively identified and offered support and how are services working together to do this?
 - What are the experiences of choice based letting schemes across the country?
- 1.6 This report considers options for older people; participation rates and barriers; and the information and support available to older people. The key concern which emerged related to lack of intervention or contact by the Directorate if an older person is not engaging in the bidding process.
- 1.7 This report makes a number of recommendations to the Cabinet Member. The Committee Members acknowledge that the Directorate is undertaking a review of the first year or so of the scheme during 2012. Members are keen to have an input into this and expect the review to take account of these recommendations.



2 Background: Choice and Older People

- 2.1 Choice based lettings are part of the 'personalisation' of public services agenda as they place the onus of matching vacancies on the home seeker, rather than the landlord. This approach also enables social landlords to make best use of the housing stock and address under-occupation. The Department for Communities and Local Government has identified the term 'choice based lettings scheme' to mean that:
- “An authority has adopted allocation policies and procedures which incorporate an advertising scheme.”¹
- 2.2 Previous work by the Committee has highlighted the need for access to housing for older people. In particular, the *Housing Provision for Older People* Scrutiny Review looked at how Council Directorates were working together to address the challenges of an ageing society. The recommendations included the refurbishment of sheltered housing and increasing support for independent living to meet the changing aspirations of older people.
- 2.3 During the course of this review, the Minister for Housing (Grant Shapps) announced the New Deal for Older People and urged local authorities to work to ensure that they give “elderly people more choice and control over where they live.”²
- 2.4 The theme of preventative work is a key part of the Council's current priorities. Research indicates some of the long term savings which housing services and appropriate advice and information services can make.³ For example, the average cost to the public sector of a fractured hip is £28,665. This amounts to almost five times the average cost of a major housing adaptation (£6,000) and 100 times the cost of fitting hand and grab rails to prevent falls. Adapting a property to enable independent living will generally pay for itself in 12 months. After that it can benefit social care budgets from £25,000 to £80,000 per year. Through such investment, cutting the numbers of older people going into institutions by one percent can save the country as much as £3.8 billion.
- 2.5 Those costs refer to adaptations, but ensuring that older people can also move to properties most suitable to their needs can also generate such savings. Additionally, there are financial and social benefits of freeing up larger properties.

¹ Department for Communities and Local Government (2008) *Allocation of Accommodation: Choice-based Lettings Code of Guidance for Local Housing Authorities*

² Department for Communities and Local Government (17 Jan 2012) *Press Release: Councils should help older people live at home for longer*. At: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/2067493>

³ Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research (2011) *Firststop Evaluation Phase 2 Source Document*. At: <http://www.firststopcareadvice.org.uk/news/item-report-backs-governmentfunded-older-peoples-advice-service--b03da.aspx?ao=1>



3 Background: Birmingham Home Choice

Development of Choice Based Lettings

- 3.1 Choice based lettings was piloted in north-west Birmingham as Urban Choice starting in 2004. In February 2010 it was then introduced across the city as Birmingham Home Choice, initially with one and two bedroom properties. In September 2010 it then expanded in scope to include the majority of the Council's housing stock (including sheltered housing). It also includes 50% of the housing stock of housing associations with whom the Council has nomination agreements. Most recently, adapted properties have been included from January 2012. However, Extra Care Schemes are not included.
- 3.2 At the time of writing there have been 10,097 lettings through Birmingham Home Choice. Of these, 930 were to those aged 60 or over (9%).

Using Birmingham Home Choice

- 3.3 Birmingham Home Choice enables households on the housing register, or existing tenants who wish to move, to bid for available properties that they would like to live in. The process is as follows:
- Applicants register with Birmingham City Council (or existing tenants of Family Housing Association or Midland Heart wishing a transfer can register with their landlord) and are then issued with a user ID and pin number;
 - Available property is advertised on the Birmingham Home Choice website, in the newsletter and on interactive digital TV;
 - Applicants can bid for property using the Birmingham Home Choice website, Digital TV, an automated voice recognition phone line or SMS text messaging. In some cases people can also be supported by officers making bids on their behalf, known as "management bidding"; and
 - Bids are sorted in order of priority and the person with the highest priority (number of points) is invited to view the property and normally gets first refusal.
- 3.4 The availability of accurate and timely information is an important attribute of a choice based lettings system. Key things that need to be shared with applicants include the need for them to be pro-active; the procedures for using the system; clear and consistent information on available properties; the availability of support for bidding; and feedback on the outcomes of bids.



4 Barriers and Participation

- 4.1 There are a number of reasons why people may not actively participate in choice based lettings schemes. These include:
- The lack of visibility of the service and the difficulty of registration;
 - The lack of access to information about vacant properties and how to bid;
 - The inability to understand written material (language or literacy difficulties);
 - The inability to understand the scheme and exercise informed choice;
 - The inability to adopt a bidding strategy or use the available bidding methods;
 - The inability to participate in bidding for a sustained period, for example due to poor mental health; and
 - The lack of housing choice.⁴
- 4.2 A rough estimate in research published by the Department for Communities and Local Government stated that around 5-10 per cent of people seeking to secure social housing need additional help.⁵ This includes, but is not limited to older people.
- 4.3 The former Housing and Urban Renewal Overview and Scrutiny Committee heard in October 2011 that 35% of those registered with Birmingham Home Choice had not participated in the choice based letting scheme by placing a bid.
- 4.4 A snap shot from the Homes and Neighbourhoods Directorate identified that age is clearly a determining factor in the non-participation rate in Birmingham (see Chart 1).⁶ There are four bandings of housing need; those in band A have the highest need and therefore the most points to secure a property. There are not enough older people in band A to be able to reach firm conclusions on their participation rates compared to other age groups.
- 4.5 In band B, however, there are more than 1000 people over fifty years old who have been assessed as having fairly high levels of housing need. Looking at the participation rates of older people in band B, the non-participation rate doubles in relation to the over 50s age group with over 47% of the 1,195 people not participating. This compares with 20% of the 3,553 under 50 year olds who were not participating in the scheme (See Table 1).

⁴ Lomax, D and Pawson, H (2011) *Choice-based Lettings, Potentially Disadvantaged Groups and Accessible Housing Registers: A Summary Guide to Positive Practice*. DCLG

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Report to Housing and Urban Renewal Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 21st October 2011



Chart 1: Non-Participation in Birmingham Home Choice by Age – October 2011

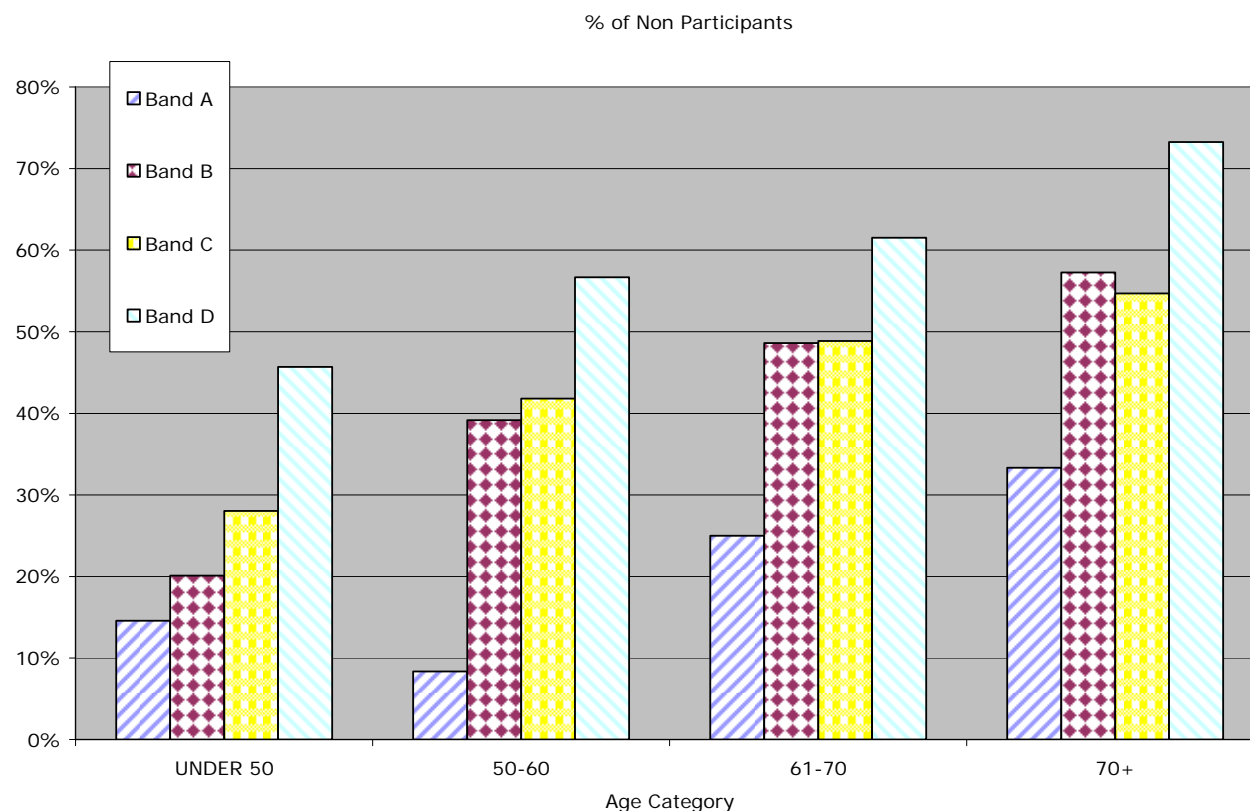


Table 1: Band B Participation Rates in Birmingham Home Choice - October 2011

AGE	NUMBER OF APPLICANTS	NON-PARTICIPANTS	% OF NON-PARTICIPANTS
UNDER 50	3,553	714	20%
50-60	516	202	39%
61-70	321	156	49%
70+	358	205	57%

4.6 This is useful information for monitoring purposes and it is recommended that these figures are used as a key indicator to review progress.



5 Developing a Proactive Service

- 5.1 For the Committee, the key theme which emerged relates to the need for a choice based lettings scheme to be proactive in its dealings with older people. Steps need to be taken to ensure all vulnerable people and users with additional support requirements are identified.
- 5.2 As the user-led nature of the model can disadvantage some people, Government guidance states that information on an applicant's requirement for support should be proactively sought, routinely collected and shared with partners when appropriate. It notes the very elderly as one group likely to require support.⁷ Trigger questions should be included in initial applications (e.g. "Do you need a support worker?"), and frontline staff should see it as routine to ask applicants if they want any help. Local good practice examples include:
- In **Wolverhampton** people are asked on their initial application form if they require assistance. A dedicated support team follow this up with support and advice, if required.
 - **Nottingham's** HomeLink team contacts people with, for example, medical needs on their application form, to ensure that they have support to bid. Those over 60 are sent information on properties. The team also undertake outreach to open days at warden controlled schemes so that they can identify anyone interested in applying for the scheme and, therefore, who will need to be registered and possibly supported to use HomeLink.
- 5.3 In **Birmingham** support needs can be noted at point of registration or after. For example, an applicant can alert the Directorate or an officer may make contact if the applicant has not bid. Recently, the Directorate has been developing a more proactive approach and has made contact with applicants who have not bid and provided assistance where needed. The tailored support could be initial advice and guidance, a 'walk through' of placing a bid, arranging a face to face appointment, weekly telephone calls or sending out the newsletter.
- 5.4 Members note that some local teams within the Directorate are very proactive in this issue and would encourage that good practice be embedded across the city.
- 5.5 In addition to identifying users needing additional support Members believe routine monitoring should take place of those applicants who are high priority, but have not been bidding. Good practice in contacting people who are not participating has been identified in **Bristol** and **Sandwell** and is backed by Department for Communities and Local Government guidance:

"Periodic monitoring of bidding activity of high priority applicants should be routine: to identify inactive households. The failure to bid at all – or the

⁷ Lomax and Pawson (2011) *Choice-based Lettings, Potentially Disadvantaged Groups and Accessible Housing Registers: A Positive Practice Guide*. DCLG



tendency to enter ineligible bids – may be a sign that the applicant does not understand or has difficulty navigating the choice based lettings system.”⁸

HomeChoice Bristol

Bristol City Council sent out a questionnaire to applicants over 65 on the housing register asking about their bidding habits; whether they had ever bid or never bid; and what their usual bidding method was. Of the total responses 49% said they had placed a bid, half of these said they bid via the internet.

The questionnaire highlighted that many applicants were not bidding because they were only interested in bidding for property types that were in short supply (bungalows). Respondents were then contacted and, where appropriate, the bidding process was explained and realistic advice given regarding the types of properties they could expect to see advertised through HomeChoice Bristol. In order to ensure that older applicants fully understand the scheme and the bidding process, the Rehousing Adviser follows this up with a phone call to discuss how they are going to bid and what support they might need to access the system.

Bristol has introduced more detailed icons to make it easier for applicants to identify properties suitable for their needs, for example icons for a wheelchair accessible shower, or downstairs toilet.

Sandwell: A Proactive Approach

Choice based lettings has been operating across the borough since 2005. In 2010 approximately 93% of Council voids and 50% of housing association voids were allocated through the scheme, including adapted properties. Extra Care properties are first allocated through a Social Services Housing Panel, and those not allocated in this way are added to choice based lettings.

Bids can be made via the internet (found to be unpopular with older persons), contact centres and via a freephone number (found to be popular) and more recently via digital TV. A weekly mailing list is also sent out on request which is popular with older people.

Until recently the participation of older people had always been below that of their equivalent make-up on the Housing Register. Older people are now proactively encouraged and supported to engage with choice based lettings by allowing proxy/assisted bidding and in certain circumstances direct offers of accommodation. The Council also introduced a policy of identifying and contacting ‘non-bidders’ (12 month post registration date) to determine the reason for non-engagement and their individual support needs to enable them to participate. The number of non-bidders aged over 60 now averages 60 per month, compared to 1,655 recorded in September 2010.

The main reason for not actively bidding on choice based lettings was that residents were waiting for a particular area or property, or they did not realise they needed to be active or understand the choice based lettings bidding process. In many cases making one contact via telephone, letter or personal visit to establish what problems they had with choice based lettings was often enough before the resident became

⁸ Lomax, D and Pawson, H (2011) *Choice-based Lettings, Potentially Disadvantaged Groups and Accessible Housing Registers: A Summary Guide to Positive Practice*. DCLG. Noted also in Department for Communities and Local Government (2008) *Allocation of Accommodation: Choice Based Lettings. Code of Guidance for Local Housing Authorities*



confident to use the choice based lettings system on their own. It was felt the investment in this proactive approach has paid off.

- 5.6 Currently in Birmingham, no contact is routinely made with applicants to understand why they are not bidding. The representative of the Birmingham Advisory Council of Older People (BACOP) urged that the Directorate takes a more personalised approach and proactively contacts older people who have not bid for six months. Piloting this approach would provide an opportunity to collate information, gain a better understanding of non-participation and develop appropriate responses.
- 5.7 It was noted by one participant at the Older People's Reference Group meeting that needs change over time and that the health of older people can deteriorate.
- “No one contacts us. Someone should to ask if we still want to move.”
- 5.8 A support worker also suggested that older people often do not understand why the Directorate is not contacting them and that their requirements change over time.
- 5.9 It was suggested to us that additional assistance to actually move home should be given to older people using choice based lettings. Private sector companies such as McCarthy and Stone offer a de-clutter and packing and unpacking service and Birmingham Wise Move offers similar support. It was felt that this practical hand holding service could be beneficial in encouraging older people to participate in Birmingham Home Choice. It was felt that the possibility of a social enterprise developing this should be explored.
- 5.10 It was acknowledged that the Directorate's Clearance Team also has this type of expertise. They provide a one to one rehousing service, tailoring the level of provision to each individual customers' needs and, where necessary 'holding their hands' throughout the process. This includes providing support with Birmingham Home Choice for customers who are not able to access the internet to ascertain property availability.

See Recommendations 1 and 2



6 Understanding and Addressing Barriers to Older People's Participation

- 6.1 Extra Care Housing is currently not part of the Birmingham Home Choice scheme. As some older people are more likely to want this type of property they may be using alternative methods to secure their property choices, rather than going through Birmingham Home Choice. This may, therefore, have an impact on the participation rates of older people.
- 6.2 Participation rates for older people in other locations are also lower than for younger groups. In **Bristol** they have come to the conclusion that older people are not participating because the type of housing that they wish to move to (two bedded bungalows), is simply not available in the area that they wish to live, so there is no point bidding.
- 6.3 It is important to remember that choice based lettings schemes cannot increase the number of properties available. If a person's preference is not available to them, then there is little incentive for them to participate in the scheme by placing bids, as it remains impossible for them to achieve the outcome that they desire.
- 6.4 In **Wolverhampton** a comparison of the number of successful lettings to older people before and after the introduction of the local choice based lettings scheme has been undertaken. This data shows that successful letting rates have not changed significantly across any age group. Officers have, therefore, concluded that the choice based lettings scheme has not had a negative impact on the outcomes for older people.
- 6.5 The evidence indicates a low level of participation by older people in Birmingham. However, there is currently no evidence available about the cause of this and, specifically, if it is due to the barriers of Birmingham Home Choice, or rather about the appropriateness of available housing. The Directorate should make contact with older people on the housing register to determine satisfaction with the process and reasons, if applicable, for non-participation.
- 6.6 In Birmingham one of the methods for assessing barriers to services is through the equality impact needs assessments (equality impact needs assessment (EINA), now equality analysis). The EINA relating to choice based lettings is being reviewed as part of the review of the scheme's operation. A previous EINA relating to choice based lettings suggests:

“Some older people may need help to understand the changes that are proposed and to make bids.”⁹

⁹ Bob Blackaby Associates (2008) *Equalities Impact Needs Assessment Proposed Rollout of Birmingham City Council's Choice-based Lettings Scheme*



- 6.7 Age Concern has been asked to support the current EINA work and it is important that in carrying out equality analysis that all equality strands, including age, are properly examined.
- 6.8 In **Stoke on Trent** applicants with no housing need are placed on an inactive housing register. There would appear to be advantages of this system. Applicants do not have an unrealistic expectation of getting a home through that route, but it ensures a list of interested people who can be offered a low demand property. In the context of choice based lettings it also helps ensure a more realistic picture of housing needs. This has particular relevance in the context of older people given the levels of void sheltered housing schemes. At the time of writing there are 145 sheltered voids in Birmingham. The local housing teams have recently been successful letting some of the long term voids, particularly in sheltered high rise, by holding open days and targeting eligible customers.

See Recommendation 3



7 Informing Older People and Others about Choice Based Lettings

7.1 This section explores the awareness of Birmingham Home Choice by both residents and support organisations.

Residents

7.2 The Chair attended a meeting of the City-wide Older People's Reference Group where a straw poll was taken of those who were aware of Birmingham Home Choice. Out of the 30 or so in attendance only a handful were aware of it and just two or three had used it. This is not a representative group, but the indication at the evidence gathering meeting was also that awareness and understanding of the system is low. Overall, it was felt to be a complicated system.

7.3 In terms of applicants it was suggested there is a need to promote how the Directorate lets properties through Home Choice bidding. Households are required to re-register annually, but officers do not currently follow this up with a proactive choice based lettings discussion. This would be an opportunity to promote Birmingham Home Choice to older people.

7.4 The Directorate had noted a need to review the introductory pack that is sent to households when they register with Birmingham Home Choice to ensure the process is clear. Members concur with this.

7.5 Government guidance advises that frontline staff should have the tools to offer information in alternative formats where appropriate e.g. hard copy guides, online information, plain English guides, guides for people with learning disabilities. Much of the information on the Birmingham Home Choice website (including property information) is translated into a range of community languages.

7.6 In Birmingham the choice based letting scheme has been advertised in the tenant newsletter, but further steps can be taken to advertise more widely. For example:

- **Solihull Community Housing** use plasma TV screens in public offices to display information about the choice based lettings scheme and to advertise properties;
- **Nottingham's** HomeLink scheme is proactive in advertising the scheme to older people; and
- The Whitefriars Housing Group (the largest social housing landlord in **Coventry**) assists older people with any housing issue at a weekly drop in session held at the local Age UK Office.

Support Agencies

7.7 It is essential that all those working with older people are informed of the choice based letting scheme and have the resources and skills to support people to participate in the scheme directly or to know where to refer them onto. Partner organisations (such as the Birmingham Advisory



Council of Older People) appear to have been informed at the inception of the scheme, but do not feel that they have been kept up to date on an ongoing basis.

7.8 The Birmingham Home Choice website notes a range of third sector organisations who have agreed to assist applicants. Age Concern is the contact given for older people.

7.9 Government guidance states that:

- Choice based letting schemes should have an access strategy for external partner agencies, which details specific objectives and designates clearly defined roles;
- A regular working group or meetings between partners and stakeholders should take place to maintain contact and provide opportunities for updating, reviewing and improving the choice based lettings systems;
- Planned ongoing training programmes for choice based lettings partners and support staff should be in place;
- Regular events should take place to raise awareness; and
- Arrangements should be made with statutory, voluntary and community organisations to assist potentially disadvantaged applicants to engage with choice based lettings. This may be included in the commissioning process.¹⁰

7.10 In Birmingham an access plan was produced in 2009. There are bi-monthly meetings with housing associations, and meetings have recently taken place, or are planned with other stakeholders including Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid and the Salvation Army. Training is provided to new staff and updates would be provided to existing staff if any of the processes change. New tenant management organisations have also received training. A customer and stakeholder event was held in May 2010 and Birmingham Home Choice is also promoted at other service area events.

7.11 The **Coventry** Homefinder scheme has worked closely with partners to ensure older people that they work with can access support.

7.12 It is important to ensure that general support is available for older people. Voluntary organisations are often the first point of call for support and information. Members were informed that at the inception of choice based lettings it was proposed that Age Concern Birmingham have funding to support older people's access. This did not happen, but the reasons for this should be reconsidered and options explored for ensuring that voluntary organisations such as Age Concern can adequately support older people.

7.13 Directorate staff recently attended a session at the Birmingham Carer's Centre to inform carers and support workers about homelessness, allocations and Birmingham Home Choice. Members

¹⁰ Lomax, D and Pawson H (2011) *Choice-Based Lettings, Potentially Disadvantaged Groups and Accessible Housing Registers: A Positive Practice Guide*. DCLG



think that attendance at such events when those being up-skilled are encouraged to cascade that information are an effective way of providing information within current resource constraints.

- 7.14 Participants at the Older People's Reference Group also noted the need to inform organisations dealing with different communities (such as the Irish Welfare Office and St Anne's) about Birmingham Home Choice.

Care Centres

- 7.15 The Committee heard from the Council's Community Links Service which runs services from four care centres, each working across 2½ Districts with the remit to support older people. Each of the centres has an IT suite which is open to local older people, in addition to those in residence. Staff can also visit older people in their own homes with a laptop to provide support. Members were surprised, therefore, to note that the Community Links team were unaware of Birmingham Home Choice. They had been involved in no joint working with the Homes and Neighbourhoods Directorate on this subject, and nor do centres receive the newsletters. There are obviously opportunities, which should be investigated, regarding supplying the centres with the weekly newsletter, and wider advertisement of the availability of computers and support in these centres for older people in the community. There is also a need to up-skill the staff to support residents in accessing Birmingham Home Choice.
- 7.16 It is also important that the professionals (such as GPs and social workers) supporting older people understand how choice based lettings works. Further work should be undertaken to understand how they perceive choice based lettings. One approach to getting buy-in from their organisations is by highlighting the savings which could be made to their budgets if the older people they work with have access to appropriate housing.

See Recommendation 4



8 Information About Using the Scheme and Available Properties

Newsletter

- 8.1 It was noted that, although the newsletter is not divided into sections, it advertises each of the five housing areas of the city in sequence. Properties suitable for older people are dispersed throughout the newsletter.
- 8.2 The Directorate sends out approximately 100 newsletters each week to customers who are vulnerable (and may be old) and have no other way to view and bid on the properties. It is usual that officers send them a copy and then ring them before the cycle closes. If they are interested in any of the properties, the officer can bid on their behalf (a management bid). The **Sussex** choice based lettings scheme, Homemove, charges a small subscription fee to have the newsletter posted directly to a user's home for six months.

Website

- 8.3 When the Committee had a demonstration of the website they felt it was generally well laid out with a good level of information about the system and properties. Members noted that there is a language option which will ensure translation of much of the site. On the website anyone can look for available properties: this is positive for those supporting older people looking for properties. However, without individuals having to log on it does mean that the Directorate cannot determine who is inactive and who is looking, but not bidding.
- 8.4 The website has photos of all City Council properties and most housing association ones. Symbols and text are side by side and there is a notes field for additional information. Rents and service charges are included. There is also a view date so applicants know when they would have to be available for a viewing, if they were shortlisted. There is a search facility to narrow down options by size and area of the city (zones A-E).

Suitable Accommodation

- 8.5 The current Council policy is that only applicants who need a property with adaptations and have been assessed by an occupational therapist can be allocated a home with major adaptations.¹¹ These properties are identified with a wheelchair icon in the newsletter and on the website. The intention was to provide further detail of adaptations and suitability, but this has not been done.

¹¹ <http://www.birminghamhomechoice.org.uk/media/file/AllocationSummary.pdf>



- 8.6 It was suggested that older people generally look for a home which can provide health enhancements, but that the Birmingham Home Choice newsletter is not informative about this. It was suggested that the current level of detail is inadequate to assess if a property is suitable for someone seeking specific needs.
- 8.7 The icons used and the range of information is not detailed enough for users with specific requirements. For example, they may wish to know: the size of garden; whether there is a walk in shower or enough space for one to be installed; or whether a property is suitable for installing a stair lift. As noted in 5.5 HomeChoice Bristol uses icons to make it easier for applicants to identify properties suitable for their needs, for example a wheelchair accessible shower, or downstairs toilet.
- 8.8 The Committee heard of one family in the city who were allocated a property with adaptations which they had not been aware of and did not require. Although the Homes and Neighbourhood Directorate hopes that this was exception, it indicates the need for up to date and accurate information about properties. This could include details not currently collected, such as whether or not properties have a straight staircase as this can enable easier installation of a stair lift.
- 8.9 There is currently a five year stock condition survey underway incorporating some 13,000 properties a year to ensure that improved information is available to the Directorate. It is suggested that this is an opportunity, which needs to be exploited, to collate better data on adaptations and suitability for older people and to incorporate this into the data available for users of Birmingham Home Choice. Given the long term nature of the stock condition survey Members suggest that local housing officers, and possibly contractors, are encouraged to note such information when the opportunity arises, alongside this.

The Sheltered Housing Brand

- 8.10 Sheltered housing is offered as part of Birmingham Home Choice. These are often on the readily available properties section of the website suggesting that adequate demand is not always generated through the choice based lettings system. The Committee's *Housing Provision for Older People* report of 2009 suggested that:

“Many people were not aware of what sheltered housing can offer and more could be done to provide information to older people about the benefits of the range of provision in Birmingham.”

- 8.11 Equally, during this evidence gathering the Birmingham Social Housing Partnership representative suggested that there is currently no definition of ‘sheltered housing’ on the website or information as to what services it offers. She suggested that sheltered housing needs a clearly defined ‘brand’ to inform older people and their carers and families and ensure that its offer was clear. Success stories about moving from general needs to sheltered housing could be included on the Birmingham Home Choice website. The Directorate does already produce a booklet on sheltered



housing which is sent out to people making enquiries and used to promote the service at open days.

- 8.12 Members understand that there is some segmentation of this market. Some over 50s may be attracted to vertical high rise as a quieter option, whilst some older people will be interested in the activities provided in the community hub or additional support needs. It was noted that, although a range of explanatory documents were available on the home page of Birmingham Home Choice website, there was not one on sheltered housing. The Committee suggest that this be added.

Access to Information

- 8.13 It is necessary to have access to the printed newsletter or access to the internet to obtain information on property vacancies. Alternative ways of bidding are not helpful as the automated phone system requires property identification numbers. Digital TV has limited information on properties available.
- 8.14 Advice available to people using the system is limited. There is a user guide which signposts people requiring help to a neighbourhood office and provides a phone number for making an appointment. It shows no helpline number. The weekly newsletter, however, provides a helpline number, but this service has been identified by the Directorate as requiring review.

See Recommendations 5 to 7



9 Bidding: Enabling Older People's Participation

9.1 As noted there are a range of methods for bidding for properties. In August 2011, in relation to Birmingham Home Choice, the Audit Commission Report on Landlord Services stated that:

“Some aspects of the scheme are positive, including housing associations being part of the initiative, digital TV access to the service and help for vulnerable people to make bids...”

9.2 Properties are advertised each Thursday and bidding ends at midnight on Tuesday. Applicants can place up to three bids each week. When they bid on the internet they are shown the number of other bids made and where they are in the priority (based on points). They can, during the week, cancel bids and rebid if they see that they do not have a high priority. Currently, the top three bidders are invited to a viewing, although 85% of the time the top one takes the property. It was noted that some applicants can become quite despondent if they constantly fail to get a viewing or an offer.

9.3 Members note there is some information about successful bids on the website. Under a section called “lettings feedback” there is information about the average points for lettings for the city as a whole. For example, the information on sheltered housing, at the time of writing, said:

SHELTERED MARCH 2011 - SEPTEMBER 2011

AVERAGE NUMBER OF POINTS

Property Type	Number of Lets	Average number of points for successful let
Bungalow	42	77
Flat	246	61

Number of Bedrooms	Number of Lets	Average number of points for successful let
0	5	44
1	224	62
2	59	67

Average number of points	Number of Bedrooms		
	0	1	2
Bungalow		76	134
Flat / Mais	73	60	78



- 9.4 On the same web page is the information for properties advertised each week, regarding how many points each successful applicant had and the number of bidders. Members recognise this is important information as choice only works if users understand how it works and what the choice really is. Members suggest that improvements to the website are explored to see if this data can be incorporated in the feedback to individual bidders. In the shorter term, Members recommend that the pages are renamed to be more accessible to users.
- 9.5 Some properties are in low demand and after being advertised a couple of times are classified as Readily Available Properties. As soon as anyone makes an eligible bid for these they are taken off the website and a viewing is arranged. On the website the acronym RAP is used for such properties and the Committee suggest that acronyms (which it felt were off-putting for older people) are removed entirely from the website.

Access to IT Equipment and Support

- 9.6 Despite there being a variety of bidding methods available the vast majority of people continue to choose to bid online. A single week's snapshot indicated that 96.6% of all the bids made had been made through the internet.¹²
- 9.7 At the Older People's Reference Group meeting half of those present did not use computers. One participant informed us that research indicates that 60% of over 65s have never used the internet.
- 9.8 On the website the system will only show properties applicants are entitled to bid for, if they have logged in. Areas relating to the bidding process where the Committee consider improvements could be made include:
- Including a phone number (so applicants can request a new PIN and ID number) next to where they need to input it to log in. This is particularly important for people who have not bid previously or have not bid for a long time;
 - There is a field saying "notes/queries", which could say something stronger to elicit communication and determine who may require help, such as "if you have any queries or need any support in bidding the Home Choice team will get in contact"; and
 - Enabling the change of contact details to be changed by the user directly (although as many changes of details have an impact on the allocation of points there may be valid reasons not to proceed with this).
- 9.9 For those without computer and internet access, there are a number of ways in which they can access a computer to make a bid. Locations where computers can be accessed free of charge to make bids include:
- Five dedicated computers in the Property Shop which is in the ground floor of the Central Library. An officer is based there for a few hours most weekdays to offer advice and support.

¹² Report to the Housing and Urban Renewal Overview and Scrutiny Committee 20th October 2011



Two of the computers have assistive software installed to assist people with visual impairments;

- Local community libraries;
- Some of the offices of the social housing providers involved in the scheme;
- Neighbourhood offices; and
- Homeless hubs.

- 9.10 The Library Service has given some consideration to the needs of Birmingham Home Choice users. All libraries download and print off the Home Choice Property Newsletter, although a charge is made for copies. There are 600 public access computers with free internet access for library members. Computers generally need to be booked in advance, although in agreement with the Homes and Neighbourhoods Directorate a dedicated computer in each library is reserved for choice based lettings on Thursdays when the new list of properties is published. Although library membership is generally required for internet use, Birmingham Home Choice users who are not library members need only show their letter from the Directorate.
- 9.11 Computer confidence differs between users and many require library staff assistance. The service has participated in schemes to build up confidence and knowledge (such as BBC First Click and the Arts Council Digital Inclusion project) and this has aided many older people. Library staff can show users how to log on and how to find sites, but cannot guarantee support in using choice based lettings. Where there is an issue of staff capacity the use of volunteers in the future has been explored.
- 9.12 The Library Service suggested that the Property Shop has the lowest use of computers by older people, as they are more likely to use the community libraries. So, currently, the dedicated support available does not meet many older people's needs. Libraries will also signpost residents to neighbourhood offices, and in a number of libraries these are on the same site.
- 9.13 Paragraph 7.15 also notes that Community Links Service can provide IT support and could be a valuable source of support.

Other Ways of Bidding

- 9.14 Although there may now be accessible computers to make bids, those who would like to bid online, but do not have the skills or confidence to use IT, continue to be disadvantaged. There are alternative methods, but the Directorate's one week snapshot of bids showed that participants are not taking this opportunity. Only 0.6% of all those placing a bid used Digital TV, and only 0.4% of people used the automated phone line. The same percentage of people used SMS texting to make a bid.
- 9.15 The automated phone line takes users through a series of questions. To place a bid the reference number of a property needs to be known, and so details of the week's available properties need to have been available (as noted in 8.13). As the system is fully automated it may be too difficult for many people (older or not) to use. Certainly, when Members had a demonstration there was



concern about the lack of time users had to input their details and that the PIN number is repeated back, as this could compromise security.

- 9.16 A form should be developed which indicates the questions which will be asked to ensure older people have their ID, PIN and the property advert numbers all to hand prior to phoning. Otherwise the automated system can be intimidating.
- 9.17 **Coventry** Homefinder supports vulnerable people who approach the service and have no support network by helping them bid for properties. These people are sent the weekly property list so that they can see what properties they would like to bid for and they can then phone up the Homefinder team to submit their bids, or bids can be placed on their behalf.
- 9.18 As noted, digital TV is another way of enabling bidding. As it has very low usage opportunities could be found, in association with Digital Birmingham, to promote this service.¹³
- 9.19 Members heard of one older person and her daughter (in Birmingham) who do not have a television or computer and dislike using the phone. Arguably, any system needs to be able to support their participation too. One option may be developing a paper based system to supplement others, or greater use of officers being able to submit bids at places such as neighbourhood offices. In **Kent**, for example, HomeChoice accepts coupon bids that people post showing their preferences. This service is costly to run and a charge is made to applicants who wish to use it. In **Sussex** Homemove also accepts coupons. In **Nottingham** an outreach service can provide one to one support to help people to bid from their own homes and users can also place paper bids over the counter at local offices.
- 9.20 Care would have to be taken to ensure that such bids were registered onto the system as soon as they are received. This may have resource implications, but this could be investigated as an additional offer for users who are not participating, but have housing need.

Management Bids and Assisted Bidding

- 9.21 During the same one week snap shot period 146 management bids were made (1.8%). These types of bids are placed on behalf of vulnerable people who request that their assessing needs housing officer bids for them, as well as customers who are unlawfully occupying a Council property and customers who are owed a full homeless duty. Management bids are labour intensive and, therefore, the service is not available to all. They are undertaken without the applicant being able to express an opinion on every available house and, therefore, their opportunity for choice is limited.

¹³ Currently the Birmingham Looking Local Channel has 190,000 users a month, but its marketing budget is limited. Access through Sky and Virgin appears straight forward, but Freeview requires a link to the telephone line and additional charges.



- 9.22 Overall, the view from the Birmingham Social Housing Partnership was that some older people need support to access choice based lettings and make bids, and that this needs to be happen more formally through enhanced management bidding and a dedicated help team.
- 9.23 Discussion with officers indicates that assisted bidding by support workers and family members is encouraged where it is felt that the existing methods disadvantage individuals. This requires an older person to disclose their log in details and a clear understanding about the nature of properties they would accept. This is only publicised, currently, in a frequently asked questions area of the website and, perhaps, should be incorporated as an option for those requiring additional support.
- 9.24 **In Shropshire**, Homepoint, the choice based lettings scheme, advises people that they can ask a relative, friend, carer or support worker to receive details on their behalf and help them bid on their website.

See Recommendations 8 to 10



10 Transparent Social Housing Options for Older People

- 10.1 In addition to Birmingham Home Choice, older people can also access social housing through Wise Move, Birmingham Home Swap, and Extra Care housing.
- 10.2 The Birmingham Wise Move Scheme offers existing Council tenants who are vulnerable and under occupying a property support to move. Over the two years to March 2011 they had assisted 101 tenants to downsize and the same number of households to move into suitable homes.
- 10.3 Wise Move will pay moving expenses of up to £2000, although the average cost is around £1700. The small team also offer support, such as advice about downsizing and reducing possessions. They also assist older and vulnerable tenants to bid for available properties through Birmingham Home Choice. The team understands that downsizing is a sensitive topic of conversation as homes often have intrinsic links to family life and personal histories. Two of the lessons they would note are about the importance of building relationships with older people and ensuring that families are included in discussions. The housing support workers would be very well placed to support older people with all these options and also providing additional support for some tenants in using Birmingham Home Choice.
- 10.4 The local housing team can note on the website that an applicant might be entitled to support from Wise Move. Members observed this in some areas of the city (e.g. Kings Norton) and for certain properties. Whilst this could be made more consistent across the city, it was noted that not all properties which are currently under-occupied will be in high demand and priority for Wise Move. Also, many older people can make this move without the additional support or funds, and there are currently limited resources within the Wise Move team.
- 10.5 All extra care housing is allocated through a joint allocations panel. In the evidence gathering Members were informed of the importance of ensuring a balance of care levels and associated budgets and that this aspect is too important to offer extra care through choice based lettings alone.
- 10.6 It was suggested to us that having different routes can complicate the situation for older people:
- “Older people and those that support them want simple access and all choices in one place.”
- 10.7 The Department for Communities and Local Government Guidance states that:
- “Where housing authorities adopt a policy of offering a choice of accommodation, the policy should, as far as possible, extend to all applicants and all available accommodation.”

See Recommendation 11



11 Conclusions and Recommendations

- 11.1 Members support the successful roll out of the choice based lettings system, but have some concerns about the impact on older people. One particular area Members would like to be explored through the Directorate's review of the first year of Birmingham Home Choice is the reasons for non-participation of older people. Steps can be taken to make the scheme more widely understood; more user friendly for older people; and to help ensure a good fit between the available housing stock and specific housing needs.
- 11.2 It is important to ensure that the Council is carrying out its duties under the Equality Act 2010 and its obligations under the Housing Act 1996:
- “A local housing authority shall secure that any necessary assistance in making such an application (for an allocation of housing accommodation) is available free of charge to persons in their district who are likely to have difficulty in doing so without assistance (Section 166 1)(b)).”
- 11.3 One participant concluded the discussion at the Older People's Reference Group by suggesting the current system is too complicated for many older people, and noted additional challenges faced by some, such as language and internet use. She felt there must be easier ways for people to get housing:
- “It should be made very, very simple.”
- 11.4 The intent is not to set up a parallel allocations system for older people, but to ensure their housing needs can be met within the current system and availability of stock. As the Department for Communities and Local Government Guidance states:
- “Potentially disadvantaged homeseekers should be encompassed within the choice based letting system rather than being managed under separate arrangements.”¹⁴
- 11.5 As part of the future development of the service Members would encourage ongoing discussions to be held with older people and partner agencies (including those engaged as part of this review) to ensure services best meet older people's needs.

¹⁴ Lomax, D and Pawson, H (2011) *Choice-based Lettings, Potentially Disadvantaged Groups and Accessible Housing Registers: A Summary Guide to Positive Practice*. DCLG



Developing a Proactive Approach

Recommendation 1: That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing develops a more proactive approach to dealing with older people in the high priority bands A and B who have not participated in Birmingham Home Choice in the previous six months.

Recommendation 2: That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing explores what additional support could be made available to older people on the housing register to encourage a move within Birmingham Home Choice (building on the good practice existing within the Directorate of the Clearance and Wise Move teams) and the resource implications of this.

Understanding and Addressing Barriers to Older People's Participation

Recommendation 3: That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing consults with the over 60s on the housing register regarding their reasons for being on the register, satisfaction with the process and, if applicable, reasons for non-participation.

Informing Older People and Others about Birmingham Home Choice

Recommendation 4: That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing explores further opportunities for advertising Birmingham Home Choice and up-skilling Council staff and key partners to support older users to include:

- Identifying officers (including those in the Community Links Service) and partners who would benefit from a better understanding of Birmingham Home Choice; using and creating opportunities (including training and mailings of information) to up-skill them and encouraging them to cascade information; and implementing cost effective ways of informing them about the scheme on an ongoing basis;
- Encouraging officers to develop local solutions, building on existing networks and local knowledge, to advertise local voids and target marketing to eligible older people and professionals (such as GPs and District Nurses) working with older people; and
- Exploring the possibility of using care centres and other suitable venues for holding events to publicise the service to partners and local communities.

Information About Using the Scheme and Available Properties

Recommendation 5: That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing explores whether more needs to be done to ensure all older people have access to the Birmingham Home Choice property newsletter, such as sending it to care centres, exploring the additional resources required of distributing the newsletter to more residents.

Recommendation 6: That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing reviews the existing Birmingham Home Choice helpline and its resourcing.



Recommendation 7: That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing explores how further information about property adaptations, scope for adaptations and suitability for older people could be provided through:

- Consulting with users on improving the information on available properties;
- Aligning the stock condition survey to meet this need and incorporating relevant information into the Birmingham Home Choice system;
- Encouraging the development of local information alongside the stock condition survey to fill gaps over the five year survey period and to ensure that data is updated as appropriate; and
- Increasing the scope of the symbols used in the Birmingham Home Choice property data to incorporate information relating to adaptations and suitability, whilst also ensuring that such information is provided in text form.

Bidding: Enabling Older People's Participation

Recommendation 8: That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing ensures there is on-going dialogue with the Library Service especially with regard to:

- The Community Libraries Service Review and proposed opening hours; sharing information about weekly patterns on the Birmingham Home Choice web use, and any potential changes to the weekly bidding cycle;
- Opportunities for extending information and support through the Home Library Service; and
- Reviewing the use of the Property Shop in the central library, including quantifying its use and impact.

Recommendation 9: That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing includes guidance in Birmingham Home Choice information on assisted and management bidding to help applicants with support needs.

Recommendation 10: That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing consults with older people regarding improving use of the website.

Transparent Social Housing Options for Older People

Recommendation 11: That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing ensures access to housing for older people is as transparent as possible by exploring:

- The opportunities for ensuring that all social housing options for older people are noted within Birmingham Home Choice publicity;
- Whether it is possible to include any of the extra care housing vacancies within Birmingham Home Choice (whilst acknowledging the need to balance care needs); and



- How links can be strengthened between landlord services and Wise Move to be able to promote the service to tenants who may be seeking to move to more suitable accommodation; provide additional support to such tenants to enable them to move; and facilitate consistent advertising of the support which Wise Move can offer.

Scrutinising Progress

Recommendation 12: That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing:

- Reports progress towards the achievement of these recommendations to the Health and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee in December 2012. Subsequent progress reports will be scheduled by the Committee thereafter, until all recommendations are implemented.
- Reports to the Health and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the Directorate's own review of the first 12-18 months of the Birmingham Home Choice (an interim report in December 2012 and a final report by February 2013).
- Reports to the Health and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee regarding the findings and the action plan relating to older people following the Equality Assessment for Birmingham Home Choice.



Appendix 1: Witnesses

We would like to thank the witnesses listed below who met with Members regarding choice based lettings, plus other officers and partners who provided us with additional information.

Linda Butler – Head of Library Services, Environment and Culture

Barry Clewer – Chairman of the Birmingham Advisory Council of Older People

Jim Crawshaw – Integrated Service Head – Homelessness and Pre-Tenancy Services, Homes and Neighbourhoods

Gaynor Darby – Birmingham Home Choice Allocations Manager, Homes and Neighbourhoods

Lucy Hales – Director of Housing and Care Services, Nehemiah UCHA

Norman Howell – Chairman of the City-wide Older Peoples Reference Group

Devinder Kalhan – Group Manager, Specialist Care Services, Adult and Communities

Wendy Peniket – Lettings Manager Sandwell Homes Ltd

Ann-Marie Powell – Head of Housing Strategy and Commissioning, Homes and Neighbourhoods

Emma Pugh – Service Manager – Community Links, Perry Tree Centre, Adult and Communities

Neville Rowe – Strategy and Research Manager, Sandwell MBC

Members of the City-Wide Older Peoples Group