

Report to the Report to the Economic Development and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee

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Progress Report on Newcastle Housing Advice Service



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Introduction

The Scrutiny Committee have requested a progress review of the Newcastle Housing Advice Service following commencement of the new contract in April 2014.

Background

The Council has a statutory duty under the Housing Act 1996, as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002, to provide homelessness, housing advice and housing register services in the local authority area.

On 13th September 2013 Cabinet approved to re-tender the Newcastle Housing Advice Service Contract. Following the Newcastle Housing Advice (NHA) re-tendering exercise, Midland Heart Ltd were awarded the NHA contract, which commenced on 1st April 2014 for a period of three years, with the possible extension of a further three years following evidence of satisfactory performance and funding.

Questions to be Addressed

Since awarding the NHA contract to Midland Heart prioritisation has been given to three broad areas of the service which can be considered by Scrutiny:

Mobilisation to a new office location

The NHA service is now delivered from the ground floor shop of 61-63, Lower Street, Newcastle. The shop has a clear identity as NHA, with the name of the service above the shop front and the NHA logo clearly shown next to the name. Prior to the commencement of the contract, work began with the Council's communication department to market the new service at its new address, a 0300 telephone number to users (a low cost number for landlines and mobiles, and used already by Midland Heart), email addresses, web site information and all correspondence linking to the NHA service. This marketing was directed to advise existing customers, key stakeholders, the general public, the Council's customer

service personnel and all Council members of the changes. In addition, a separate “drop in” event was arranged, to allow for members and customer service staff to get to know the NHA service team and key representatives from Midland Heart corporate personnel. This event also allowed for members to see the new office location and for the NHA team to promote the service to members who were not as familiar with their activities. Members were introduced to the wider expertise of Midland Heart who are a major provider of housing, care and support services. A formal launch of the NHA service is scheduled for 24th September 2014 and this event will be communicated widely with involvement from Midland Heart and the Council's communications department.

Members may wish to consider if they are familiar with the NHA service and the office location, along with the NHA identity and contact details and whether any further promotion of the NHA service is required to ensure customers and key stakeholders are aware of the NHA service.

Mobilisation to the Homes Direct choice based letting system

As part of the service Midland Heart will deliver an online housing options advice toolkit and online registration for housing applications. This approach will commence with the new Choice Based Letting (CBL) system being introduced, Homes Direct, from 1st August 2014. The new service will enable customers to register and update their housing register application directly, allowing for registrations to be made live immediately following registration. The approach is based on self-help with the customer taking control of the choices they make.

Under the scheme vulnerable people will be protected as there will be support and face to face help provided.

The self-service housing options is one access route that is promoted and is targeted to those residents who may not be in urgent need but require some form of advice. Previous research of the system shows that private rented tenants use this service mostly, followed by social landlord tenants and those living with family and friends. All customers who are homeless or threatened with homelessness would be engaged in a fuller assessment process that would include an office or telephone interview with the NHA service team advisor.

A comprehensive mobilisation plan for migration to the new system was developed which has included training on the new system to registered housing providers, third sector voluntary groups and housing support providers operating within the Borough. Support for existing customers and customers registering with the new system for the first time have been provided by Midland Heart Corporate Customers Services staff working together with the NHA team.

Following implementation of Homes Direct by Midland Heart, the current Housing Allocation Policy will be reviewed by officers of the Borough Council and a service level agreement will be agreed following engagement with Aspire Housing and other Registered Housing

providers within the Borough to ensure a fair system of allocation and agreed nomination rights.

The Homes Direct system commenced at the beginning of August, initial indications show that this is operating effectively, any operational issues will be considered through the regular contract monitoring meetings to ensure they are addressed.

The tender specification encouraged the “contractor” to develop technology to increase access to the service. Members may want to discuss the self-service model for housing options as to the number and type of customers that would be expected to utilise this service.

Performance information

Joint “Contract Monitoring” meetings are scheduled to be held quarterly and representatives of Midland Heart attend the meeting with the Housing Strategy Officer, responsible for managing the NHA contract. The contract and the service standards specification are reviewed and performance information is presented and considered at the meeting. The first meeting was held in July to review the performance for the first quarter of the financial year April – June 2014. Attached at Appendix 1 is a copy of the key performance information supplied for quarter one, with a comparison to quarter four of 13/14 and quarter one of 13/14.

In addition there have been regular operational meetings to discuss the mobilisation of the new contract. These have been attended by the Head of Housing and Regeneration, Housing Strategy Offices and senior representatives from Midland Heart. In addition meetings held in parallel to discuss the implementation of the Home Direct system, which have been fundamental to ensuring that keys issues have been dealt with efficiently and communication of joint working with Aspire and other Registered Housing Providers has taken place.

Open dialogue has also enabled discussions about specific cases and led to the resolution of homelessness and prevention where possible. To date Midland Heart has accommodated two homeless households into properties within their own housing stock. This is an encouraging start to the benefits of working with Midland Heart, helping to improve access to a wider range of affordable housing options across the Midlands for our customers.

Scrutiny members are requested to consider the performance information and invited to provide any comment.

Outcomes

Members of the Scrutiny Committee are asked to provide comment on the broad areas of the NHA service progress to date and are requested to direct any comments on progress to date to the Council’s representatives.

Supporting Information

The performance information for quarter one is attached for information.

Constraints

It is only possible to provide information on performance for the first quarter of the financial year at the time the report is presented to members as quarter 2 statistics will be collated after this date.

Conclusions

The Newcastle Housing Advice service provided by Midland Heart has been fully mobilised along with the implementation of the Homes Direct choice based lettings system. Midland Heart have been very successful in enabling this mobilisation in a relatively short time period. Overall the service is operating satisfactorily.

Relevant Portfolio Holder(s)

Councillor John Williams – Planning and Assets

Councillor Tony Kearon – Safer Communities

Appendices

Performance information for the NHA service for quarter one 14/15.