

# 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 second progress review of the Newcastle Housing Advice Service following the first year of operations of the contract period.

### 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 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2014, a progress report was presented to Members of the Scrutiny committee following the award of the Newcastle Housing Advice (NHA) service contract to Midland Heart Ltd. Since then members have been provided with quarterly statistical information to support the performance of the contract and have been updated on matters relating to the service including the review of the allocations policy. This report presents information to update members on the progress of NHA service provision together with key operational challenges.

### Questions to be addressed

Following the award of contract and the progress previously reported of the NHA service to members, prioritisation has been given to:

### Promotion of the service

The NHA service is delivered from the ground floor shop of 61-63, Lower Street, Newcastle. The shop is identified as NHA, with the name of the service above the shop front and the NHA logo clearly shown next to the name. The service has been easily recognised and found by the general public and partner agencies. The office is open from 9 am to 5 pm Monday to Friday, with the exception of Thursday morning when the office opens at 10 am. This time allows for partner agencies to visit NHA and to share good practice and general

information. NHA also use this time to attend other agencies team meetings to explain the service. This approach has proved invaluable when dealing with complex cases.

The Council and NHA have been keen to promote the service. The service had a very successful open day following the move the new office and invited partners and Council Members. NHA are keen to invite Members to the office to allow them to better understand the service and to familiarise themselves with the NHA team.

### **Introduction of Homesdirect**

As part of the NHA service Midland Heart have implemented an online housing registration system for housing applications. The Choice Based Letting (CBL) system, known as Homesdirect was introduced 1st August 2014. The service enables customers to register and update their housing register application directly, allowing for applicants 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 this scheme vulnerable people have been protected with continuing support and face to face help provided for customers who are not able to make an online application. The move to Homesdirect has supported both customers and agencies and has proved extremely successful.

Following the implementation of Homesdirect by Midland Heart, the Housing Allocation Policy has been reviewed. Changes from the review of the policy were agreed by Cabinet in March. These changes will now be processed by Abritas, the software developer of Homesdirect, and the revised policy is anticipated to be live by September 15. The Council and NHA are now commencing work to communicate these changes with customers of Homedirect.

Attached to this report is a summary of the Homesdirect customer satisfaction survey that was completed for the period January to April 2015. The feedback is very positive with 90% of customers commenting on helpful staff and the overall satisfaction with the service. A small number of customers commented that they had difficulties completing the online registration form; however, it appears they were not aware of the help available. This has been discussed with the Customer Contact Manager for Homesdirect who has made assurances that help is available for customers when required.

### **General Service Improvements**

NHA attends a variety of meetings with partner agencies to discuss the most vulnerable customers for example Mulit Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) for victims of Domestic violence and Priority Needs Group, for street homeless customers in the Borough. They are also an active partner in the allocation of properties to the Extra Care Schemes, Millrise and Lea Court.

The NHA Senior Advisor has now had training to improve the NHA web links and NHA website, to keep customers updated. The continuous improvements to the web links allow for customers to access self-help tools to which are enhanced through Homesdirect.

Midland Heart has made improvements to their administration processes and has now introduced a paperless IT system called 'Paperlite'. This has reduced the need to have paper files and recording and is a more efficient way of case handling.

## **Performance information**

Joint “Contract Monitoring” meetings are scheduled quarterly and representatives of Midland Heart attend the meeting with the Housing Strategy Officer, responsible for managing the NHA service contract. The contract and the service standards specification are reviewed and performance information is presented and considered at the meeting.

Attached is the key performance information supplied for the four quarters of 14/15. In addition commentary has been supported below to allow members to analyse and evaluate the performance information with invitation to provide any comment.

Homelessness preventions are lower in Q4, however, overall the number for 14/15 has exceeded the 600 target. Key to the prevention tools available to NHA are the discretionary housing benefit payments administered by the Council, together with access to social housing provided through nomination agreements.

The numbers of households now registered on Homesdirect has increased steadily since the system went live in August 2014. The numbers registered include those with a local connection to Newcastle-Under-Lyme Borough including customers that live in Stoke and Cheshire East. Attached to the report is an update of the social housing allocations and housing register information as from 1<sup>st</sup> June 2015

The percentage of nominations for quarter 4 was low, this was mainly due to the number of social homes made available by Aspire Housing. A separate breakdown of nominations made by Aspire is shown, to allow members to see the overall performance of the Council's 75% nomination agreement with Aspire Housing for 14/15.

**Q: Scrutiny members are requested to comment on the performance information and social housing allocation information.**

## **Key Challenges of Operations**

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

### **Nominations**

The Borough Council has agreed service level agreements with housing provider partners including Aspire Group, North Staffs Housing Association, Sanctuary Housing Association and Wrekin Housing Group. Ongoing performance of nominations is undertaken jointly by the Housing Strategy Officer, NHA and the housing providers to ensure fair access to suitable property allocation and mix within agreed nomination rights.

Homelessness Prevention through nominations for social housing are proving more challenging, due to less properties now being advertised through Homesdirect and the length of time it takes for repairs to be carried out. Registered providers also want “clean” references and are unwilling to accept customers with rent arrears or other poor tenancy history. Those customers who need high support to sustain tenancies are also proving

difficult to find suitable accommodation for, due to housing providers not having access to resources to support them

Housing providers are supportive of Homesdirect and relationships are enhanced through the North Staffs Lettings Forum which is hosted by the Borough Council. Performance of nominations is reported and scrutinised against the Homesdirect system. In addition to this, any operational matters are discussed, such as those mentioned above, at one-to-one meetings. These are held regularly with Aspire Housing and other providers as required. This approach is providing for useful exchange of information and encouragement for housing partners to promote and develop their participation with Homesdirect.

### **Customers with complex needs**

Increasingly, the NHA service are seeing customers presenting with complex issues and are seen as “too risky” for the housing providers to accept as a nomination through the Homesdirect, however NHA may still have a duty to assist or secure accommodation for them.

To date, NHA have made one homeless customer, who was owed full duty by the Council, a successful offer of accommodation into the Private Rented Sector. The successful outcome for the customer was aided by ARCH (Staffordshire Housing Group). ARCH provide support for single homeless people through Crisis funding, through the Council’s voluntary grants scheme ARCH provide 5 hours of support to families. This support is enabling NHA to help customers access accommodation into the Private Rented Sector.

In addition, ARCH can provide complementary support services to which customers can access if they are referred through NHA. Not only does this support the customer, it also strengthens the relationship with Private Sector Landlords. The project is proving to be a valuable homelessness prevention tool, which complements the prevention services that are offered through NHA. To date six customers have been helped to be suitably accommodated into the Private Rented Sector through the scheme.

The Council and NHA are encouraging more Private Sector Landlords to be made aware of the scheme, together with ongoing promotion and marketing by ARCH. The Council has supported the scheme for a further six months, with a possible extension following evidence of satisfactory performance and funding.

**Q: Do members have a view on the provision of support to homeless households and does the Committee wish to make any comments with regard to the voluntary grant?**

### **Temporary accommodation and B&B usage**

There is a need to improve the availability and quality of emergency homelessness accommodation, to reduce the risk of reliance on unsatisfactory alternatives such as bed and breakfast. Funding has been made available for the provision of a two bedroom house with Midland Heart under a separate contract arrangement, which commenced 1 April 2015.

A number of factors have contributed to an increase in the numbers of people presenting as homeless to which NHA have had to assist with interim emergency accommodation. During the four quarters of 14/15, there were 43 households accommodated into temporary accommodation, with the average stay in B&B being 3.2 weeks. The difficulties accommodating most of the households was due to the availability of provision of temporary accommodation to single people with complex needs as there were no vacancies with supported housing providers such as the Salvation Army or Lyme Trust.

The review of funding for supported housing projects by Staffordshire County Council resulted in the decommissioning of Ashfield's Court, which was dedicated to the provision for homeless young single people. This has resulted in no provision for this age group within the Borough. Provision now is limited to hostel accommodation at YMCA Stoke, to which Stoke City Council give priority to customers who live in Stoke. Housing Officers are engaging with Staffordshire County Council as the lead authority for young people in care and other Local Authorities across Staffordshire, to consider the issue of provision for young single people, however it should be recognised that there is no additional funding identified for this type of supported accommodation.

There is a limited amount of suitable B&B accommodation locally, B&B provision is costly and is not a satisfactory way of meeting the accommodation needs of homeless households and because it does not have management and service staff on site it provides no supervision for vulnerable residents. The Council are now undertaking a review of temporary accommodation including B&B provision. Suitable alternatives to support the provision of temporary accommodation are being considered with housing partners to explore options available within the Borough.

**Q: Scrutiny members are invited to provide any comment on the three key challenges to the operation of the NHA service and the approach taken by the Council and Midland Heart to develop and improve the outcomes to service users of NHA.**

### **Outcomes**

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

### **Conclusions**

The Newcastle Housing Advice service provided by Midland Heart has been fully mobilised along with the successful implementation of Homesdirect. The key challenges highlighted will continue to be the focus of development and improvements to the service, together with the monitoring of contract performance and quality of service provision. The NHA service continues to operate satisfactorily.

### **Relevant Portfolio Holder**

Councillor Bert Proctor – Planning and Housing

### **Appendices**

The performance information for the four quarters of 14/15

The Homesdirect social housing allocation update

The customer satisfaction survey, Homesdirect, January – April 2015