

Thurrock Diversity Network Limited



General Meeting, Thursday 15th October 2015

The Beehive 6pm – 8pm

Measuring the impact of changes to Thurrock Choice Homes Advertising of properties in local Newspapers.

About Thurrock Diversity Network

Thurrock Diversity Network is a Society for the Benefit of the Community, working for the benefit of disabled adult residents of Thurrock through the promotion of citizenship and the development of inclusive communities. We support and encourage disabled people's active participation and full integration into society. Thurrock Diversity Network campaigns through User-Led consultation and co-production initiatives (including Equality Impact Assessments) to shape and influence local and national policies and strategies affecting disabled people of all impairment types.

About the changes to Thurrock Choice Homes Advertising of properties in local Newspapers.

Thurrock Council Housing Directorate recently carried out some research into the use of newspapers for advertising Council properties which were available for bidding through Thurrock Choice Homes. Subsequently, Thurrock Council Housing Directorate are considering how they advertise properties in the future.

Thurrock Council Housing Directorate wanted to consider the impact of removing newspaper adverts on various equality groups – in particular older people and vulnerable people and those who are not IT literate - and what could be done to mitigate any impacts such as assisted bidding, help at hubs, etc.

As part of this engagement process, the Strategy Manager, Housing Business Improvement, was invited to speak and present at the October meeting of Thurrock Diversity Network, where the background and context of the initiative was explained, including the relevant processes, along with a number of key points (below).

Summary background and context

Thurrock Choice Homes (TCH) Bidding Process

- *TCH allocates empty properties on a weekly cycle, through the TCH website – Thursday – Monday via PC / Phone / Tablet.*
- *Also advertised in the Thurrock Gazette.*
- *The TCH Website has several accessibility options including 49 different languages, a British Sign Language (BSL) option, adjustable font sizes and “Browse Aloud.”*
- *The website shows all available properties.*
- *The Gazette only shows 14 properties.*
- *Anyone can look and you have to register online to bid – Help is available at libraries and hubs.*

The List

- *6737 active applicants.*
- *To be able to bid people have to have a local connection or a special reason, for example: if fleeing domestic violence.*

The Survey of TCH users

- *Newspaper advertising - £35,000 p/a.*
- *89% of applicants under 65 years old.*
- *21% of applicants identify as disabled (over 1000 people).*
- *17 applicants – blind or visually impaired.*
- *5.6% said they needed assisted bidding (375 people on form).*
- *2.75% would like TCH to bid on their behalf (185 people).*
- *12.76% said could not go out alone (840 people).*

- *In the first quarter of 2015-16 there was an increase in the percentage of people using the mobile site to bid, so that this is now the most popular means of placing a bid.*

KEYPOINT:

98% of bidding applicants now place bids via the TCH mobile site or website

- *The cost of advertising properties on the website and mobile site is included in the contract for the TCH system.*
- *There is an extra cost for advertising in the Thurrock Gazette, which amounts to around £35k per year and is paid for from the HRA.*

ISSUE:

Is paying for adverts in the newspaper good value for money?

ISSUE:

If adverts are removed from the newspaper, how are those who do not have the capacity or means to view adverts via the website or mobile site assisted?

Recommendations:

1. *A full impact assessment is undertaken to determine the impact of removing TCH adverts from the newspaper;*
2. *Consultation with equality groups and service users is undertaken as part of the impact assessment;*
3. *The assessment identifies ways of mitigating any impact;*
4. *Following, and subject to, the outcomes of the impact assessment, a recommendation is taken to November Housing O & S that the TCH newspaper adverts are removed in order to provide savings to the HRA with provisions in place to identify and assist the vulnerable and those requiring assistance.*

Thurrock Diversity Network members then provided input, views and feedback, covering three key areas:

- a) **Information about the diversity of the people potentially impacted by the proposed removal of Newspaper adverts for Thurrock Choice Homes. (Considering evidence in relation to Disability).**
- b) **How the proposed removal of Newspaper adverts for Thurrock Choice Homes could impact upon Disabled/older people/carers.**
- c) **Actions that could be taken to reduce/minimise potential negative impacts and deliver positive impacts? Consider possible alternative options that may be available.**

Each of these key areas is addressed in turn below:

<p>(a) The diversity of the people potentially impacted by the proposal</p>	<p>(b) How the proposal could impact upon Disabled/older people/carers.</p>	<p>(c) Actions that could be taken to reduce/minimise potential negative impacts and deliver positive impacts</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Older people, people with age-related conditions • Disabled people • People with mental health conditions • People with limited/no literacy skills will need recognition and particular support to become aware of the website and to be able to bid using the website • People with limited/no I.T. skills will need recognition and particular support to bid using the website • People with no Internet connection at home • People with no family or local friends network • People with dementia and related conditions • Carers may be placed under extra stress if required to support people to use the online bidding. • People with limited capacity 	<p>We believe that there is a substantial minority of people interested in social housing who do not have the skills/abilities to access online, or potentially written material.</p> <p>Our experience as an advocacy provider is that people who struggle to understand and access even simple application processes, will, in the first instance, avoid the process, until “forced” to by circumstance, and will need assistance and support to make the right choices.</p> <p>We agree that the adverts in the Gazette are costly and do not seem to be effective, other than to “steer” people to the website.</p> <p>£35,000 is a lot of money: However we are worried that some people who are really vulnerable might not remember that there are properties available – so stay on the list for long periods of time.</p>	<p>A better advert with details of how to access the housing system in all ways would likely be much more effective, informative and useful for people.</p> <p>Could there be some sort of automatic reminder system that every 6 months sends a letter to people showing/including the list and asking if they are still interested. This will help them remember they have an opportunity</p> <p>Save £30,000 and pay an existing support organisation like TCIL £5,000 per year to have a 10am – 3 pm phone line that can provide advice, information and guidance and face-to-face appointments.</p> <p>Give a “special log in” to certain people / community organisation locally that they can look in detail at what’s on offer or bid easily on behalf of others and have details of what / how many bids won what</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People with sensory impairments (hearing and or sight) • People with learning differences/difficulties 	<p>We are concerned about the potential reasons for the low uptake of the Enquirer as a source for TCH bidding. Is the 3% using the newspaper only due to the limited distribution of the relevant newspaper?</p> <p>Thurrock Council needs to ensure that the public are made aware of the forthcoming changes and to give clear details of all of the alternatives</p> <p>Vulnerable people needing support having to share confidential information with “strangers” e.g. Hub volunteers is a potential concern, staff and volunteers need sufficient confidentiality and client care training.</p> <p>Currently, the list in the Newspaper comprising of successful bids is the only way that you can satisfy yourself that your bid was correctly listed/registered, in preference and how many bids on certain properties took place, this is really useful.</p> <p>People may be more inclined to downsize if the process of bidding is as easy as possible and is as accessible as possible.</p>	<p>property – to help bid appropriately and increase odds.</p> <p>Provide an audio description of the properties available have a specific link to this online – with a link or contact details to above</p> <p>Website to give better details of properties – i.e. recent photograph (or intended illustration, if a new build) a floorplan, room sizes, local facilities, civic amenities (e.g. Close to G.P. bus stops, shops – more like “Right Move” – this would save people viewing unsuitable properties – This will enable people to make an informed bid.</p> <p>The Right of people to refuse a property needs to be clear. The website should be clearer on availability and possibility of adaptations for properties</p> <p>There needs to be better joined up working and support for people who are unable to access the website at all and unable to bid without help – i.e. a LAC missed an opportunity to bid for a vulnerable individual to downsize. And Families needing to downsize because of the Bedroom Tax.</p>
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	<p>People would be disadvantaged unless measures of mitigation (above) are put into place.</p> <p>Without information in the Newspaper adverts it wouldn't be possible to identify which properties and areas are the most popular. Having this information available means that people can use their bids wisely.</p> <p>Some Disabled people may not want to move, their surroundings are familiar, so they may be less inclined to bid.</p> <p>Mixed experiences of using the bidding system – some experiences of using bidding system had been positive.</p> <p>Some negative experience and had missed out on entirely suitable properties and other people had leapfrogged the queue.</p> <p>See the importance of digital inclusion but also recognise that some vulnerable groups would want a telephone call and to talk to someone, rather than to bid online</p>	<p>The list of successful bids that currently appears in the newspaper should be available digitally via the website and on email to anyone who participated in that bidding process during that week</p> <p>Print a weekly TCH sheet and make this available to those who need it. Also display in Civic areas, community centres, halls, buildings, hubs and libraries, as there are not hubs in every area across Thurrock.</p> <p>There needs to be an allocated staff member for individual bidders, who knows the individual's needs and preferences who can liaise with clients regarding suitable properties in their chosen area and make personalised bids. For example, use the money saved to employ specialist peripatetic housing advisors who can visit hubs and peoples' homes to assist in starting the process for those in need (e.g. receiving referrals from the LACs).</p> <p>People should be able to use a Freephone number to speak to staff about properties available that meet your bidding criteria.</p>
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		<p>There needs to be awareness raising and free training available for individuals and organisations about the accessibility options that are on the website e.g. BSL, Browse Aloud etc.</p> <p>The “Go On UK” Indicators of Digital Exclusion and Basic Digital Skills are a useful resource when considering local impacts: http://www.go-on.co.uk/resources/heatmap/#area-search-form-container (searchable by postcode).</p>
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Conclusion and Recommendations

Taken in the round, it is evident that disabled people and older people and those with limited, familial/carer or social network support, those with limited or no I.T. and/or literacy skills are most likely to be negatively adversely impacted upon by the proposed removal of Newspaper adverts for Thurrock Choice Homes.

We recommend that the potential impacts detailed in this Report be considered and that necessary support be put in place (achieved via multi-agency/cross-Directorate cooperation and funding wherever possible).

Also, that the suggested actions detailed above be taken to reduce/minimise potential negative impacts. Where this involves implementation of reasonable adjustments and improvements to the accessibility of the bidding process including provision of alternative formats and necessary support, advice and guidance, that steps are taken by Thurrock Council Housing Directorate and partners to ensure that disabled people, older people and other vulnerable groups are actively included, engaged and consulted throughout any intended process.

Thurrock Diversity Network – October 2015