

**30 November 2015**

**ITEM: 8**

## **Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

### **Thurrock Choice Homes – Newspaper Advertising**

**Wards and communities affected:**

All

**Key Decision:**

Key

**Report of:** Dawn Shepherd – Strategy Manager, Housing

**Accountable Head of Service:** Dermot Moloney – Strategic Lead, Housing

**Accountable Director:** David Bull - Director of Planning, Transportation & Housing

**This report is Public**

#### **Executive Summary**

Thurrock Choice Home (TCH) is the system used by Housing to allocate void properties – both Thurrock Council and Thurrock Registered Provider (RP) properties with nomination agreements.

Properties are advertised electronically on the Council and TCH websites and also on the TCH mobile site.

Properties are also advertised in the Thurrock Gazette but there is only provision for 14 properties and the cost to the Council is around £35,000 per year.

Less than 1% of applicants only view the adverts through the newspaper and therefore the housing directorate wishes to remove newspaper advertising.

An assessment of the impact has been considered and consulted upon, and measures to mitigate any adverse impacts have been considered.

The Housing Allocations policy states that properties will be advertised in the local newspaper and therefore this would be a change to the allocations policy, requiring Cabinet approval.

#### **1. Recommendation(s)**

- 1.1 That the committee is asked to consider and comment on the proposed changes to advertising set out in the Housing Allocations Policy and note the proposed mitigations.**

## **2. Introduction and Background**

2.1 Thurrock Choice Home (TCH) is the system used by Housing to allocate void properties – both Thurrock Council and Thurrock Registered Provider (RP) properties with nomination agreements.

2.2 Currently there is a weekly cycle of properties advertised and active applicants can place 2 bids each week on a property that they qualify for, in order to register an interest. A shortlist of interested applicants is drawn up once the bidding cycle ends.

2.3 Properties are advertised between Thursday and Monday each week in the following formats:

- On the TCH Website [www.thurrockchoicehomes.org.uk](http://www.thurrockchoicehomes.org.uk)
- On the TCH Mobile Site
- In the Thurrock Gazette (previously in the Thurrock Enquirer until 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2015)

2.4 The allocations team send out a weekly email with an electronic copy of all available properties which can be printed off or passed on electronically. There are over 60 people to whom this is currently sent – this includes housing officers, support workers and sheltered housing officers.

2.5 Once applicants have viewed the properties available they can place their bids using one of the following methods:

- Via the TCH website
- Via the TCH mobile site
- By calling the 24 hour automated bidding line
- By texting

2.6 When the bidding cycle ends, the results are also shown on the website, mobile site and in the Gazette.

2.7 The cost of advertising through the websites and mobile site is included in the operating cost of the choice based letting system.

2.8 The cost of advertising properties in the Thurrock Gazette is around £35,000 per year.

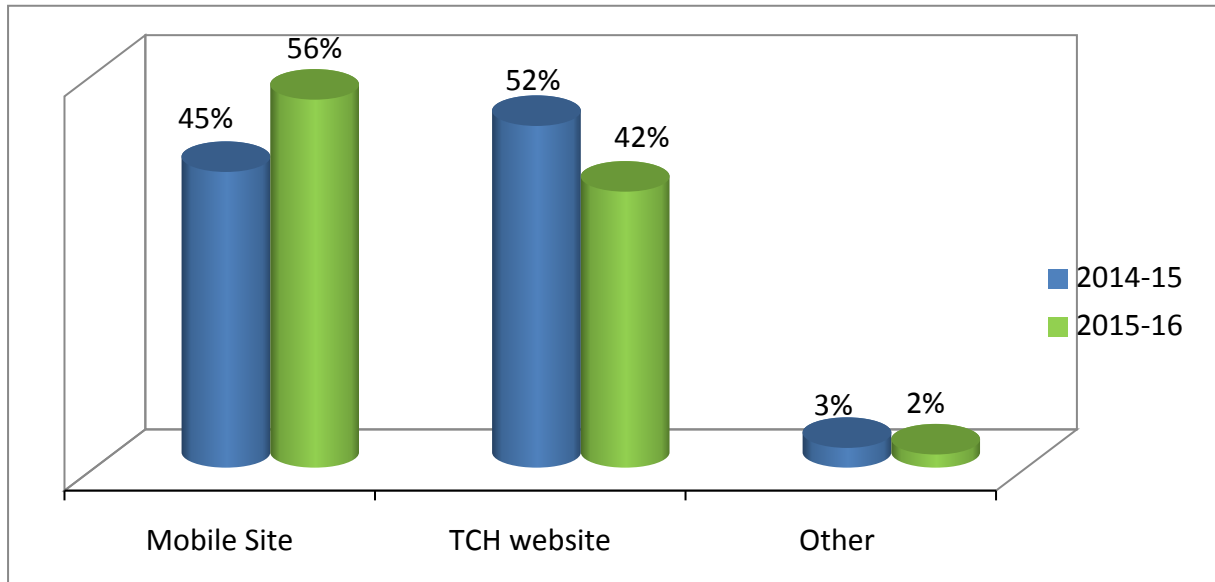
2.9 It is therefore essential to ensure this is good value for money.

## **3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options**

3.1 In the year 2014-15 most people placed bids via the websites or mobile site, with only 3 % using one of the other methods (Text or phone). In order to

place a bid on the website or mobile site applicants would also view available properties at the same time. Websites were most popular with 45% of bids.

But during the first half of the year 2015-16 the mobile site took over as the most popular option for placing bids and only 2% used neither the website nor mobile site – see comparison below:



In summary – 98% of applicants bidding now use the digital option which means at least 98% are viewing properties on these sites.

3.2 To investigate further, a survey of TCH users was undertaken from 25<sup>th</sup> June to 29<sup>th</sup> July 2015 to find out how applicants viewed the adverts each week.

The survey was available online and advertised via the TCH website. A message and a later reminder were sent to every live applicant (over 5,000) inviting them to participate.

To ensure the views of those needing assistance to bid were captured, officers at the hubs were asked to complete the survey with applicants when they assisted them to place a bid.

423 people responded to the survey – of which:

- 57% of applicants said they never received, or obtained for themselves, a copy of the newspaper;
- Only 19% received or obtained for themselves a copy of the newspaper every week;
- 3% said they only looked at adverts in the newspaper i.e. not on the web or mobile sites;
- However, of that 3% - 77% went on to use the website to bid anyway which meant they could view properties there.

This indicates that of the people surveyed 0.7% only used the newspaper adverts to view properties and not the digital options.

With current Housing waiting list figures this represents around 65 active applicants. Whilst not a high number, there needs to be a means of identifying and assisting such customers, if the adverts are to be removed.

- 3.3 Subsequently, officers carried out a consultation period with groups representing vulnerable people to consider the possible impacts and how they could be mitigated.

The following groups were considered to be most impacted by the removal of adverts:

- The elderly;
- Those with no access to computers or mobile telephones;
- Those with learning disabilities;
- The housebound who could not visit places where assistance could be given.

The consultation identified ways of mitigating the impacts as follows:

- Provision of support in libraries and hubs – volunteers can show applicants the full list of adverts on computer with more detail than available in the newspaper;
- Sheltered housing officers could visit or discuss bids on the telephone with elderly residents wishing to transfer;
- Assisted bidding could be put in place for those who needed it – this involves a specific option for each individual – for example a telephone call from the allocations team to discuss available properties or sending out a list of properties each week. This system is already in place for over 100 applicants including those in need of specially adapted properties and could be expanded;
- Many applicants already have family members who place bids on their behalf and who could therefore look at properties for them. This option could be encouraged;
- Young people could be encouraged to assist older applicants – this idea has been mooted with the Youth Cabinet and at least two volunteers have already been identified;
- Making better use of the systems' "Auto Bid" function whereby the computer matches applicants to suitable properties based on their needs and requirements including areas of choice and property type. It was noted that should this option be used there would need to be more flexibility around an offer refusal if the applicant had not personally placed the bid themselves;
- Local area co-ordinators and support workers at Family Mosaic hubs could provide the page of adverts which can be pulled off the TCH website or is received via email from the Allocations team each

week. Currently over 60 people receive the email but this could be expanded to more support workers and also to applicants.

The consultation also identified that digital options were increasingly becoming the only choice – for example online applications for housing and benefits and therefore this was a natural progression.

It was also recognised that the website meets the needs of those for whom English is not their first language, with a comprehensive translating service that translates the website into 49 different languages.

The website also provides a British Sign language translation service and “Browse Aloud” functions for the blind and visually impaired, and for those who cannot read.

- 3.4** The consultation identified the need for a rigorous advertising campaign to ensure that applicants were made aware of changes and alternative ways of receiving property information. This could include open day events.

A lead in period of at least 2 months was identified.

Officers would work closely with groups representing those identified as likely to be affected most to ensure alternatives are in place prior to the changeover.

Advertising of the changes would be carried out in the Thurrock Gazette.

The Equality Impact assessment carried out by Thurrock Diversity Network – at Appendix 1 - highlighted a number of options for mitigating any adverse impacts on those most likely to be affected by the changes. These options will be carefully considered and a plan for introducing the changes will be set out in the report which goes to Cabinet.

#### **4. Reasons for Recommendation**

- 4.1 Research carried out has indicated that advertising properties in the newspaper is meeting the need of a very small group of people and at £35,000 per year is disproportionately and unreasonably expensive.
- 4.2 Due to the lack of available space in the newspapers, the number of properties that can be advertised each week is limited to 14; also, tight deadlines for printing have to be met so last minute properties can get left out. Therefore those people who only use this option to view properties are at risk of not being able to view everything that is available for them and may be unaware of a suitable property. In comparison the website and mobile sites show all properties and can be updated by staff up to the last minute before advertising starts, ensuring maximisation of adverts.

4.3 Newspaper advertising does not offer translation services available via the website and mobile site.

## **5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)**

5.1 Consultation sessions were held and representatives from 17 different local organisations were sent details of the proposals and invited to a consultation event or to provide written feedback. Groups included those representing the elderly, physically and mentally disabled, those with learning disabilities and those suffering from domestic abuse.

Thurrock Council housing officers - estate, rents, welfare, allocations, sheltered and homeless - attended an event and discussed options for mitigating any impacts.

Officers attended the following groups to discuss the proposals:

- Thurrock Mental health forum;
- Thurrock Housing and safeguarding group (includes Adult Social care and Family Mosaic support groups)
- Thurrock Diversity Network

Formal written feedback was received from these groups and an equality impact assessment was prepared by the Thurrock Diversity Network (Appendix 1).

## **6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact**

6.1 Encouraging use of digital media instead of costly newspaper advertising meets with the Council's aims for creating an excellent customer experience at the lowest possible transaction cost - providing excellent online transactional services to support our residents in serving themselves.

6.2 Encouraging applicants to use digital solutions also encourages learning and opportunity and builds pride and responsibility. It also encourages less use of paper promoting a greener environment.

## **7. Implications**

### **7.1 Financial**

Implications verified by: **Jonathan Wilson**  
**Financial accountant, Corporate Finance**

Removal of adverts from the newspaper represents a saving to the Council of around £35,000 per year.

There will be no extra cost for the digital solution which is already in use.

There may be some initial extra cost involved in the lead up to the change to enable extra advertising and possible events, but this will be a one off expense.

## 7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Martin Hall**  
**Housing Solicitor and Team Leader**

An allocation scheme must include a statement as to the housing authority's policy on offering people a choice of accommodation or the opportunity to express preferences about the accommodation to be allocated to them (s.166A Housing Act 1996). It is for housing authorities to determine their policy on providing choice or the ability to express preferences.

The Council has opted to use a Choice Based lettings system to advertise available properties, so that applicants can express a choice over where and how they live by bidding for properties.

There is no legal requirement to advertise properties in the newspaper but Thurrock's Allocations policy states that newspaper advertising will be used and therefore a change to the allocation policy will be required. Cabinet approval is required for such changes.

## 7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Natalie Warren**  
**Community Development & Equalities manager**

The report clearly indicates that some people will be impacted by the proposal and that these people will meet the protected equality groups i.e. elderly and disabled. However the number is likely to be very minimal.

Consultation with groups representing the elderly and disabled has been undertaken and many options for mitigating the impact have been identified and will be implemented if the recommendation is agreed.

An equality impact assessment has been carried out by Thurrock Diversity Network with proposals for actions to mitigate the negative impacts.

The report has also highlighted a positive impact for using websites for those who need assistance with translations, the visually impaired and those with literacy needs.

7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

None

8. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

None

9. **Appendices to the report**

Appendix 1 – Equality Impact Assessment prepared by Thurrock Diversity Network

**Report Author:**

Dawn Shepherd

Strategy Manager, Housing