

JRF Programme Paper
Place

North Yorkshire Home Choice Evaluation

**David Mullins, University of Birmingham, Pat Niner,
University of Birmingham and Filip Sosenko, Heriot-Watt
University**

February 2014

This paper:

- presents data from an evaluation of the first year of North Yorkshire Home Choice, drawing on an evidence base of applicant and lettings data analysis, scrutiny of online information and publicity, interviews and focus groups;
- explores the wider implications of the evaluation, focussing on four themes (vulnerability, mobility, under-occupancy and banding) of general relevance to Choice Based Lettings (CBL) schemes;
- details responses to recommendations provided to North Yorkshire Home Choice. These 31 recommendations were provided in evidence papers during the evaluation to inform a review and development of the scheme.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) commissioned this paper as part of its work on Place, which aims to support resilient communities and places where people thrive.

ISBN 978 1 90958 609 3

© Heriot-Watt University 2014

Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Executive summary	4
Background.....	4
Evaluation evidence	6
Recommendations and conclusions.....	9
Background	11
National context	12
North Yorkshire distinctiveness	14
Drivers and context for Home Choice.....	15
Setting up and implementing Home Choice.....	18
External partners.....	23
Partnership evolution	24
Evaluation evidence	26
Aims and methods	26
The North Yorkshire Home Choice scheme, registrations and lettings	29
North Yorkshire Home Choice.....	30
Registrations and lettings.....	32
Customer perspectives on Home Choice	37
Vulnerability	41
Evaluation evidence	42
Mobility.....	54
Under-occupancy and over-crowding.....	58
Bronze banding.....	62
Optimistic view	63
Pessimistic view	64
Recommendations and conclusions	66
North Yorkshire Home Choice responses to evaluation findings	66
Review 2013	67
Wider implications of the evaluation	67
References	71
Appendices	73
Appendix A Evidence papers	73
Appendix B Equality impact assessment version 7 – November 2012.....	73
Appendix C North Yorkshire common allocations policy – September 2013.....	73

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Joseph Rowntree Foundation for funding the study and to John Low for managing the project. Thanks to all of the NYHC partners for providing information and support to the study. Special thanks to Yvonne Burns, Karen Jackson and Helen Fielding for assisting with the planning and administration of the study. Thanks to the 380 customers who took part in the three surveys and to the 31 individual home-seekers who took part in the focus groups and depth interviews and 18 stakeholders who took part in the scoping interviews.

Executive summary

This project was commissioned as part of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's focus on place in Yorkshire. It has been undertaken by the University of Birmingham with Heriot-Watt University in partnership with North Yorkshire Home Choice. It comprises an evaluation of the first year of operation of the Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme known as North Yorkshire Home Choice operated by a partnership of seven North Yorkshire housing authorities and the main housing associations in these areas. The authors are David Mullins and Pat Niner, both of the Housing and Communities Research Group, School of Social Policy at University of Birmingham and Filip Sosenko, of Heriot-Watt University's Institute for Housing, Urban and Real Estate Research.

Background

North Yorkshire was one of the last places in England to adopt choice based lettings following a JRF action research project ten years earlier focusing on the first adopter, Harborough (Brown, *et al.* 2003). Choice based lettings provide a single scheme for letting social housing in which housing applicants act as 'customers' and bid for properties advertised on a website. The current evaluation was commissioned by JRF and collected evidence on the first year of operation of North Yorkshire Home Choice and considered impacts for 'customers' including vulnerable groups, for landlords and for local authorities. It also documents the response by Home Choice partners to the evaluation.

In the ten years since CBL schemes were first adopted there have been several major evaluations and a number of research-based studies. These studies have identified a number of key issues arising from CBL, many of which proved relevant to the current evaluation. In particular the impacts of CBL on demand, active bidding, customers' understanding of the lettings process, involvement of vulnerable groups, tenancy sustainment and housing management efficiency have been carried forward into the current study.

New and specific issues arising from the distinctiveness of the North Yorkshire context include the scale and geographical scope of the partnership, the rurality and remoteness of much of the area covered, and high variability in housing supply and demand. Unlike many earlier CBL schemes there was a specific aim to increase mobility. The timing of the evaluation meant that new policy factors including the Localism Act and welfare reform were important influences on the operation of the scheme.

Adoption of North Yorkshire Home Choice was the consequence of a long period of national policy stability and increasingly persuasive promotion of CBL. The decision to go for a large sub-regional scheme appears to have been pragmatic and associated with the growth in sub-regional working. The distinctiveness of North Yorkshire has also had an impact with political as well as operational and technical barriers needing to be overcome in addition to sheer geographical scale and sparsity of population. The 'advantage of going last' does not appear to have paid any particular dividends for the partnership, partly because it was attempting something new and not comparable to many

early adopters. Indeed the timing seems to have been a disadvantage in that implementation coincided with the post-crisis period of austerity and public services cuts and the emergence of new drivers for allocations policy in the Localism Act and Welfare Reform.

Adoption of a sub-regional scheme was influenced by top down drivers to fill a gap in the national map of CBL coverage and new synergies arising from sub-regional working. Design decisions such as the establishment of a part-time co-ordinator supported by collaboration from retained housing teams in the districts were influenced by caution to retain local independence and minimise pooled costs. Functionality and flexibility of IT was constrained by procurement of an existing system from an IT provider.

Setting up Home Choice was a lengthy process with three key phases of design choice, IT procurement and advance training to 'Go Live' in July 2011. Key aims of the scheme were transparency rather than choice, mobility, and a balance between consistent policies and local variation (e.g. rural local lettings schemes). The scope of Home Choice was confined to most social housing lettings by partner landlords; while there was some expansion to include some non-partners, the scope was not extended to include the private rented sector (PRS).

Governance and operational arrangements were important enablers to achieve scheme aims. A sub-regional scheme required all partners to be represented on the Partnership Board and key policy decisions to be ratified by the councils/boards of individual partners. The decision to employ just one part-time co-ordinator required most operational matters to be delegated to partners and co-ordinated through a middle manager Operations Group. It would have been hard to secure agreement for a more centralised structure at a time of spending cutbacks and when most partners were concerned to preserve a degree of autonomy and control over access to scarce social housing.

The Partnership took a strong interest in Equality Impacts and a standing sub-group developed an Equality Impact Assessment and liaised closely with the evaluation on the experience of vulnerable applicants. The transparency of the scheme is enhanced by the Website, Full Scheme Guide and Lettings Policy accessible to all users who are also able to track property availability and lettings outcomes. This public information assists accountability and potential challenge, but some materials are available only in staff guidance on policy interpretation.

An audit of customer-facing materials early in the evaluation (see Evidence Paper 3) provided recommendations for improving accessibility to seven potentially vulnerable applicant groups; these were accepted and improvements planned by the Equality Monitoring Group.

The success of Home Choice depends on external partnerships well beyond the core members of the scheme. Cuts to advice services and community and voluntary groups during the implementation of the scheme therefore provided significant challenges. One area where external partners had been very

successfully integrated with Home Choice was in relation to youth homelessness, with effective move-on arrangements secured for young people ready for independent living after successful engagement with support.

The Home Choice partnership was still in an early stage of evolution at the time of the evaluation. While it had been successfully established, the experience of the first year was one of gradual consolidation and adjustment to a rapidly changing policy context rather than a step change to a more comprehensive scheme for example embracing private sector housing options. This was probably simply a case of getting by with diminishing resources and increases in severe housing need. It is therefore perhaps significant that one of the key changes in Year 1 was to review the active register by excluding non-bidders who did not respond in 28 days to a renewal notice; this reduced the active register from 17,000 to 15,000. This followed an increase in registered demand from 15,000 to 17,000 between April and September 2012 as registration exceeded lettings, an experience similar to earlier CBL schemes where the evidence was of significant increases in low level demand (Marsh *et al.* 2004, Pawson *et al.* 2006).

Evaluation evidence

The evaluation was undertaken in a participative style with evidence papers provided as work in progress to inform the Home Choice policy review; detailed findings were explored with the Home Choice Equalities Monitoring Group. This was seen as helpful by the partners and interim reports were seen as a useful resource for staff induction, particularly of the Home Choice Co-ordinator, in a period of high staff turnover.

Five evidence papers were produced and published on-line as work in progress to stimulate discussion of emerging findings and to inform the Home Choice partnership's policy review, which was completed in June 2013 following consultation in October 2012.

The breadth of the evidence base is apparent from the use of data on over 15,000 applicants, nearly 3,500 people rehoused and surveys of nearly 400 individual households, and the range of methods used. Depth was achieved through individual interviews and focus groups involving nearly 50 individuals. Links to practice were achieved through website tours, analysis of documents, attendance at Partnership Board and Equality Monitoring Group meetings and regular communication with the Home Choice Co-ordinator post holders throughout the project.

In this report evidence is presented in six short chapters covering:

- the scheme itself, registrations and lettings activity;
- customer perspectives;
- vulnerability;
- mobility;
- under-occupancy and over-crowding;
- priority banding.

By September 2012, some 15 months after its introduction, just over 27,000 applications had been made to Home Choice, including just over 10,000 applications brought forward from earlier schemes in July 2011. Of the total, almost 3,000 (11 per cent) had been housed and 17,400 were on the active register and able to bid (64 per cent).

Analysis of the register in April 2012 showed that more than half of applicants require one bedroom only, and only about one in eight require three bedrooms or more. Almost two-thirds of applicants (62 per cent) were in Bronze band and a further third in Silver. Fewer than one applicant in ten was in Gold or Emergency bands. Overall, 43 per cent of applicants had submitted at least one bid. The number of bids made ranged from 1 to 164. York stands out as accounting for three in every ten lettings made. There is a relatively limited supply of one bedroom properties (41 per cent) compared to the minimum bedroom requirements of applicants (57 per cent requiring one bedroom). Gold band applicants in York have more than three times as many 'competitors' bidding for a property than Gold band applicants in Craven.

There is no evidence that Home Choice is excluding older or more vulnerable applicants. Indeed, tenancies started include slightly higher proportions of people with some disability, those needing help in bidding and those requiring an adapted property. The Home Choice priority scheme is clearly selecting in favour of homelessness, risk of homelessness, and health and wellbeing issues since much higher proportions of those housed than of applicants demonstrate such needs. A quarter of tenancies started involved someone already a tenant of a social landlord and almost one in five was a tenant transferring from a main partner landlord; 'good neighbour' transfers account for half of these moves. Applicants who are neither existing social tenants nor homeless or at risk of homelessness have the poorest chances of rehousing (79 per cent of active register but just 43 per cent of lettings).

Customer surveys present a generally favourable perception of Home Choice in relation to the amount of choice that the new system offers. Most applicants, whether successful or not, valued the opportunity to browse and select from available properties. The proportion of successful applicants who believe the process had afforded them at least some choice is higher under the new system than under the previous one. The vast majority of applicants rehoused via Home Choice found the new allocations system easy to understand and fair. However, unsuccessful bidders are markedly less satisfied than those successfully rehoused.

Customer surveys suggest older people are having greater difficulties in using Home Choice and greater dissatisfaction amongst older unsuccessful bidders. Moreover, customer surveys revealed three most common barriers to participation in Home Choice: having no internet access, difficulty in reaching a landlord or council office, and having a disability.

Home Choice customers value system feedback on their bids, but only 40 per cent make effective use of the 'recent lets' section of the website to inform their

bidding. There is scope to increase awareness of this section and to improve its design to increase perceived usefulness.

Vulnerable clients appear to be well represented amongst lettings compared to applications, to benefit from the banding system and to be more satisfied with Home Choice than many other (lower priority) applicants. Effective support for vulnerable clients to engage with Home Choice has been provided by support providers. Improvements to information to make Home Choice more accessible and usable by vulnerable groups have followed our audit. Social services support for people with learning difficulties could be more fully integrated with Home Choice. Cuts in funding of support agencies is a potential threat; refresher training is required as staff and volunteers turn over.

Mobility across local authority areas has increased under Home Choice and this is perceived as a welcome extension of choice by a significant minority of customers. The potential for further mobility between high and low demand areas through strategic bidding is apparent as is the opportunity for some to move for personal reasons. However, these advantages are not widely appreciated and for many applicants there are personal constraints (such as medical and family factors) to moving as well as some constraints imposed by the scheme itself. For some applicants cross-areas mobility is seen as a disadvantage of the scheme, potentially increasing competition for homes in the only areas where they want to live.

One of the unusual features of the original Home Choice lettings policy was the opportunity provided to bid for properties either one bedroom larger or one bedroom smaller than strictly required under bedroom category assessment rules. All types of household other than single parent families showed an increase in under-occupancy under Home Choice compared with previous schemes. 26 per cent of lettings gave applicants one bedroom over minimum requirements. 623 allocations were made to applicants with a minimum requirement of one bedroom who were aged under 65. Of these, 448 (72 per cent) bid for and were allocated one bedroom, and 175 (28 per cent) bid for and were allocated two. Such applicants would potentially be affected by changes to Housing Benefit commonly known as the 'Bedroom Tax', and this aspect of the scheme was changed in 2013. Applicants will now be informed at registration what types and size of property they will be able to bid for.

Increased transparency offered by Home Choice could have had two sets of consequences for the 62 per cent of the register in Bronze band who were competing for 13 per cent of the lettings. Firstly, there might be a willingness to widen choices and bid strategically and often to take advantage of properties in lower demand. Secondly, there might be a reduced interest in engaging with social housing providers given an awareness of the futility of such engagement.

The evaluation explored both scenarios. The optimistic scenario was supported by work to reduce the number of non-bidders and enhance the information available for strategic bidding. This identified scope to improve customer understanding of the system to inform bidding behaviour by improving design

and encouraging use of the recent lets section of the website. Further support for clients who reported difficulties in bidding was also promoted.

The pessimistic scenario explored reasons behind the low proportion (35 per cent) of Bronze band applicants bidding. Focus groups highlighted the sense of futility amongst many Bronze banders who felt that they could do nothing to get greater priority. There was a recognition that unless supply of housing increases, Bronze band will be of no use to most applicants. Home Choice probably exacerbates rather than reduces the feeling of unfairness and helplessness. The scope for Home Choice to offer meaningful alternative housing options to Bronze banders is likely to be a test of its long term acceptability. Implications are either to extend Home Choice as a one-stop route into all rented and affordable housing in North Yorkshire or to restrict the scale of the Bronze band problem by introducing more systematic review of applications.

Recommendations and conclusions

The evaluation was designed to provide feedback to inform policy development by the North Yorkshire Home Choice Partnership. Interim findings provided by the five evidence papers were discussed with Home Choice partners at several stages in the study; particularly at the Partnership Boards in October 2011 and 2012 and at the Equalities Monitoring Group in October 2011 and March 2012.

31 recommendations were made to NYHC and most of these were accepted and included in the revised Equality Impact Assessment version 7 in November 2012.

This evidence was used by Home Choice partnership to inform its own policy review October 2012 – June 2013.

The study also provides insights that are of wider relevance and may be related back to the issues arising from the literature review in the Background section of the report. These are presented as broad conclusions to end the report.

While difficult to attribute changes in lettings outcomes to the NYHC scheme alone, there appear to have been some changes after the introduction of the scheme, the most notable of which is an increase in mobility across authorities.

The most significant achievement of NYHC was the establishment of an effective partnership covering very different types of housing authority and housing associations over a very extensive geographical area.

Much diversity still remains, not just because of caution about over-integration but because local differences in housing supply and demand mean that one size really would not fit all.

The extent to which all of the effort involved was worth it will become clearer in the next few years. Early wins included the boost given to sub-regional collaboration, for example for the development of the sub-regional housing and

homelessness strategy and much improved collaboration between housing and support providers on a pathway out of homelessness for young people.

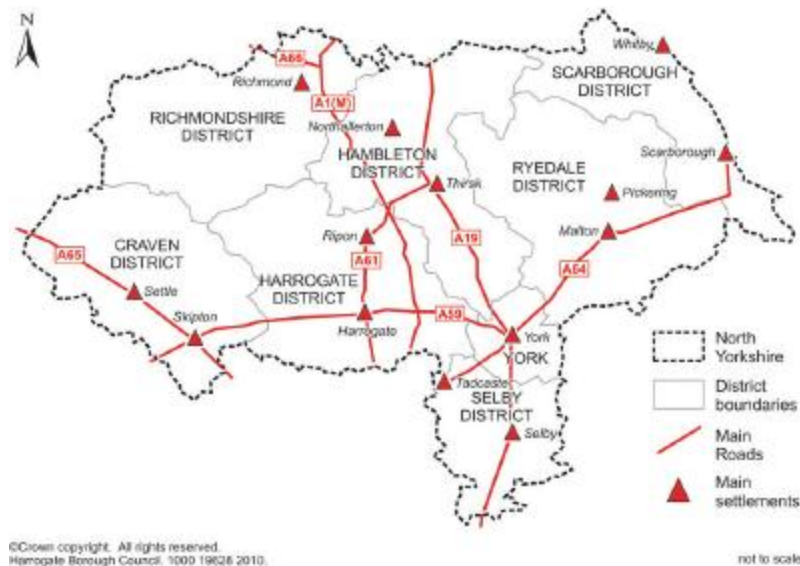
Vulnerable clients, including homeless people, have generally fared well. Many applicants welcome the increased 'choice' offered by the scheme, although unsuccessful bidders are more sceptical, and some people preferred the old system. The biggest challenge remains to create meaningful choices for customers in the lowest priority bands.

Background

North Yorkshire was one of the last parts of England to adopt Choice Based Lettings (CBL). The Home Choice scheme came into operation in July 2011 across seven of the eight local authorities in this sparsely populated and mainly rural area (see Figure 1). The local authority partners are:

- City of York Council;
- Hambleton District Council;
- Richmondshire District Council;
- Ryedale District Council;
- Craven District Council;
- Scarborough Borough Council;
- Selby District Council.

Figure 1: North Yorkshire Sub-region Showing Seven NYHC Areas and Harrogate



Four of these local authorities are no longer stock holding landlords. The first non-local authority partners were therefore the stock transfer housing associations initially set up in the following districts and their successor housing groups:

- Hambleton (Broadacres);
- Ryedale (Yorkshire Housing);
- Craven (Yorkshire Housing);
- Scarborough (Yorkshire Coast Homes).

Six other housing associations with significant lettings in the partnership area subsequently joined Home Choice as full participants:

- Home Group;
- Tees Valley/Fabrick Housing;

- York Housing Association;
- Endeavour Housing Association;
- Muir;
- Jephson.

A further 22 non-partner landlords now have associated landlord status and use Home Choice for lettings within the partnership area.

Any UK resident aged 16 or over can apply to join the Home Choice register and most housing association and local authority stock in North Yorkshire is now allocated through Home Choice employing choice based lettings principles. An evaluation commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) collected evidence on the first year of operation of Home Choice and considered impacts for 'customers' including vulnerable groups, landlords and local authorities. This report also considers the response by Home Choice partners to the evaluation and resulting policy changes made to the scheme in 2013. The main issues of wider relevance to come out of this evaluation arise from the scale and geographical spread of the partnership, impacts on cross boundary moves, success in responding to the needs of vulnerable groups, impacts of Welfare Reform on bedroom eligibility and issues in procuring effective IT.

National context

Following the initial JRF-funded action research on transferring the Dutch choice based lettings approach to England (1998-2002) published in 2003 (Brown *et al.* 2003), choice based lettings were supported in the Housing Green Paper 2000 and adopted as a national policy in the Homelessness Act 2002. Choice based lettings provide a single scheme for letting social housing in an area in which housing applicants act as 'customers' and bid for properties advertised on a website, with their ability to bid successfully constrained by their priority 'banding'. CBL schemes have now been adopted by over 95 per cent of English housing authorities and there is a wide literature considering their impact. Overall aims of such systems have not departed greatly from those set out by Brown *et al.* (2003) with Harborough District Council to 'improve customer choice and satisfaction; the effectiveness and performance of the allocations system and the availability of detailed information to inform local housing strategy' (Brown *et al.* 2003 p. 2).

Piloting Choice Based lettings: An Evaluation of 27 pilot early adopters was undertaken between 2001 and 2005 by Cambridge and Bristol Universities (DCLG, 2004). This evaluation found that good progress had been made towards delivering many of the intended benefits in the pilot areas with applications for social housing increasing and 'customers' welcoming increased transparency and recognising that active bidding required extra effort but produced worthwhile results. For their part landlords reported improved lettings and housing management performance and the report concluded that it was possible to implement CBL successfully in both high and low demand areas. Higher banding of vulnerable households was maintaining their priority, but support to vulnerable households was seen as 'the weakest part of CBL pilot

activity overall' (DCLG, 2004 p.173). Other limitations evident at that time were in engagement of private landlords, and 'the factor that most frequently hindered progress was the procurement and implementation of the complex hardware and software required' (p.6). Most pilots were concerned with creating a single application and bidding process for all social landlords across a single local housing authority, although some multi-authority schemes were already being attempted at that time. However, the report noted that at that time 'encouraging local movement from areas of high demand to areas of low demand was not an aspiration for many pilots' (p.175).

A few years later a report on *Monitoring the Longer Term Impact of Choice Based Lettings* was undertaken by Heriot-Watt University and BMRB (DCLG, 2006). This moved the focus on from early adoption to consider the longer term experience of 11 CBL schemes in England and two in Scotland. It considered impact from a number of perspectives including:

- Impact on Demand for Social Housing (which had increased compared to non-CBL areas; with active bidding from those registered increasing over time);
- Impact on Lettings Outcomes (with few lettings going to lower priority bands, but higher priority bands such as homeless applicants able to secure better quality properties than previously);
- Impact on Vulnerable Groups such as older people, ethnic minority communities (older people less likely to bid, BME groups more likely to apply and less likely to be segregated, but limited evidence on other vulnerable groups);
- Tenancy Sustainment (limited evidence but it appeared that more tenancies were intact after 12 months compared with previous lettings policies);
- Mobility Impacts (increased intra-authority moves in some areas, but limited data on cross authority mobility);
- Impact on Housing Management Performance and Cost-Effectiveness (high set-up and increased running costs but some evidence of pay back in faster relets, lower refusals and reduced tenancy turnover).

The brief for and conduct of the North Yorkshire Home Choice Evaluation incorporated aspects that featured in the two major national evaluations. Reflecting the pilot study there was a consideration of drivers, design and implementation issues, taking into account the broad geographical scope of Home Choice. Reflecting the longer term impacts study there was a consideration of impact for customers, including registration and bidding behaviour and perceived choice; impact for landlords and local authorities; mobility between authorities; and policy and governance issues arising from a cross-authority partnership approach.

Following on from the national evaluations, there has been an increasing volume of academic research on CBL and the reasons for its spread in the UK and internationally (Mullins and Pawson, 2005; Haffner and Hoekstra, 2006; Pawson and Hulse, 2011). Several authors consider the extent and nature of real choice offered (Bochel and Somerville, 2008; Manzi, 2010) and the wider

implications of the shift from citizens to consumers or customers in 'responsibilising' tenants (Flint, 2003; Marsh, 2004; Mullins and Rowlands, 2004; Needham 2008). Two important issues within this literature have been whether the support needs of vulnerable households have been adequately met (Hall *et al.* 2008; Appleton and Molyneux, 2009) and what impact CBL has on discrimination and segregation, particularly by race and ethnicity, with a robust argument emerging on positive and negative impacts and the importance of accessible language information (Dowding and John, 2009; Robinson, 2009; van Ham and Manley, 2009; Manley and van Ham, 2011; Inside Housing, 2011).

Ethnicity plays a relatively small role in North Yorkshire, but the evaluation considered the question of language in scheme publicity and registration, and the experience of Gypsy Travellers. The evaluation brief placed a strong emphasis on the wider issue of vulnerability, an issue that the Home Choice Equality Monitoring Group was already addressing through its Equality Impact Assessment of Home Choice. In the North Yorkshire context particular emphasis was placed on vulnerabilities associated with different age groups, mental health and learning disabilities. The position of young homeless people, people with mental health issues and learning disabilities was the focus of depth interviews on vulnerability and access. Meanwhile applicant surveys and focus groups enabled the study to pay particular attention to the experience of older applicants in registering, bidding and housing outcomes and whether differentials found nationally were repeated in North Yorkshire.

Additional themes that are not well covered in the existing literature that were important to consider in the Home Choice Evaluation were the impact of rurality and sparsity of population in large parts of the county combined with high demand markets in York and Scarborough and the impact of the scheme on inter-authority mobility.

A final theme that proved to be important during the evaluation period 2011-12 was the significant change to national policy frameworks in the wake of the Localism Act 2011 and Welfare Reform Act 2012 that affected both the expectations and performance of Home Choice and therefore loomed large in the local policy review. The 'Bedroom Tax' in particular led to significant pressure to change the ways in which Home Choice had previously extended applicant choice to allow applicants to overcrowd or underoccupy by one bedroom in bidding for otherwise suitable properties.

These considerations are reflected in the structure of the evidence section of this report which begins by providing an overview of the scheme itself, registrations and lettings, and customer perspectives before exploring four distinctive themes (vulnerability, mobility, occupancy and Bronze banding) that arise from the study.

North Yorkshire distinctiveness

North Yorkshire Home Choice effectively filled one of the last gaps in the national map of adoption of CBL. National data shows that Home Choice

participants were among the last 13 per cent of housing authorities to adopt CBL. In April 2011 Yorkshire and Humberside had the lowest proportion of adopters nationally at 67 per cent (DCLG, 2011). However the seven Home Choice partners adopting a joint scheme in July 2011 left Harrogate district as the only non-adopter in the region; adoption was no longer recorded in the equivalent Local Authority Statistical Return for 2011-12.

One of the most distinctive features of Home Choice is its extensive geographical coverage; not only do the seven partner authorities themselves stretch across 100 miles from Settle to Scarborough (driving time 2 hours 49 minutes) but registration is open to anyone in the UK. Activity is somewhat lower relative to other CBL schemes, with 15,000 live applicants in 2011 and 1,500 lettings a year. There are very substantial differences in housing demand with over half of the active applicants coming from just two participating authorities, York and Scarborough. Consequently there are also big variations in the mean number of bids per advert, from just 18 in Craven to 85 in York, almost five times higher.

Another important contingent factor affecting the new scheme was the substantial variation in lettings policies as well as local demographic, housing market and supply:demand prior to adopting Home Choice. Evidence from the North Yorkshire Sub-Regional Housing and Homelessness Strategy published after Home Choice was set up (October 2012) maps some of the distinctive features of the sub-region. It notes that almost a third of the population of just under 600,000 lives in York, with a further 21 percent in Scarborough and Harrogate (not part of Home Choice). This uneven demography combined with housing market variations helps to explain some of the variations in supply and demand for housing picked up by Home Point. There is a significant affordability problem in York and Scarborough and the commuting belt adjacent to Leeds City Region. There are also high house prices in many rural areas (especially on the coast and in the two National Parks where second home ownership is particularly high). This is made worse by the low proportion of social rented homes compared to regional and national averages.

Moreover there was no strong tradition of sub-regional collaboration in the decades preceding the development of sub-regional strategies under the Sustainable Communities Plan developed by national government in 2003.

Drivers and context for Home Choice

Scoping interviews for the evaluation held in October 2011 clarified the drivers that eventually led to the establishment of North Yorkshire Home Choice which went live in July 2011. The most significant was the top down pressure to achieve the national target of 100 per cent adoption of CBL by 2010. This inevitably led to pressure being placed on the slowest authorities, and North Yorkshire accounted for the entire deficit in adoption in Yorkshire and Humberside region which in April 2011 had the lowest adoption rate of any English region.

One interviewee summed up the external pressure as coming from DCLG in 2006-7 to encourage slower authorities in North Yorkshire to engage with CBL and to develop a stronger sub-regional strategy generally – *“on CBL we were directed to Cornwall as a large rural county model that had been incentivised by a grant covering most of the set up costs”*.

The second and enabling driver was the gradual development of sub-regional working which was to provide the mechanism for the rather unusual strategy of tackling CBL collectively rather than on an authority by authority basis.

A different interviewee pointed to the origins of sub-regional working in North Yorkshire in a critical report from the Audit Commission around 2006 which led to work on sub-regional strategy including work towards CBL. *“There were tensions between more and less enthusiastic partners with some stock transfer landlords being a bit reluctant to risk losing independence and some local authority members fearing ‘invasion’ of bidders from higher demand areas.”*

One interviewee claimed that Scarborough and York were the first two LAs to be involved in Home Choice. They decided that they would develop a scheme and see who would join them. *“North Yorkshire was a gap on the DCLG map of CBL schemes and they sold the idea hard. North Yorkshire is a conservative area and politicians queried the benefits of CBL.”*

These interviews also highlighted the sheer scale and complexity of the task of achieving consensus for a single scheme across very different local authorities and involving the main housing association providers. Inevitably this was a lengthy and difficult process lasting around five years from initial tentative discussions to ‘Go Live’ in July 2011. Some of the barriers to be overcome were of a political nature.

The process of developing Home Choice was outlined by an interviewee as *“a journey from initial scepticism, through the Cornwall visit arranged by DCLG which convinced sceptics, to working arrangements in agreeing the Policy and getting it adopted by partner organisations”*. This process took much longer than anticipated.

Another interviewee elaborated on some of the reasons for the length of the process. *“Negotiations took a long time because of political differences with a big P – councillors favouring ‘local homes for local people’ and small p – housing associations prizing independence and charitable status and differing on incomes, rent arrears and occupancy rules. There were compromises so that everyone got most of what they wanted (e.g. routes back in for rent arrears cases through repayment agreements, one extra bedroom etc). Local members were consulted and re-consulted at each turn. One authority went through three housing cabinet members during the process.”*

The biggest concern for councillors in several authorities was reported to have been the potential of the scheme to increase cross-boundary mobility from the more high demand urban areas (notably York and to a lesser extent Scarborough) to the rural areas and market towns. Other recurring points of contention (hinted at in the interviews above) were the treatment of rent arrears, bedroom assessment rules, and difference of view between stock transfer landlords and local authority enablers around issues of independence, charitable purpose and homeless nominations. One consequence of the political prominence of allocations and lettings issues was the decision by Harrogate Borough Council not to participate in the scheme, despite its initial remit being for the entire sub-region in which Harrogate lies.

More operational and technical barriers were apparent from other scoping interviews. The biggest issue was seen as consistency. The Operations Group was seen as a good collaborative forum to take this issue forward and ensure that the Partnership Board was clear about practicalities.

From the Operations Group we learned of the diversity of policy and practice prior to Home Choice. While most represented landlords had operated paper-based application systems and points schemes and all favoured those with a local connection to some extent, there were considerable variations in eligibility and entitlement. For example, one applied single offer policies, another allowed two refusals before a penalty, while one stock transfer landlord had no limit to refusals.

The opportunities to learn from earlier experience were a potential advantage of being a late adopter. However, apart from the Cornwall CBL also known as Home Choice, which provided the immediate model, few earlier schemes were as ambitious in geographical coverage nor covered an equivalent mix of sparsely populated rural areas and high demand urban centres as did North Yorkshire. Moreover, obvious areas where earlier learning should have helped, for example in IT procurement, were to prove disappointing.

A crucial technical constraint remarked on by many of the scoping interviews related to IT procurement. One interviewee summed this up as “*not good. The contractors interpreted the agreed Policy in their own way rather than as intended and then charged to put it right – they argued that the partnership signed off the specification and things should have been spotted at this stage. There was no good will involved. Dealing with IT problems in a sub-regional scheme has its difficulties as different partners spot things and need changes. A central log book was developed to co-ordinate requirements but this could cause delay.*”

A final distinctive feature of North Yorkshire Home Choice is that its implementation coincided with a period of substantial change and cost reduction in local government in the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis and austerity measures introduced by the Conservative-led Coalition Government.

One interviewee observed that “*The political background to introduction was difficult. Obviously it is more difficult to introduce change in turbulent times. Not ideal to introduce in time of cuts and restructurings. As a consequence CBL is being blamed for things it is not responsible for.*”

Thus the adoption of North Yorkshire Home Choice was the consequence of a long period of national policy stability and increasingly persuasive promotion of CBL. The decision to go for a large sub-regional scheme appears to have been pragmatic and associated with the growth in sub-regional working. The distinctiveness of North Yorkshire has also had an impact with political as well as operational and technical barriers needing to be overcome in addition to sheer geographical scale and sparsity of population. The ‘advantage of going last’ does not appear to have paid any particular dividends for the partnership, partly because it was attempting something new and not comparable to many early adopters. Indeed the timing of implementation seems to have been a disadvantage in that implementation coincided with the post-crisis period of austerity and public services cuts and the emergence of new drivers for allocations policy in the Localism Act and welfare reform.

Setting up and implementing Home Choice

The scoping interviews and documentary review in October 2011 also provided some pointers to the process that had been adopted for setting up and implementing Home Choice and some of the key design decisions that were to affect the subsequent impact of the scheme. This section briefly considers the process, key aims and scope of the scheme, governance and operational structures, Equality Impact, Lettings Policy and Scheme Guide, customer information, key external partners and plans for evolution of the partnership. In this way it gives a flavour of the baseline position for the evaluation; providing the reader with some key pegs on which to hang the evaluation findings and impacts in later sections of this report.

As noted above these design and implementation decisions were effected over a period of nearly five years. This lengthy process can be broken down into three main periods. First, a period of general shaping of the partnership and its aims stimulated by the Audit Commission and DCLG pressure and including the influential visit to Cornwall in 2007. Second, a period of more active preparation including broad design choices and IT procurement. Third, a period of detailed project planning and ‘advance training’ led by a seconded project manager who also had the lead responsibility for liaison with the IT provider to work towards ‘Go Live’.

Reflecting the national policy debates outlined above there were a number of divergent views about the aims and potential benefits of Home Choice. In particular there was a fairly strong consensus amongst scoping interviewees that the key benefit would be increased transparency rather than increased applicant choice. One transparency issue valued by local authority interviewees was in making nominations more transparent and subject to monitoring. For example it is immediately apparent when eligible bidders for specific properties

are 'skipped' by housing associations for example because they don't meet their criteria. More generally it was anticipated that transparency would make housing applicants more aware of the shortage of housing supply and therefore more realistic about their engagement with housing providers. This was particularly the case in comparing the Home Choice scheme with previous lettings policies in the participating authorities. However, there was a degree of scepticism about advantages of active bidding, particularly in relation to the dominant low priority Bronze band which accounted for 62 per cent of the active register but just 13 per cent of lettings in the first year of operation. Additional benefits of sub-regional mobility became more important as the scheme design progressed. Some partners saw benefits in standardising access policies, and reducing the role of nominations. However, the importance of local policies, particularly rural local lettings schemes, was maintained and this was an important factor in securing agreement on the scheme, particularly from councillors in the rural districts.

The scope of the scheme was fairly clear in aiming to include all lettings by key partners who comprised the main providers of the bulk of social housing, local authorities and stock transfer landlords, in the wide geographical area covered by the scheme. Opportunities were also created for housing associations with significant lettings in the area to opt into the scheme as full or associate partners. By 2013 a total of 17 full partners and 22 associate partners had been recruited to the partnership. Despite some early discussion, and active support by some members, there had been no moves to widen the scope to include private rented properties by the time the fieldwork ended in Summer 2012 and this option was not included in the 2013 policy review. One interviewee explained that his authority had wanted PRS properties to be included in Home Choice advertisements and bidding as a selling point for its own landlord accreditation scheme. This proposal ran into difficulties over charging landlords and ensuring quality in a period when the partners were still bedding down the system and trying to do more with less.

There was slightly less clarity about social housing lettings that would be excluded from the scheme through the operation of 'direct matches' to be made by landlords in unusually serious or sensitive cases and other defined circumstances. This was generally linked to landlord interest management transfers, applicants unable to bid for themselves or those not bidding within the timescale required to enable move on from temporary homeless accommodation. During the first nine months of the scheme direct matches accounted for around 1 in 12 lettings by NYHC partner landlords.

The governance structure of the Home Choice partnership was a key pre-condition to successful set up and implementation. Overall governance responsibility rests with a Partnership Board on which each of the participating local authorities and core housing association partners are represented. The requirement for all full partners to be represented in the Partnership Board made this somewhat unwieldy, leading to delegation of detail to working groups. Interestingly given the political contentiousness of the scheme in some authorities, a decision was taken that this would be an officer board rather than including local authority councillors. This led to considerable workload in

reporting back and getting decisions ratified by council or board in each participating local authority and housing association. One interviewee summed up the governance burden as follows:

“The Partnership Board is quite large because they had to include all partners. Having so many partners means decisions take time – one disadvantage of a sub-regional approach. However, partners can share resources.”

“All Board decisions had to be ratified in each partner organisation. This meant dealing with three different Portfolio Holders over the period, holding two training/information sessions for members and preparing a Cabinet report for in principle agreement, and two further reports for details.”

Operational structures were determined by a number of competing considerations. The establishment of a part-time co-ordinator supported by collaboration from retained housing teams in the districts was partly influenced by caution to retain local independence and minimise pooled costs. Meanwhile a key task assumed by the Operational Group was to work towards consistency of policy and implementation, thereby imposing a degree of conformity that might also have been achieved by a more centralised approach to policy and administration. The fine line between consistency and conformity appeared to be at the centre of a number of issues that had been successfully addressed by the Operations Group through mutual adjustment and collaboration. The Operations Group provided an effective way to achieve ownership of the scheme across the partnership and to deal with practical problems as they arose.

There were several holders of the part-time co-ordinator post during the evaluation, reflecting the turbulence of restructuring within York City Council where the post was based. The success of the role depended on good access to information on the scheme and excellent and flexible communications with the partners. A key dependence was on the IT provider, and there was considerable frustration with lengthy delays and costs in commissioning quite minor system changes and a resulting tendency to wrap up all change requests into major ones.

The Operations Group of middle managers from across the partnership had worked together for several years. They were highly committed to making the scheme work and to solving any practical issues which arose. They felt that implementation went smoothly because of their hard work, and that most customers were coping well. This view was corroborated by their senior managers and members of the Partnership Board.

The most recent Home Choice Coordinator post holder adopted an information-focused approach to the role and made excellent use of the Evaluation Evidence papers to inform her own induction process. She used web-based surveys to consult on proposed changes to the policy in 2012-13.

Set up costs had initially been a barrier to the partnership proceeding, but grant funding from DCLG and a cost-sharing agreement overcame this early obstacle. The question of why a more centralised administration had been rejected was harder to establish. This was not apparently about aggregate costs, since several partners recognised that the dispersed arrangements involved higher costs and aggregate cost reduction was never an explicit aim of the partnership.

Initial concerns about set up costs had been partly assuaged by a grant from DCLG and by shared contributions from all partners. *“Grant funding was available which reduced fears about costs. £30,000 was contributed for each LA area towards set-up costs. In LSVTs this was split evenly between the LA and RP¹. Ongoing costs will be for the co-ordinator and IT licences etc.”*

One interviewee recalled that *“The partnership did not really cost the option of having a central team handling applications and lettings. This was debated and could be adopted in future at some point.”*

Another clarified the early concerns about preserving independence: *“District Councils felt that they were giving up quite enough control over allocations even with local administration. A centrally administered scheme was a step too far at the time. Each partner saw itself as unique and independent.”*

However, there were barriers to reaching agreement for contributions to central costs at a time of substantial reductions in most partners' budgets. This probably led to a reluctance to propose any 'expansion' of the central support team, which has remained at between 0.4 and 0.6 FTE since 'Go Live', with joint decisions required to resource quite small amounts of additional work such as 12 days additional input for work on updating the Equality Impact Assessment and working with non-partner landlords. In the meantime there was some rationalisation within the individual partners' staffing inputs with, for example, a shared housing team and policy convergence between Richmondshire and Hambleton in 2011-12 and major staff restructuring in York and Selby affecting Home Choice collaboration. Participation in Home Choice was seen as imposing additional administrative costs on partners compared to previous systems.

“Our two authorities moved to a single shared housing service. This made it challenging to deal with Go Live in the same period. Staff saw the value of Home Choice and considerable benefits (although not less work) and rose to the challenge.”

“Go Live and advance training came at the worst time for us. We were in mid appointments and it was hard to decide who to send on the training and some who went did not get the jobs. However, the whole process has improved sub-regional links from what had seemed quite an insular approach.”

¹ RP (Registered Providers)- the term now used by the regulator (Homes and Communities Agency) to describe housing associations and other organisations eligible for social housing grant.

In terms of indirect costs associated with participating in Home Choice one interviewee felt that “*Overall CBL makes more work rather than less especially re-registrations and verification*”.

A distinctive feature of the partnership was a strong interest in equality impacts, perhaps reflecting learning from earlier experience and research, but also the strong values base and leadership from within the partnership itself. The main standing sub-group of the Partnership Board outside of the Operations Group was the Equalities Monitoring Group (EMG). This Group undertook an early Equality Impact Assessment of Home Choice in 2009, two years before ‘Go Live’ and has updated this regularly since. EMG was keen to engage with the Evaluation team to gather evidence of the impact in practice on vulnerable groups. This included receiving an audit of customer-facing materials (Evidence Paper 3) and acting on the results, and negotiating the priorities for the depth interviews with vulnerable clients and facilitating access to vulnerable clients (Evidence Paper 4) and acting on the results. The Equality Impact Assessment was updated in November 2012 (version 7) taking into account the evaluation findings and other new sources of information (see Report Recommendations and Conclusions).

The Equalities Monitoring Group (EMG) was established 1st May 2009 and continues to operate as a sub group of the Board to monitor the implementation of the scheme to ensure that no one client group or household falling within the equality strands identified is adversely affected by the introduction of the scheme.

The origins of EMG were in work to standardise medical assessment procedures which led to the Health and Wellbeing Gold and Silver band criteria. This led to wider sharing of concerns on potential impacts on vulnerable groups and need for consistent approaches in areas such as exclusions, verification and banding decisions to ensure CBL does not have discriminatory impacts.

“EMG asked for an Equality Impact Assessment to be carried out. The consultation had highlighted potential issues with older people. The EMG continued to co-ordinate locality training with partners and agencies. A guide to the CBL was developed and sent to agencies likely to be involved in supporting clients in Home Choice.”

[The EIA is a working document which has subsequently been updated in light of further *national* and sub-regional research evidence including: 2004 National Evaluation of CBL, Welfare Reform 2012 Joseph Rowntree Foundation Research 2012, Localism Act 2012, Allocation of accommodation.]

At the core of Home Choice is the website, and the full Scheme Guide and Lettings Policy. These sources provide information on the scheme rules and procedures for individual cases together with regularly updated information on property vacancies and recent lets, enabling all users to track what housing becomes available and successful bids for it. An account of the main feature of the scheme is included in the Evaluation Evidence section of this report.

Together these sources provide the potential to meet the shared aim of increased transparency. This aim was challenged by some of the scoping interviews and tested in the audit of customer-facing materials undertaken at an early stage in the evaluation to provide the partnership with the benefit of the evaluation team's familiarity with similar materials from many authorities.

One challenge to the transparency of the scheme was made by a scoping interviewee from an independent advice agency who claimed that Staff Guidance on interpretation of the Policy was not publicly available. He maintained that staff should be reminded that they allocate housing according to the published policy as per s167(8) of the 1996 Housing Act. Guidance should not be used in preference to policy. However, the detailed challenges that he made to the detail of the scheme (in relation to local assessments for applicants at risk of homelessness, lack of detail in decision letters re banding, accuracy/helpfulness of details in the property advertisements) all pointed to an increased transparency compared to local schemes prior to Home Choice. This indicated that having a new policy and policy statement has made allocation processes more transparent and open to external examination and scrutiny.

The audit of customer-facing materials made recommendations in relation to seven different potentially vulnerable customer groups (those with visual sensory impairment, hearing impairment, mobility difficulties, poor command of English, learning difficulties, limited literacy, and mobile Travellers). Recommendations made to the partnership in December 2011 were accepted by the Equalities Monitoring Group and used to improve future arrangements (see page 43-44 for further details).

External partners

The initial scoping work identified a fairly tight-knit group of organisations around the original Home Choice partnership who were directly involved in funding and developing the scheme. It also began to identify more distant partners who played an important role in joining up Home Choice with other local services and enabling users to register and bid and play an active role in seeking their homes. The evaluation highlighted the importance of partnerships with advice agencies, and voluntary and community groups in enabling people in housing need to make best use of Home Choice. Cuts to these services occurring during the implementation of Home Choice were identified as challenges for the scheme.

One area where a high level of integration and partnership working had been achieved was in relation to young peoples' homelessness pathways. The County Council Supporting People Team and several specialist providers had

used the opportunity of Home Choice to secure move-on housing options for young people who had received and benefited from supported housing and achieved agreed Outcome Star assessments indicating readiness to move on to independent accommodation. Gold band status was used to secure access to mainstream social housing for such clients. This was seen by housing authorities and support providers alike as a significant advance on the position prior to Home Choice. A strong impression from the initial scoping interviews was that young homeless people who had engaged with support were a key group to gain from the introduction of Home Choice. This impression was confirmed by depth interviews undertaken with young people themselves as part of our consideration of the vulnerability theme (see also Evidence Paper 4 for detail).

The County Council Supporting People (SP) team outlined how these connections were made:

“Six local mini-commissions have been used by SP to establish young people’s hubs for 16-25 year olds homeless or threatened with homelessness in each of the NY authorities. The hubs each have a lead contractor, input from DC housing options and NYCC children services, and other local night stop provider and prevention and support workers. A Pathways model will require all young people to pass through the hub and receive support services needed, but there is no provision for low levels of need. This arrangement will link well with CBL for move-on using the Gold band conditional on successfully engaging with support. The whole process will be performance managed using Outcome Star tool to show individual distance travelled and tenancy readiness. Commissioning is complete, model has been piloted by Ryedale and training is now underway in each hub.”

An extremely positive assessment was provided by one Supported Housing Project Worker:

‘Gold band has provided a strong incentive to engage with support. It has changed the experience of accessing social housing (reduced anxiety waiting for an offer from any of four broad areas chosen and then assessing implications of refusing it – with only one final offer to follow). It also seems to have widened the range of properties that can be accessed – including HA flats on predominantly private housing estates, two-bed as well as one-bed properties and much more fine-grained areas of choice. Perhaps surprisingly, early bids led to some very quick successes in desirable properties as above – but this may have been due to being ahead of the game before many competitor bidders cottoned on.’

Partnership evolution

While the first year of Home Choice after ‘Go Live’ was generally successful, the Partnership was still in an early phase of evolution after implementing the scheme. A number of step changes might have been envisaged for example towards integration and centralised administration or expansion to incorporate accredited private landlords working with the local authority partners on homelessness. However, the process appears to have been more gradual than

this in practice with a more reactive stance, a focus on responding to national policy change such as welfare reform and increasingly conditional access to social housing and simply getting by with diminishing resources and increases in severe housing need.

Modest expansion of the scheme was advanced through negotiations with non-partner landlords with significant lettings activity to use the Home Choice system, thereby increasing the number of full and associate partners to nearly 40 by July 2013. Meanwhile, all required IT changes arising from the evaluation and policy review were wrapped up into a single schedule of work for the IT provider to undertake in the Autumn of 2013. Evidence of the very high number of low priority applicants in Bronze band was taken as a cue to review the register by excluding non-bidders who did not respond in 28 days to a renewal notice; this reduced the active register from 17,000 to 15,000. This followed an increase in registered demand from 15,000 to 17,000 between April and September 2012 as registrations exceeded lettings, an experience similar to earlier CBL schemes where the evidence was of significant increases in low level demand (Marsh *et al.* 2004; Pawson *et al.* 2006). Introduction of the 'Bedroom Tax' proposals in the Welfare Reform Act 2012 for introduction in April 2013 led to a revision of bedroom assessment rules to avoid exposing more applicants to the risks of unfunded rent demands.

Sub-regional working has also proceeded alongside Home Choice with, for example, a first Sub-Regional Housing and Homelessness Strategy published in October 2012 linked to the North Yorkshire Community Plan 2011-14. One of the comments on the draft report acknowledges the value of the cross-authority partnership for small and low resourced rural authorities in providing '*more brains to help deliver the national housing strategy*'.

Evaluation evidence

Aims and methods

Preliminary aims and methods were set out in the Project Brief initially drawn up in 2009.

- To work with the partner local authorities/landlords to establish monitoring frameworks to facilitate evaluation of equality and other impacts of the new scheme;
- To investigate the experience of the scheme on the part of 'vulnerable' people and the effectiveness of procedures established to facilitate their participation;
- To compare the impacts of the scheme on rural and urban areas, and on each of the individual landlord partners;
- To analyse the impact of CBL on applicant choices;
- To assess 'customer satisfaction' with the new scheme;
- To analyse impacts of the new scheme on housing management efficiency;
- To analyse the implications of the system for 'low priority' applicants and the extent to which the priority system is understood by service users.

The five main methods proposed in the brief were:

- Scrutiny of documents and webpages;
- Landlord staff/stakeholder interviews;
- Research on perceptions and experiences of housing applicants and new tenants:
 - Service user surveys;
 - Service user focus group discussions.
- In-depth interviews with 'vulnerable service users';
- Statistical analysis of impacts on demand, performance and customer choices.

Because of the substantial passage of time and the appointment of a new Evaluation team and Home Choice project lead at the start of the project, the brief was reconfirmed at a meeting with the Home Choice Partnership Board attended by JRF at the start of fieldwork in October 2011. The main discussion concerned how the evaluation could best help the Partnership. The following points were made:

- The Board is so bogged down in detail that the main added value for them would be to have a chance to look again at the whole scheme and how it is working overall. Is what they have set up actually better than what was there before? – accepting how variable that was.
- This was amplified – it would be useful to examine progress against the overall aims of Home Choice. It was agreed that the objectives as set out

in the Policy would be the appropriate starting point. The impact on rural areas would also be useful.

- Input into any future policy changes would be useful, as would an examination of how Home Choice interacts with other policies.
- A central point of the evaluation must be how the scheme is working for customers. This might include any changes in behaviour and whether people get fed up with bidding unsuccessfully.
- The vulnerability issue and whether the scheme is creating barriers or helping access.
- The extent and nature of cross-boundary movement, movement from outside the partnership area, and the implications of such movement. It became clear in discussion that Board members did not know precisely what the Policy meant on this issue, nor how they were going to monitor it. The Policy is framed in terms of net movement, but there is no way of calculating net movement (i.e. movement out as well as movement in).
- Does having the same policy across the sub-region and partner landlords help customers? In a similar vein, what are the implications of Harrogate not being a partner? Might there be more central control/implementation in future versus locality – what are the pros and cons?

Methods were confirmed as those set out in the brief and arrangements were made for administration of surveys, interviews, group discussions and preparation of Home Choice and CORE data for analysis to cover the first nine months of operation of Home Choice from July 2011.

The evaluation was undertaken in a participative style with evidence papers provided as work in progress to inform the Home Choice policy review, with detailed findings being explored with the Home Choice Equalities Monitoring Group. This was seen as helpful by the partners and interim reports were seen as a useful resource for staff induction, particularly of the Home Choice Co-ordinator, in a period of high staff turnover. Five evidence papers were produced and published on-line as work in progress to stimulate discussion of emerging findings:

- Evidence Paper 1- Analysis of CBL Data (July 2012);
- Evidence Paper 2- Customer Surveys (July 2012);
- Evidence Paper 3- Evaluation of Customer Facing Materials (July 2012);
- Evidence Paper 4- Focus Groups and Depth Interviews (October 2012);
- Evidence Paper 5- Lettings Analysis (October 2012).

Table 1: Evaluation Methods – Evidence Types and Participation				
Method	No of Participants	Date	Type of Evidence	Where used
Stakeholder interviews	18	October 2011	Background and operation of Home Choice	Final Report
Depth Interviews	15	April -July 2012	Experiences of vulnerable groups	Evidence Paper 4 & Final Report
Focus Groups	16	April 2012	Experiences of bidders and rehoused applicants	Evidence Paper 4 & Final Report
Customer Surveys a) Pre-home Choice b) New tenants c) Bidders	178 97 102	Dec 2011 Apr-June 2012 June 2012	Customer experiences before and during Home Choice	Evidence Paper 2 & Final Report
NYHC data analysis Active Cases April 5 2012	15,132 Records	July 2012	Analysis of 'active status applicants on Home Choice system and lettings based on 'tenancy starts'	Evidence Paper 1 & Final Report
Tenancy starts July 2011- March 2012	1,564 cases			
CORE data analysis	3,457 lettings	July 2010 to March 2011 and July 2011 to March 2012	Lettings before and after Home Choice	Evidence Paper 5 & Final Report
Customer Facing Materials	5 key documents and website	Sept-Dec 2011	Scrutiny of documents and online materials about Home Choice	Evidence Paper 3 & Final Report
Attendance at NYHC Meetings Partnership Board Equality Monitoring Group	3 3	Oct 2011- October 2012	Observation of meetings and participation in discussion on evaluation	Final Report

Full details of the evaluation methodology are included in these evidence papers <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/social-policy/research/projects/2012/evaluation-north-yorkshire-cbl.aspx>. Table 1 above summarises the main methods, the level of participation achieved through each method, the types of evidence generated and where this was used in the project outputs. The breadth of the evidence base is apparent from the use of data on over 15,000 applicants, nearly 3,500 people rehoused and surveys of nearly 400 individual households, and the range of methods used. Depth was achieved through individual interviews and focus groups involving nearly 50 individuals. Links to practice were achieved through website tours, analysis of documents, attendance at Partnership Board and Equality Monitoring Group meetings and regular communication with the Home Choice Co-ordinator post holders throughout the project.

Once the five evidence papers were completed a summary overview of the evidence was presented to the Home Choice Partnership Board in October 2012. This effectively provided the evidence needed to support the Home Choice policy review which took place between October 2012 and June 2013. Home Choice then undertook further consultation on options for the policy review (in October 2012 and May 2013).

The next two sections provide contextual information about North Yorkshire Home Choice, registration and lettings activity in the first year and evidence on customer experience of the scheme. There then follow four sections providing selective thematic summary of findings organised around the following themes:

- Vulnerability;
- Mobility;
- Under-occupancy and over-crowding;
- Priority banding, and especially the Bronze band.

The report concludes with a brief account of the North Yorkshire Home Choice response to the evaluation recommendations, the Policy Review and changes to the scheme agreed in 2013 and some more general conclusions from the study.

The North Yorkshire Home Choice scheme, registrations and lettings

This section provides contextual information as background to the thematic analysis which follows. First it briefly describes the main features of the North Yorkshire Home Choice scheme itself. It then describes the number of registrations and lettings made in the first year of operation. Some characteristics of registrations and lettings between July 2011 and March 2012, the main period covered by the evaluation, are examined in a little more detail (excluding issues treated more fully later). Full analyses of registrations and lettings over this period, and a discussion of data issues, can be found in Evidence Papers 1 and 5.

North Yorkshire Home Choice

Anyone aged 16 or over can apply to join the Home Choice register; 16 and 17-year-olds normally must have a support package to enable them to live independently and a trustee. The application form can be completed online or in a paper copy (16 pages, 86 questions) which, among other things, asks about applicant characteristics including health issues, current and previous housing circumstances and future housing requirements. The form provides basic information for the assessment of eligibility, housing need and local connection with the Home Choice partnership area. Advice and support for completing the form is available on request from partners. Applicants must provide verification evidence, and partners may seek references from landlords and/or carry out a home visit. Applications may be declined because of evidenced unacceptable behaviour. Applicants should then receive confirmation of registration including their registered date (the date when the application and all supporting information was received); their priority band; confirmation of the type and size of property they are eligible to bid for; and their user name, reference number and password for the Home Choice website. They can then bid for properties.

Properties are advertised online. Advertisements include the address (without house number) and a brief description of the property; there is normally a photograph of the outside of the property. In some cases this may be of a property of a similar type but not the actual available property. Applicants on the active register can make up to three bids each week for any property across the partnership area. Some geographical limits are placed on statutorily homeless applicants who can normally only bid in the area of the authority which owes them a rehousing duty; applicants with priority because they are ready to move from supported housing can only bid in areas covered by their agreed care/support package. Most bids are made online from home internet access or from terminals in partner offices and other public buildings such as libraries or support agencies. There are facilities for telephone bidding and auto-bidding for applicants unable to use the Internet themselves or with the help of friends, family or more formal support. Internet applicants can find out how many bids have already been made on the property they have bid for, and their place in the queue. There is online feedback each week on the recent lets pages showing the priority band of the top-placed applicant, their priority date and the number of bids the advertisement generated.

Priorities are determined by priority bands and a series of tie breakers. Applications are placed in priority bands as follows:

Emergency band:

- people unable to leave hospital because their current home is inappropriate;
- people unable to access key facilities in their home without major adaptation work.

Gold band:

- care leavers with an agreed support package;
- applicants who need to move on from an approved supported housing scheme;
- under-occupiers of social housing in the partnership area who want to move to a property with at least two fewer bedrooms;
- applicants who are statutorily homeless or threatened with homelessness and in priority need;
- applicants who are overcrowded and need at least two more bedrooms;
- applicants classed as a Good Neighbour (tenants of one of the partner landlords who have not breached their tenancy agreement in the last three years and have a clear rent account; their home must be in a good decorative state and suitable for reletting with no additional work);
- applicants with a serious and enduring illness whose health and/or wellbeing is significantly compromised by their home or environment;
- applicants who need to move to relieve a proven hardship.

Silver band:

- applicants who have a health or wellbeing issue which will be improved by moving;
- applicants who are statutorily homeless or threatened with homelessness but not in priority need or are intentionally homeless;
- applicants who are overcrowded and require one more bedroom;
- applicants whose home lacks basic amenities or who have to share facilities with other households;
- under-occupiers of social housing in the partnership area who need one fewer bedroom.

Bronze band:

- all other applicants

Bids for a property are prioritised by band. If there is more than one bid in the highest band a local connection (to the partnership area) tie breaker is applied. If there is still more than one bid, applicants requiring a property of the size available will be preferred above any seeking a property larger than they strictly 'need'. The fourth tie breaker is housing debt with an applicant without debt being preferred. If there is still more than one applicant, priority is given to the one with the earliest registered date. With the exception of the 'Good Neighbour' category in Gold band priority, existing tenants of partner landlords (seeking a transfer) are treated the same as other applicants.

The final short-listed applicant is invited to view the property. Final verification checks are made to ensure eligibility. A minority of properties are subject to detailed local connection requirements or local lettings plans. Some participating landlords have charitable status and may apply additional eligibility criteria including an income limit. There is no direct penalty for refusing a property offer although applicants refusing more than five times will be interviewed about their housing requirements. Refusals by applicants in Gold band because of homelessness have fewer choices.

There is provision in the scheme for 'direct matches' to be made by landlords in unusually serious or sensitive cases and other defined circumstances. A direct match may be made where an applicant owed a homelessness duty has not made a successful bid for themselves. Around one letting in twelve (8.5 per cent) was made through a direct match between July 2011 and March 2012.

Registrations and lettings

By September 2012, some 15 months after its introduction, just over 27,000 applications had been made to Home Choice, including just over 10,000 applications brought forward from earlier schemes in July 2011. Of the total, almost 3,000 (11 per cent) had been housed and 17,400 were on the active register and able to bid (64 per cent). The remaining applications were still in the process of being registered, or were suspended or cancelled. During the first year of operation, on average just over 1,000 applications were made each month to Home Choice, and almost 2,500 tenancies had started, a monthly average of just over 200.

Table 2 shows the active register in April 2012 by originating authority area. Unfortunately the IT system does not allow further analysis of the current address of applicants but most will be resident in the area of application. Most applications originated in Scarborough and York which are much the largest settlements in the partnership area.

Area	Number	%
Craven	1,108	7
Hambleton	1,707	11
Richmondshire	1,123	7
Ryedale	1,464	10
Scarborough	4,131	27
Selby	1,629	11
York	3,970	26
All	15,132	100

The minimum bedroom size of properties required and the priority banding of applicants on the active register are shown in Table 3. More than half of applicants require one bedroom only, and only about one in eight require three bedrooms or more. As discussed later in the section on occupancy, the original Home Choice scheme allowed applicants to bid for properties with one bedroom more or one bedroom fewer than their strict bedroom entitlement shown in Table 2. However, bedroom entitlement was taken into account in tie break situations. Almost two-thirds of applicants (62 per cent) were in Bronze band and a further third in Silver. Fewer than one in applicant in ten was in Gold or Emergency bands.

Table 3: Active Register April 2012 by Minimum Bedroom Size and Priority Band

Minimum bedrooms	%	Priority band	%
One	57	Emergency	*
Two	30	Gold	7
Three	11	Silver	32
Four	2	Bronze	62
Active register = 15,132			

* denotes less than 0.5per cent

Overall, 43 per cent of applicants had submitted at least one bid. The number of bids made ranged from 1 to 164. The average number of bids made by people who had bid at all was 15. Geographically, applicants were most likely to have bid in York (51 per cent had bid). Over two-thirds of applicants in Gold band had bid (68 per cent) compared with only 35 per cent of applicants in Bronze band.

Tables 4 and 5 show similar information for tenancies starting between July 2011 and the end of March 2012. In this case, the local authority area is the actual location of the property let, and the bedrooms are the number in the property allocated. York stands out as accounting for three in every ten lettings made. The relatively limited supply of one bedroom properties (41 per cent) compared to the minimum bedroom requirements of applicants (57 per cent requiring one bedroom) provides a context for our later discussion of the occupancy rules theme. Not surprisingly, the priority banding of lettings is very different from that of applicants on the active register with over half of lettings going to applicants in Gold or Emergency bands. Most strikingly, while 62 per cent of applicants were in Bronze band, Bronze band only received 13 per cent of lettings. CBL makes this issue more transparent because of the focus on active bidding but, as one commentator on the draft report observed *“in reality it has not reduced and may have slightly increased prospects of low priority groups in securing housing”*.

Table 4: Tenancies Started July 2011 to March 2012 by Originating Local Authority

Area	Number	%
Craven	162	10
Hambleton	185	12
Richmondshire	125	8
Ryedale	129	8
Scarborough	262	17
Selby	240	15
York	461	30
All	1,564	100

Bedrooms allocated	%	Priority band	%
One	41	Emergency	2
Two	38	Gold	54
Three	18	Silver	32
Four	2	Bronze	13
Tenancies started = 1,564			

By definition all applicants housed had made at least one bid. The average number of bids made by housed applicants was 12 (fewer than bidders on the active register), with a range between 1 and 103.

One of the striking features of Home Choice is the wide geographical area it covers and the variety of settlements included, ranging from small villages to York, a city with a population of over 200,000. It is clear from analysis of Home Choice data that indications of need and demand also vary widely across the area. Table 6 shows the priority band for tenancies started by local authority area, and the average number of bids received for properties let.

	Craven	Hambleton	Richmondshire	Ryedale	Scarborough	Selby	York	All
Number	162	185	125	129	262	240	461	1,564
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Emergency	1	1	-	3	3	1	2	2
Gold	21	49	50	45	60	37	74	54
Silver	43	40	41	39	26	50	17	32
Bronze	35	11	9	13	11	12	7	13
Average bids	18	42	23	36	60	36	85	52

Table 6 shows that the chances of applicants in lower priority bands being housed are much higher in some local authority areas than others with Craven and York providing the extremes. Exactly the same picture emerges from the average number of bids per advert. Analysis (not shown here) shows that this also applies within priority bands so that, for example, applicants in Gold band in York have more than three times as many 'competitors' bidding for a property than Gold band applicants in Craven. These variations, potentially at least, provide an important element in the customer experience of Home Choice discussed in the next section and the impact of banding on customer

experience discussed later. Another important element is the amount of unsuccessful bidding involved, particularly for those in Bronze band wherever the applicant lives.

Variations in demand are also apparent at a smaller scale. There are 103 lettings areas across the Home Choice partnership and lettings were made in almost all of them between July 2011 and March 2012. The average number of bids at lettings area level ranged from 4 (Croft in Richmondshire) to 129 (Carr in York). All the lettings areas attracting over 100 bids per advertisement were in either York or Scarborough. This appears not to be related to 'rurality' (as measured by settlement size) in any simple fashion since analysis shows that in 'rural' areas (villages and surrounding areas with a population of less than 1,000) properties in the 'higher demand' local authorities (Scarborough and York) attracted almost five times as many bids on average as in 'low demand' authorities (Craven and Richmondshire) and more than twice as many as in the remaining parts of the partnership area. Thus it appears that the main rural effect occurs at a sub-regional level based on distance from the main centres of population rather than at a more localised level based on settlement size. This highlights the potential value of Home Choice in facilitating mobility between higher demand and lower demand parts of the sub-region. The impact of the scheme in promoting mobility between higher and lower demand areas through its provision for cross-authority moves is discussed in more detail in a section on the theme of mobility.

Table 7 shows some characteristics of applicants on the active register in April 2012 and those housed between July 2011 and March 2012. Both applicants and those housed include all ages. Tenancies started include slightly higher proportions in the youngest (under 25) and oldest (75 and over) age ranges than the register. Both register and tenancies started are overwhelmingly from people describing themselves as 'white'. Tenancies started include slightly higher proportions of people with some disability, those needing help in bidding and those requiring an adapted property. There is therefore no suggestion from this that Home Choice is working in such a way as to exclude older or more vulnerable applicants (see later discussion of the vulnerability theme).

Table 7: Active Register April 2012 and Tenancies Started July 2011 to March 2012: Some Applicant Characteristics		
	Active register	Tenancy started
Number	15,132	1,564
Applicant age	%	%
Under 18	*	1
18 to 24	16	20
25 to 34	22	19
35 to 44	18	16
45 to 54	15	12
55 to 64	13	14
65 to 74	10	9
75 to 84	5	7
85 and over	2	3
Ethnic origin		

'White British' and 'Irish'	95	96
'Any other white'	3	2
Other	2	2
Not stated	1	1
No disability	78	72
Needs help with bidding	13	19
Requires adapted property	9	14

The final table in this background section based on analysis of Home Choice data shows some current (i.e. prior to the letting) housing circumstances and need characteristics of applicants and those housed. Very small need categories have been omitted.

Table 8: Active Register April 2012 and Tenancies Started July 2011 to March 2012: Some Housing and Need Characteristics		
	Active register	Tenancy started
Number	15,132	1,564
	%	%
Currently renting from a social landlord	20	25
Currently renting from a partner landlord	16	18
Classified as a 'Good Neighbour'	2	7
Statutorily homeless (full duty)	1	13
At risk of homelessness and in priority need	1	19
Serious health/wellbeing issue (Gold band)	1	6
Less serious health/wellbeing issue (Silver band)	4	9
No local connection	15	3

A quarter of tenancies started involved someone already a tenant of a social landlord and almost one in five was a tenant transferring from a main partner landlord. Both proportions are higher than found among applicants still on the register suggesting that existing tenants have a better chance of success than others. Fewer than half of the tenants of main partner landlords housed had gained priority though being classed as a 'Good Neighbour' although this is clearly a quite significant way of gaining priority.

The Home Choice priority scheme is clearly selecting in favour of homelessness, risk of homelessness, and health and wellbeing issues since much higher proportions of those housed than of applicants demonstrate such needs. Applicants who are homeless or threatened with homelessness made up a third (32 per cent) of lettings. As noted above, existing tenants made up a

further quarter. This indicates that applicants who are neither homeless, threatened with homelessness nor a social tenant have the poorest chance of being rehoused – they represent 78 per cent of the active register but only 43 per cent of lettings. However, some commentators on the draft report have pointed out that the open access nature of Home Choice means that not all applicants are currently in housing need. Some may be making ‘insurance applications’, and this was particularly felt to be the case with non-bidders (for example applicants in the older age groups who are not bidding and say they haven’t seen the website). Similarly there were views that some younger applicants for single person accommodation would historically have remained ‘*at home with family until married or had children*’.

While 15 per cent of applicants had no local connection with the partnership area, only 3 per cent of new tenants had no local connection. This may be attributable to the operation of the tie breaker system which, other things being equal, favours applicants with a local connection.

The next sections explore the operation of North Yorkshire Home Choice in relation to selected themes. These sections draw on evidence from across the five evidence papers.

Customer perspectives on Home Choice

Whether the focus is on enhancing choice or promoting transparency, the move from traditional methods of housing applications to CBL might be expected to be a transformative experience for housing applicants. Back in 2003 Brown et al described this as a shift ‘from point hunting to house hunting’ (p.2). In this evaluation we tracked the impact of this shift using survey research methods.

The three customer surveys were used to test:

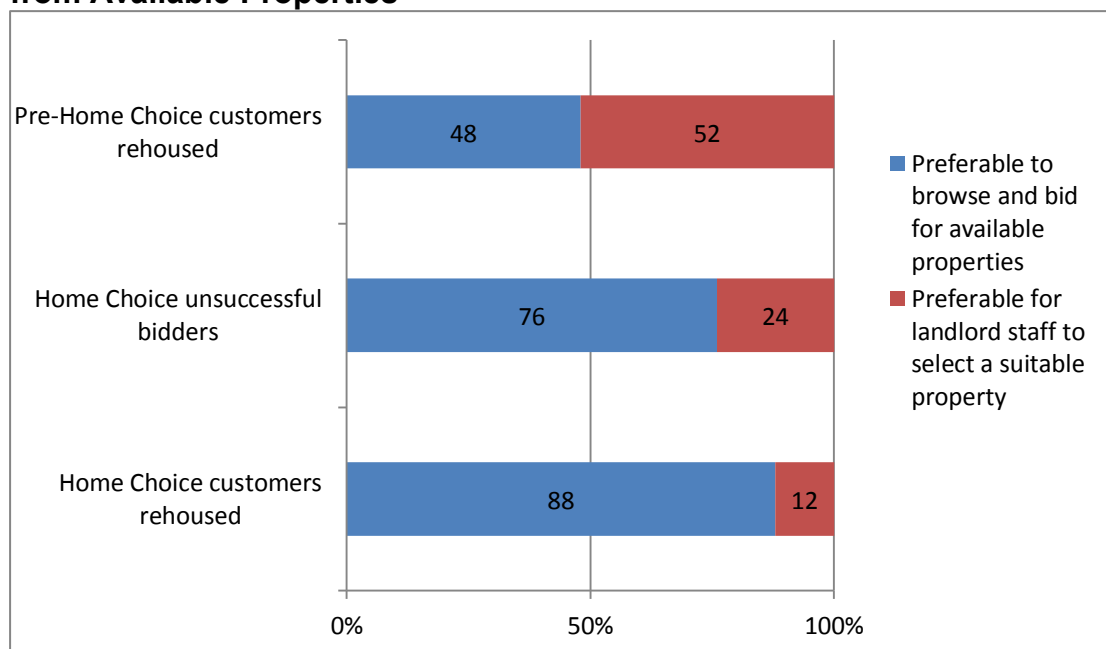
- a) what applicants think about Home Choice;
- b) how Home Choice compares with the previous letting systems from a customer perspective;
- c) whether certain categories of ‘vulnerable’ applicants (e.g. older or disabled people or those in extremely rural locations) find it difficult to use the new scheme; and
- d) how customers bid under Home Choice and the extent to which they use the information available to inform their bidding.

Full analysis of results of these three surveys can be found in Evidence Paper 2. Here a small selection of evidence is included addressing each question in turn. Other evidence on customer experience from focus groups and depth interviews with vulnerable applicants can be found in Evidence Paper 4, however that is referred to later in this report in our discussion of vulnerability rather than in this more general introductory discussion.

- a) On the first question (what applicants think about Home Choice) the surveys present a generally favourable perception of Home Choice in relation to the amount of choice that the new system offers. Most

applicants, whether successful or not, valued the opportunity to browse and select from available properties.

Figure 2: Survey Respondent Views on Being Able to Browse and Select from Available Properties



Sources: Home Choice customer surveys 2 and 3; Pre-Home Choice customer survey.

Moreover, detailed findings presented in the Evidence Paper but not reproduced here show that the proportion of successful applicants who believe the process had afforded them at least some choice is higher under the new system than under the previous one. Furthermore, a significant proportion of Home Choice customers appreciate having a wider choice of areas.

- b) The second question sought views on Home Choice compared with the previous systems used in the various partner authorities, looking at ease of understanding and equity. The picture revealed in Table 9 is mixed. The great majority of applicants who had been rehoused through Home Choice found the new system easy to understand and fair, and were more positive about Home Choice than about the previous schemes. However here and throughout the surveys it is apparent that unsuccessful bidders are markedly less positive. As ever, it is impossible to differentiate between dissatisfaction with outcomes and with process

Table 9: Survey Respondent Views on Home Choice Allocations Policy as Compared with Customer Views on the ‘Old System’

‘Old system’ comprehensibility – responses to statement: points-based allocations are/were easy to understand

	Agree strongly	Agree	Disagree	No opinion	Total (%)	N=
Tenants rehoused pre-Home Choice	21	50	13	17	100	125
Tenants rehoused via Home Choice	23	40	11	26	100	84
Applicants so far unsuccessful	30	38	15	17	100	60

‘New system’ comprehensibility – responses to statement: priority bands allocations are easy to understand

	Agree strongly	Agree	Disagree	No opinion	Total (%)	N=
Tenants rehoused via Home Choice	36	48	5	11	100	88
Applicants so far unsuccessful	13	38	33	15	100	60

‘Old system’ equity – responses to statement: points-based allocations are/were fair

	Agree strongly	Agree	Disagree	No opinion	Total (%)	N=
Tenants rehoused pre-Home Choice	19	45	14	22	100	118
Tenants rehoused via Home Choice	13	48	12	27	100	82
Applicants so far unsuccessful	22	36	27	15	100	55

‘New system’ equity – responses to statement: priority bands allocations are fair

	Agree strongly	Agree	Disagree	No opinion	Total (%)	N=
Tenants rehoused via Home Choice	28	52	6	15	100	87
Applicants so far unsuccessful	10	24	50	16	100	58

Sources: Home Choice customer surveys 2 and 3; Pre-Home Choice customer survey.

c) On the third question, the sample sizes and construction limit our ability to make direct comparisons of the experiences of vulnerable groups and other applicants.

Customer surveys revealed three most common barriers to participation in Home Choice, these being: no internet access, difficulty in reaching a landlord or council office, and having a disability (see Table 10).

	Number of respondents who indicated having a difficulty	% of the total number of respondents
No access to the Internet	87	23%
Difficulty in reaching a landlord or council office	59	16%
A disability	40	11%
Living in a remote rural location	9	5%
Being housebound	7	2%
Having a learning difficulty	6	2%
Other factors	23	6%

Sources: Home Choice customer surveys 2 and 3 and pre-Home Choice customer survey.

*The total number of respondents was 377 with the exception of 'living in remote rural location' where the number of respondents was 199.

Home Choice customers in the oldest age group were relatively more likely than others to indicate no access to the Internet (3 respondents aged 18-24; 26 respondents aged 25-64; 19 respondents aged 65+) and not having seen the Home Choice website (35 per cent of respondents within the oldest age group).

The surveys also provided some limited evidence that older people have greater difficulties in using Home Choice and greater dissatisfaction amongst older unsuccessful bidders. Meanwhile, evidence from other parts of the evaluation, discussed in the section on Vulnerability, suggest that older people are not disadvantaged in final outcomes.

Evidence Paper 1 also observed that there are clearly some barriers to effective participation in Home Choice affecting older people in particular who are less likely to bid at all than any other applicant group. It is good that the Equality Monitoring Group is keeping these questions under review. The Home Choice Partnership's Equality Impact Assessment, discussed in the section on Vulnerability, includes plans for reaching out to the elderly: to support existing methods of access/bidding for affordable housing and to understand the potential barriers that older people experience to inform further actions.

d) The survey proved particularly useful in illuminating the fourth question on bidding behaviour. Home Choice customers value system feedback on their bids, but only 40 per cent make effective use of the 'recent lets' section of the website to inform their bidding. There is scope to increase awareness of this

section and to improve its design to increase perceived usefulness. Furthermore there is a need to ensure that customers fully understand the potential use of 'recent lets' and other system information to inform bidding and to use local office staff and leaflets to guide customers to better informed bidding. Sophisticated applicants will get there on their own and have a competitive advantage. For those without the necessary skills, leaflets may not be the answer; and staffing for advice and training are quite limited. This evidence is discussed further in the section on Bronze banding to inform the 'optimistic view' presented there on the potential for even low priority bands to use Home Choice to secure housing options that would be unlikely to have been available to them under non-choice based systems.

Vulnerability

The national context section highlighted some of the concerns that have accompanied the adoption of CBL in relation to impacts on vulnerable groups who may either experience difficulties in registering, understanding and making choices or may find that they are disadvantaged in the properties secured.

Such concerns had led North Yorkshire Home Choice to establish an 'Equalities Monitoring Group' (EMG) on 1st May 2009 as a sub group of the Board to monitor the implementation of the scheme to ensure that no one client group or household falling within the equality strands identified are adversely affected by the introduction of the scheme.

The EMG has developed an Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) as a working document to assist it in this role, with seven updates produced since the first draft in 2009. The EIA covers six main strands of potential inequality (race, disability, gender, sexuality, religion and age). Of these, it pays most attention to disability (including mental health and learning disability), age and race. It identifies ways in which the NYHC scheme could potentially have adverse impacts on equalities and ways in which the partnership will respond, with an action plan format to clarify responsibilities and timescales. Particular attention is paid to measures to ensure that the scheme is accessible to vulnerable groups, through awareness raising, website and application form design, call centre, outreach and assistance including surgeries, telephone advice, assisted bidding and automated bidding. Monitoring of outcomes includes reports on the profile of the register, bidding behaviour, lettings outcomes and customer complaints. There was initial consultation on the scheme and recent amendments have been subject to wide-ranging consultation. There are efforts to include an appropriate range of stakeholders on the EMG, for example from Adult Services, City of York Council. The EMG Chair took a leading role in working with the Evaluation team to facilitate the research (see especially Evidence Papers 3 and 4) and responding to evaluation findings through updates to the EIA and follow-on actions.

Evaluation evidence

The evaluation evidence on vulnerability consisted of general evidence and purposive evidence.

General evidence was based on analysis of the register as a whole and lettings from the register, and general customer surveys. Purposive evidence consisted of an audit of customer-facing materials with a particular focus on accessibility to vulnerable groups and depth interviews with vulnerable applicant groups selected in collaboration with the EMG.

General evidence

Comparing register composition with lettings outcomes can provide an indication of any disadvantage experienced by vulnerable groups. Table 7 earlier in this report provides such a comparison by age, race, disability and for those needing help with bidding. In relation to race, both register and tenancies started are overwhelmingly from people describing themselves as 'white', and there is no discernible difference in the ethnic composition of those rehoused. However, Table 7 shows that younger and older people, those with disabilities and those needing help with bidding are all better represented amongst those achieving rehousing under Home Choice than amongst active applicants. Thus there is little prima facie evidence of disadvantage experienced by vulnerable applicants at this level of analysis. Indeed the indication is that vulnerabilities are recognised in prioritisation and reflected in housing outcomes.

More detailed analysis of the profile of the register and lettings by disability is provided in Evidence Paper 1. Table 11 below shows that the pattern of people with disabilities forming a higher proportion of those rehoused than of those on the active register holds for all types of disability except learning disabilities. This suggests that allocations are not being markedly selective in these terms but, insofar as there is evidence of selection, it appears to be in favour of the more vulnerable. Special issues may arise in relation to households with members with learning disabilities, and this was pursued in depth interviews and case studies in the purposive part of the study (see below).

	Tenancies started	Active register
Disability		
None	71.9%	77.8%
Autism	0.3%	0.2%
Hearing impairment	1.0%	0.7%
Learning disability	0.3%	0.9%
Mental health	4.7%	3.9%
Mobility problem	11.1%	8.3%
Progressive disability/chronic illness	5.4%	3.4%
Visual impairment	0.8%	0.5%

Other	3.9%	3.4%
Unwilling to disclose	0.7%	1.3%

The experience of people with disabilities and older people suggests that the banding system advantages people with vulnerabilities as indeed was intended in its design in the Emergency band and health and wellbeing Gold and Silver band criteria. One interviewee had informed us that *“we wanted to instil the principle that it is possible to promote health and wellbeing through rehousing. The policy that went to consultation had a two-way distinction between Emergency band (designed to avoid bed-blocking due to lack of appropriate housing) and a single medical category with quite a high threshold. The consultation suggested that this was too crude so the three-way distinctions in the current Policy between Emergency, Gold and Silver health criteria were introduced”*.

Data on the profile of Gold band applicants provided in Evidence Paper 1, but not shown here, demonstrates the prioritising of serious health and wellbeing issues. While only 1 per cent of all on the active register had such issues, 14 per cent of applicants in Gold band did. However, the proportion of Gold band applicants (in April 2012) with serious health and wellbeing issues varied widely at local authority level, ranging from 6 per cent in Hambleton and York to 25 per cent in Selby. Similarly, need for help bidding among Gold band applicants (19 per cent overall) ranged between 9 per cent in Ryedale and 41 per cent in Craven. Requiring adapted property (19 per cent overall) ranged less widely from 10 per cent in Hambleton to 28 per cent in Craven. This reinforces concerns that the EMG originally had about consistency in assessments and banding of people with equivalent health-related needs for rehousing. This evidence was picked up by the EIA v 7 which identified a response to the Evaluation as follows

‘Variances across Area in relation to need help bidding, Serious health/well-being issue and requirement for adapted property. Need to ensure consistency in interpretation of the policy, thresholds applied and resources available across the area to address these variances. Investigation at a local level to confirm if there are significant contextual issues affecting results (i.e. particular profile of applicants in one area to another such as elderly, disabled)’ (EIA v 7 p. 10 Nov 2012).

Evidence on bidding behaviour provided a slightly different perspective to the analysis of outcomes above and also suggested some difficulties for older people and vulnerable groups in taking an active part in Home Choice.

Table 12 from Evidence Paper 1 provides an analysis of profiles of bidders and non-bidders. Here we see that, contrary to their over-representation amongst lettings, older people and to a much lesser extent people with disabilities, are over-represented amongst non-bidders.

Table 12: Active Register : Characteristics of Bidders and Non-Bidders		
	Bidders	Non-bidders
Number	6,438	8,694
	%	%
Applicant age		
Under 25	20	13
25 to 64	70	66
65 and over	10	21
Ethnic origin		
White British and Irish	94	96
Other	6	4
Disability		
Some disability	21	23
No disability	79	77
Need help with bidding		
Yes	11	14
No	89	86

This slightly counter-intuitive finding is probably affected by large numbers of older people in the Bronze band. In response to this finding the EIA v 7 notes that:

Significant number of non-bidders and limited information as to why. Important for EIA to ensure that those who have expressed that they need help with bidding are having their needs met. On the whole vulnerable people are not disadvantaged with the exception of older persons. "Need to reach out to older persons" and develop actions accordingly (EIA v 7 p. 10).

Popularity of lettings received by vulnerable groups

Evidence Paper 1 attempted to look beyond the issue of proportion of properties let to vulnerable groups to consider the relative popularity of such properties. The analysis (not shown here) found that overall the average number of bids per advert for properties allocated between July 2011 and March 2012 was 52. The average number of bids per advert for properties housing applicants aged under 25 was 82 bids), for applicants other than White British and Irish it was 69 bids and for people with some disability it was 56 bids). Therefore, all of these groups were housed in properties attracting above average numbers of bids per advert. Older applicants, however, receive properties in relatively below average demand (32 bids on average). This is presumably more a reflection of property size than any indication of

quality. Need for help with bidding is age related which may account for the relatively unfavourable outcomes for applicants needing help (34 bids on average).

Purposive evidence

An audit of customer-facing materials was undertaken by a member of the evaluation team with a broad experience of CBL systems (see Evidence Paper 3). He audited the main publicity materials on Home Choice available in Autumn 2011 (application form, guide to completing the application form, easy read guide, full scheme guide, allocation policy and guide to supporting others) and took a tour of the website with customer access and tested bidding methods by phone and online. From this direct experience he made recommendations in relation to seven different potentially vulnerable customer groups (those with visual sensory impairment, hearing impairment, mobility difficulties, poor command of English, learning difficulties, limited literacy, and mobile Travellers). Recommendations made to the partnership in December 2011 were accepted by the Equalities Monitoring Group and used to improve future arrangements. A sample of the detailed and specific recommendations made in relation to just one of the seven vulnerable groups is shown in the box below. The response of the partnership to recommendations across the vulnerable groups in relation to one audited document (the application form) follows on.

Figure 3: Extract from Evidence Paper 3: Evaluation of Customer Facing Materials

1 Customers with visual sensory impairment

Registration

Clients with visual impairment can receive assistance from partner organisations. It is understood that such assistance would be on an ad hoc, individual basis. The details of assistance are, however, unknown. It is also not known whether the standards of assistance are the same across all partner organisations.

Clients with mild visual impairment may be disappointed that they cannot register independently using the paper form. They would have had this option had the form been available in large print. They may be able to register online as font size can be enlarged with a 'font size changer' tool on the Home Choice website.

Understanding the system

Since the scheme booklets are not available in Braille, large print or audio, clients with visual sensory impairment have to rely on assistance from their carers or from partner organisations. The lack of possibility of getting to know the system independently would most likely be disappointing for some clients.

The Home Choice website is more helpful in this respect, since users can employ Browsealoud and the font size changer.

Finding available properties








There are also problems with font size for adverts in the property sheet. Clients with mild visual impairment could use their own magnifying glass. With regards to browsing adverts online, clients are assisted via Browsaloud, the font size changer, and symbols.


Bidding


Visually impaired clients can bid over the phone. Those with less severe visual impairment could also bid online as larger font format is available.

The Audit received a very positive response from the partnership, and Figure 4 from EIA v 7 indicates some of the actions that followed in relation to the application form. Similarly detailed responses were made in relation to recommendations on each of the main documents audited (The EIA v 7 is included in full as an appendix to this report providing a good practice example of systematic use of research evidence).

Figure 4: Extract from Equality Impact Assessment v 7: Responding to Evaluation Audit

Document/media Key areas covered	Evaluation Response
Application Form: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translation • Easy read/Braille 	 It is reasonable to provide translation, large print and/or Braille copies of this form on request. Recommendation: Review annually
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help to use the scheme 	 Recommends amendment to request vulnerability details of applicants who require advocate. Action already actioned in subsequent revision of Application Form 2011.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List of vulnerabilities 	 The list is restrictive with only 5 “closed” options covering broad areas.  Recommendation: Extend list and include lack of English or literacy skills and mental health issues.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applicants under 18 	Useful category capturing information to link to legal responsibilities. Recommendation: Link questions to outcome star data collection.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptations 	 List of adaptations in place or required does not include relevant adaptations for visually impaired. Recommendation: Include “reflective stripes”, facilities/space for guide dogs. Q35 does not include adaptations required by other household members: Recommendation: change wording to “what adaptations do you or other people in your household need.....”.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health, housing and support 	 Missed opportunity to collect relevant data on all household members. Recommendation: To amend in accordance with Appendix B. Change wording to “Do you or your family have health or disability problems that are affected by your current home and could be improved by moving to another home?”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equalities Monitoring 	 Useful data collection for Equalities Monitoring Group.

-
- **Communication**  Collects vulnerability information but options for communication incomplete.
Recommendation: Include Home visit.
-

- **Other issues**  Recommendations:
Consideration of including:
 - Signature for advocate;
 - Posting of property sheets;
 - Tenancy sustainment support referral;
 - Economic status details.

Use of “registration” and “application” interchangeable throughout document has already been action in subsequent revision of Application Form 2011.

Thus the audit proved to be a highly effective use of an external evaluation in informing the development of the scheme at an early stage as well as identifying evidence for a more rounded assessment of the impact of the scheme on vulnerable applicants.

Once the general evidence had been assessed and the audit received and discussed by the EMG, plans were developed for **depth interviews with vulnerable clients** to provide a more direct exploration of the factors underlying differential experience of the scheme (see Evidence Paper 4).

Four main vulnerable groups were agreed with the EMG. People with mental health problems (5 interviews) and learning difficulties (2 interviews) were selected because the EMG’s evidence base on the experience of these groups was weaker than for other groups such as older people. Seven young people were selected because the partnership had adopted new pathways for young homeless people with support needs and because it proved easier for the partnership to locate this group than many other vulnerable applicants, even with the tagging system used on Home Choice. A Gypsy Traveller household was interviewed to provide an indication of the experience of the most significant minority group in the partnership area apart from Poles². Alongside these interviews the evaluation included two focus groups with 12 ‘ordinary applicant households’, 4 of whom had been rehoused. Both sets of interviews covered similar questions about the experience of applicants from first hearing about Home Choice including registering, bidding and successful bids (where relevant), views on banding and choice and on the best and worst features of Home Choice and potential areas for improvement. Interviews with vulnerable applicants focused more on potential barriers to access and to bidding and finding properties. A full account of the methodology, findings and

² The Equalities Group originally opted to focus the depth interviews on people with mental health problems, people with learning disabilities and Gypsy/Travellers. However, after several attempts by local partners to achieve the quota of interviews with these groups, a fourth group of often excluded service users - young people (16-25 year olds) - was added.

recommendations arising from the depth interviews and focus groups is provided in Evidence Paper 4.

One key finding that emerged from comparison between the samples was that, despite specific vulnerability factors, the vulnerable applicants were generally more satisfied with Home Choice than were the wider sample of customers included in the focus groups. This was primarily because they were more likely to be in Gold or Silver bands and therefore had more chance of securing properties than the 'ordinary applicants' who were predominantly in Bronze band. This indicated that, at an aggregate level, Home Choice had overcome access barriers for these applicants and recognised their vulnerability through higher banding which in turn increased property choice, successful bidding and therefore satisfaction.

Notwithstanding these aggregate findings on outcomes of Home Choice for vulnerable groups, the depth interviews provided some more nuanced evidence on the impact of different forms of vulnerability on ability to use the scheme and the most effective methods of overcoming access barriers. Some 'vulnerable groups' are more engaged than others. Initial information and help with registration was most frequently provided by support workers. Registration was most problematic for those with limited literacy and computer skills or with problems in understanding what is going on. In the latter cases effective use was generally made of support workers to mediate with Home Choice. This highlighted the importance of regular training opportunities for support workers and good working relationships with housing staff.

Not all interviewees were currently bidding for properties. Amongst those who were, there was a significant divide between those who were confident about using Home Choice to browse and select properties and those who were dependent on support workers or other helpers to make bids on their behalf. Amongst the former group the main problems arising were with the limitations of Home Choice in relation to property details, and search facilities. Amongst the latter group the problems were of limited understanding of how it works and of making best use of support workers and others to participate and thereby to secure suitable housing. Interviewees least confident about using Home Choice or bidding themselves were affected by the severity of their mental health problems or other barriers such as literacy and confidence with IT. In these cases access to the service is dependent on good support workers well connected to Home Choice.

Ten of the 15 vulnerable interviewees had Gold band status. The impact of Gold banding is partly apparent in the rehousing results, and partly in the confidence and interest of some bidders in Home Choice. However in several cases bidders appeared unaware of their banding, perhaps because it had only recently been awarded or upgraded.

Interviewees were asked about their understanding of choice and whether they saw Home Choice as fair. Vulnerable interviewees were experiencing a degree of choice of various sorts, although this was not always seen as relevant to their needs. Some were also aware of constraints on their choice, particularly the

limit of homelessness bids to the local authority area and the potential for direct matches if bids did not succeed in time. Perceptions of fairness tended to relate to individual position and not surprisingly the higher banded vulnerable interview sample felt the system was fairer than did the lower banded focus groups.

A key aim of the depth interviews was to investigate the experience of the scheme on the part of 'vulnerable' people and the effectiveness of procedures established to facilitate their participation, and to gauge the impact of the new system for groups potentially disadvantaged as a result. Interviewees were asked directly about the kinds of barriers they had encountered themselves, but also indirectly about the kinds of people who they thought would have greatest problems in using Home Choice. We conclude this summary of findings from the depth interviews by considering the rather different barriers experienced by the four vulnerable groups.

Interviews with young people did not indicate significant barriers to their engagement with Home Choice. Most were comfortable with the IT and were appreciative of the support with registration and bidding provided by support workers. Interviews indicated a high level of trust for support workers such as from the newly registered young single man who thought that Home Choice sounded fair and would give him a choice but who was 'just waiting for my case worker to push me in the right direction'. Similarly a young mum was receiving considerable support in moving into a private leased property and in registering and bidding for permanent accommodation under Home Choice following the recent birth of her baby.

Discussion with support workers and with local housing officers indicated that Home Choice had resulted in enhanced opportunities for access to social housing through move-on from supported housing. 'Prior to Home Choice there were no move-on quotas from supported housing. Young people in YMCA and Foundation accommodation have gained access through Gold banding of those who are assessed as ready to move on and who have completed support plans' (Local Housing Officer).

Young people were the most willing to give advice on how the system could be improved, and their familiarity with IT led their responses to focus on how the functionality of the system could be improved, ideally by involving users more in future system design. The most commonly requested improvement was for pictures of the inside of properties, and comparisons to real estate marketing to which Home Choice seems a pale imitation were not lost on interviewees. Several interviewees echoed comments made at the focus groups about the unreliability of area search facilities, suggesting that there is something that really doesn't work or that better guidance on how to use search facilities is needed.

The position was different for some of those interviewed with mental health needs, for both the clients with learning difficulties and for the Gypsy Traveller couple who had difficulty reading and writing. The main barriers experienced in these cases are:

- Literacy;
- Computer skills, sensory or other health factors that preclude computer use;
- Understanding and ability to make choices;
- Access to necessary support from family or advice agencies;
- Geographical isolation was generally seen as a less important barrier, although problems of internet access and Wi-Fi signals clearly existed.

The main response to these barriers, one that had generally been successful for the clients we met, was the provision of personal support and advice to register, clarify requirements, bid and make decisions.

Such support came from various sources including family members and friends who were extremely helpful to some interviewees. More formal sources of support included mental health support workers, drug intervention teams, supported housing workers, social workers, and volunteers as well as Home Choice partners staff. This support worked best where the support workers were in regular contact with Home Choice partners and were knowledgeable about the system and the decision rules.

Horton Housing's Gypsy Traveller drop-in service provides a good example of such connectivity and expertise. In some cases it was clear that support workers were less knowledgeable and well connected than the drop-in services. This highlights the need for updated training on how the system works in practice for new staff and volunteers in support agencies, and for somewhere they can go to clear up procedural queries. This support should be provided in a way that overcomes the confidence and trust barriers that some vulnerable clients experience.

Particular attention was focused on the experience of applicants with learning difficulties because, as noted above, this was the only group with disabilities less well represented amongst those rehoused than on the active register. There is also a literature indicating common problems in integrating social services and housing responses to the needs of people with learning difficulties and in moving from institutionalised or supported housing options into 'ordinary housing'. A detailed national study in 2008 'found discriminatory practices that exclude people with learning difficulties from the system and this varied from simple lack of understanding of how to make information accessible and easy to understand, to blatant exclusion from the process and being told 'go to social services' (Hall *et al.* 2008 p. 4). That report concluded that while practice varied, there was generally room for improvement:

- in clarity and intelligibility of information and accessibility of CBL to people with learning difficulties;
- in avoiding the view of supported housing as the default option and acknowledging the wish of people with learning difficulties to move into independent accommodation as a normal life choice rather than in

emergencies (e.g. when parent/carers died or were no longer able to manage);

- in providing support for bidding rather than bidding on behalf of clients with learning difficulties; and
- in ensuring that support workers themselves understand how CBL works.

In the Home Choice Evaluation, there were some initial difficulties in securing access to clients with learning disabilities to interview. This was attributed to the low numbers of such cases who were registered on Home Choice and actively seeking accommodation. The general data analysis reported above had confirmed that people with learning difficulties were under-represented amongst year one lettings. The two interviews completed were interesting in highlighting effective liaison between social services and housing, the very specific accommodation requirements involved and the crucial role played by support workers in ensuring understanding of the system and their options and in enabling customers to make choices.

One of these cases provides an excellent example of effective support received by R., an LD service user. His Social Worker had worked effectively in liaison with Home Choice to enable (R.) to register and to amend the registration to a joint one with his lady friend. He had identified a the type and location of property they deemed suitable for sharing, with mobility adaptations and close proximity to the town centre. Our discussion clarified that R. understood the principles of banding, liked the property detail photos and was looking forward to the possibility of sharing accommodation in the town centre near to his day centre and place of work.

Figure 5: People with learning difficulties – depth interview summaries

- The two people with learning difficulties came from Craven and Hambleton. These were the only two such cases that Home Choice partners had been able to identify after several attempts.
- Both were single men, one living in supported housing, the other had been living in private rented housing with his aunt (85) and older brother (77), an arrangement that had fallen down when his aunt moved into a nursing home.
- They had both lived in existing housing for many years and a successful move will clearly require considerable input from Social Service and Housing providers.
- Both had first heard of Home Choice from support workers and contacts with Home Choice were mediated by a Social Worker and a Supported Living Manager and in turn by housing staff in the local authorities.
- Both had very specific locational and support requirements for their new accommodation:
 - (R.) wanted to move from his village to a nearby town where he attends a day centre two days a week, works in a plant nursery supplying municipal hanging baskets and floral displays and helps out cleaning barges on the canal. He would like to share his new accommodation with a lady friend, currently in respite care, as he had not previously lived alone. The Social Worker felt this would be good for mutual support as neither had lived independently before, and was making extensive efforts, including in liaison with Home Choice, to make this happen. (R) is registered on Home Choice but neither Social Worker nor (R.) were aware of current banding.
 - (M.) had been living in his own room in a shared house with three other residents with learning disabilities for ten years. He wants to move because of someone trying to access his money and this move is supported by his mother although it was not clear how much support it has from the existing supported housing provider. He is very specific about wanting to move to independent accommodation within sheltered housing within the same town. He has Bronze band.
- Neither interviewee had any direct personal dealings with Home Choice and both were entirely dependent on support workers to engage with it. However, (R.) did understand Gold, Silver and Bronze and liked to be able to see the property photographs ('like buying a car'):
 - In case (R.) the Social Worker had worked effectively in liaison with Home Choice to enable (R.) to register and amend the registration to a joint one. Given the shortage of such accommodation and the increasing urgency of the move the Social Worker is uncertain whether Home Choice will meet (R's) needs.
 - In case (M.) this was problematic because the support worker saw him as constantly changing his mind about moving. If he continues to want to move, help can be provided as in several other cases where people with learning difficulties have been helped to understand property adverts, review them and bid.

These two cases highlight the importance of good liaison between Social Services, Housing and support workers and the mapping of Home Choice onto existing liaison systems:

- In the case of (M.) we concluded that he had needed considerable support to enable him to understand and make choices and to register bids.
- In case (R.) liaison operated well through an existing Accommodation Forum and good personal links between staff who share a building.
- There was scope for more training of Social Services staff on the mechanics of Home Choice to follow up the initial information-based training. Furthermore it was unclear whether Home Choice could come up with a suitable property in time for (R.) and his lady friend.

In summary the depth interviews suggest that barriers associated with vulnerability were largely overcome by provision of personal support and advice to register, clarify requirements, bid and make decisions. However, most of this support was provided by agencies outside the Home Choice partnership and there was some inconsistency in the quality and availability of this support and the degree of connection to Home Choice. Furthermore these support agencies are likely to be facing reductions in resourcing at the present time. There is therefore a need to ensure that this vital support is constantly refreshed through training, partnership links and adequate resourcing of community based advice agencies.

Overall the evaluation evidence leads us to several conclusions concerning vulnerability. First vulnerable clients appear to be well represented amongst lettings compared to applications, to benefit from the banding system and to be more satisfied with Home Choice than many other (lower priority) applicants. There is evidence of effective support for vulnerable clients to overcome access and bidding barriers and the important role played by support providers outside the Home Choice partnership. However, there were a number of improvements to be made to make information about Home Choice more accessible and usable by vulnerable groups following the system audit, some issues with non-bidding, particularly by older people, and a need to more fully integrate social services support for people with learning difficulties into the Home Choice system. Cuts in funding of external agencies that provide much of the effective support to Home Choice users is a worrying development for the future and constant refresher training is required as staff and volunteers turn over.

It is perhaps significant that the evaluation analysis of the vulnerability theme attracted greater interest from North Yorkshire Home Choice than any other theme and accounted for the majority of recommendations adopted by the Partnership despite the fact that the findings were already predominantly positive. This probably reflects the importance attached to the values of equality and reducing barriers faced by vulnerable people by this predominantly social housing partnership. It certainly reflects the institutionalised structures and processes designed to promote equality through the EMG and EIA.

Mobility

Themes that are not well covered in the existing literature that were important to consider in the Home Choice Evaluation were the impact of rurality and sparsity of population in large parts of the county combined with high demand markets in York and Scarborough and the impact of the scheme on inter-authority mobility.

The question of rurality has already been addressed in the general review of the scheme, registrations and lettings above. It established the greater importance of sub-regional geography of housing demand over settlement size in determining the operation of the scheme across North Yorkshire.

As the background sections of this report have shown, the issue of enabling mobility across the partner areas was a key theme throughout the design and implementation of the scheme.

The Evaluation provided evidence of the extent to which the mobility opportunities provided by the scheme were taken up by customers in the first year. This section first presents the evidence on cross-boundary mobility. It then considers the underlying differences in supply and demand between parts of the sub-region that might encourage strategic bidding to enhance rehousing prospects alongside motivations to find work or to be closer to family. Finally it draws on the customer surveys and focus groups to identify the extent to which mobility choice is seen as an advantage of Home Choice.

Our **analysis of lettings** based on CORE data is presented in full in Evidence Paper 5. This is the only readily available source of 'before' and 'after' information on lettings. Analysis has been carried out for general needs lettings for the period July 2011 to March 2012 – the first nine months of operation for Home Choice. This is compared with the same nine month period in 2010-11. Table 13 shows the proportion of lets involving moves within the same authority area, from elsewhere within the partnership area and from outside the Home Choice partnership area. For this analysis, the main partner landlords and 'other landlords' are distinguished. There is a distinct difference between the pattern in the two years, especially for the main partner landlords. In both years the great majority of lettings went to people from the same authority area. However, cross-boundary movement was higher in 2011-12, involving both moves within the partnership area and from elsewhere. In proportionate terms, movement between local authority areas within the partnership area increased most, involving one in ten main partner lettings in 2011-12, double the proportion before Home Choice (see Table 13).

Table 13: Extent of Cross-Boundary Movement : Main Partner Landlords				
	2010-11		2011-12	
	Partner	Other	Partner	Other
Number	1,424	313	1,218	502
	%	%	%	%
Within same LA	94	94	84	90

From elsewhere in Partnership	2	2	10	4
From elsewhere	4	4	6	6

In 2011-12 cross-boundary flows of 5 or more for partner landlords within the partnership area were:

York to Selby	27
Richmondshire to Hambleton	19
York to Ryedale	12
York to Hambleton	9
Scarborough to Ryedale	9
York to Scarborough	7
Ryedale to Hambleton	6
Selby to Ryedale	5

In terms of net flows within the partnership area gains and losses were as follows:

Hambleton	29 gain
Selby	26 gain
Ryedale	21 gain
Craven	2 loss
Scarborough	6 loss
York ³	54 loss

Thus the most apparent effect has been to permit outward movement from York.

The main sources of inward movement to the partnership area are the various authorities in the Teesside area, and the authorities of the West Yorkshire conurbation. There was only one move recorded from Harrogate, which opted out of joining the North Yorkshire Home Choice, in 2011-12 compared with five in 2010-11. There were a few moves from further afield, including London.

Lying behind this pattern of small but significant increase in cross-authority mobility under Home Choice is the transparency provided by the system, including the recent lets pages, of the very different rehousing prospects in different areas of North Yorkshire due to supply/demand balances.

Table 6 earlier in this report draws on data in Evidence Paper 1 to show the extent of variation in the proportion of lettings going to different priority bands. Applicants in lower priority bands stand a much better chance of being housed in some areas (notably Craven and to a lesser extent Selby) than in others (notably York and Scarborough). Table 6 also showed the variation in the average number of bids per advertisement between local authority areas demonstrating a range from just 18 in Craven to 85 in York, almost five times higher.

³ There is a possibility that CORE records are incomplete for City of York Council lettings in 2011/12. If this is so, the apparent net loss experienced by York district could be exaggerated as some inward movement from elsewhere in the Partnership area could have been missed.

This analysis is further developed in Table 14 showing that Gold band applicants in York have more than three times as many 'competitors' also bidding for a property as Gold band applicants in Craven. On this measure and looking specifically at Gold band, Craven and Richmondshire emerge as receiving fewest bids while York receives by far the most, followed by Scarborough.

	Gold	Silver	Bronze
Craven	30	20	9
Hambleton	56	31	21
Richmondshire	31	16	4
Ryedale	49	29	14
Scarborough	68	49	29
Selby	50	31	16
York	99	57	15
All	72	34	15

So there is evidence of increasing cross-boundary mobility and of underlying differences in rehousing prospects between areas that may be driving this movement through strategic bidding, but what evidence is there on how customers view the ability to make choices between areas?

Table 15 from the Customer surveys reported in Evidence Paper 2 provides a general indication of customer views on being able to choose areas across the partnership. While most customers do not appear to be interested in having a wider choice of areas, there is evidence of an increased interest in this possibility after Home Choice came into operation. The proportion of all Home Choice applicants who expressed a preference for having a wider choice of areas was considerably higher than the proportion of tenants rehoused before Home Choice who wished they had a choice of areas (39 per cent versus 18 per cent). Thus four in ten Home Choice applicants, a significant minority, value having a wider choice of areas. The difference in support for wider choice between those rehoused under Home Choice and those Home Choice applicants still awaiting a new home (45 per cent vs 34 per cent) might indicate that some Home Choice applicants have been successful because they looked further afield.

Table 15: Survey Respondent Views on Having a Wider Choice of Areas

	Not interested in having a wider choice of areas	I (would) like having a wider choice of areas	No opinion	Total (%)	N=
Tenants rehoused pre-Home Choice	69	18	12	100	173
Tenants rehoused via Home Choice	50	45	5	100	94
Applicants so far unsuccessful	60	34	6	100	98
All Home Choice customers	55	39	6	100	192

Sources: Home Choice customer surveys 2 and 3; Pre-Home Choice customer survey.

Focus Groups provided some more direct evidence of a few successfully rehoused applicants who had made such strategic choices. These examples (Figure 6) show that there were often more specific reasons for mobility such as to be near family or jobs or to move away from unsuccessful relationships.

Figure 6: Examples of Motivations for Cross-authority Moves from Focus Groups

Three participants had exercised this choice personally, interestingly two of them in Bronze band had moved into accommodation for older people:

In one case the move *“enabled F to move away from Whitby and her former partner-an excellent use of choice”*.

In another case it had enabled the customer to move from London where her prospects of rehousing were quite limited into a sheltered housing scheme in York. *“It can work for people even when not in Gold band.”*

The third case was the best example of strategic bidding by a young family who had been able to trade a four bedroom house in a ‘rough area’ of York for a rural property using Silver band status. This example shows the potential power offered by Home Choice to resourceful bidders to move away from poorer areas if they have an asset to trade.

However, as in the surveys it was apparent that the opportunity for cross-authority moves was only of interest to a minority of participants. Moreover, for people wanting to be housed locally, cross-authority mobility was not seen as a positive factor. Indeed in some cases it was seen as a potential threat, reducing supply to meet local needs (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Examples of Perceived Disadvantages of Cross-authority Mobility and Sub-regional Scale of Home Choice from Focus Groups

One York focus group member commented *“you have to remember it’s not just people in York who are bidding – may be even people in Leeds etc”*.

There were also perceived and actual constraints to mobility under the scheme: One participant had *“put in a bid for a village and had a phone call saying they had no local connection, so were not eligible”* (presumably because this was a Section 106 scheme with a planning condition for local people).

“I can’t bid outside York for medical reasons. Therefore there is no advantage to me from wider area choice.”

Furthermore, one Richmond participant saw the sub-regional dimension of the scheme as being mainly about *“saving resources for the seven organisations rather than increasing choice for us”*.

In summary then Home Choice has clearly increased mobility across local authority areas and this is perceived as a welcome extension of choice by a significant minority of customers. The potential for further mobility between high and low demand areas through strategic bidding is apparent, as is the opportunity for some to move for personal reasons. However, these advantages are not widely appreciated and for many applicants there are personal constraints (such as medical and family factors) to moving as well as some constraints imposed by the scheme itself. In tie break situations local connection to the partnership area is a determining factor ruling out inward moves to all but the least popular properties (such as the sheltered housing example cited above). Some rural properties are subject to local lettings conditions. For homeless applicants direct matches may be imposed if successful bids are not made within a period. For some applicants cross-area mobility is seen as a disadvantage of the scheme, potentially increasing competition for homes in the only areas they want to live.

While the experience of the first year of Home Choice partly confirmed some of the fears of some local councillors that the scheme would result in higher levels of incomers to their social housing stock, this did not lead to any reduction in the open approach to area choice that had been a key feature of its design. This may be because nine out of ten lettings are still allocated to local bidders and because inter-authority moves have reduced hard-to-let problems in lower demand areas.

Under-occupancy and over-crowding

One of the unusual features of the original Home Choice lettings policy was the opportunity provided to bid for properties either one bedroom larger or one bedroom smaller than strictly required under bedroom category assessment rules. This feature brought bidding for social housing closer to the experience of house buyers and private renters where bedroom requirements are not a direct constraint on choice but are instead an indirect one mediated through trade-offs in relation to price and, in the case of low income private renting, the housing

benefit system. This freedom to over- and under-bid was mitigated to some extent by the tie break used after local connection, whereby applicants requiring a property of the size available are preferred to those seeking a property larger than they strictly 'need'.

Data presented in Table 16 highlights the mismatch between the household sizes of applicants and the size of available properties across the partnership and variations between areas. More than half of applicants require one bedroom only, and only about one in eight require three bedrooms or more.

Table 16: Active Register: Minimum Bedroom Requirement by Originating LA Area

	Craven	Hambleton	Richmond-shire	Ryedale	Scarborough	Selby	York	All
Number	1,108	1,707	1,123	1,464	4,131	1,629	3,970	15,132
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
One	60	60	59	53	57	52	59	57
Two	27	29	27	33	29	34	31	30
Three	11	10	12	12	12	12	9	11
Four+	2	1	2	2	2	3	1	2

Meanwhile the pattern of lettings in Table 17 shows that only four in ten properties have one bedroom while one in five have three or more bedrooms.

Table 17: Tenancies Started: Number of Bedrooms Allocated by Allocated LA Area

	Craven	Hambleton	Richmond-shire	Ryedale	Scarborough	Selby	York	All
Number	162	185	125	129	262	240	461	1,564
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
One	35	37	42	34	44	35	48	41
Two	46	45	40	35	30	47	34	38
Three	19	15	18	27	23	18	15	18
Four+	1	3	-	4	3	*	3	2

When area variation apparent in the more detailed analyses in Evidence Paper 1 is added to this picture, it is not surprising to find that in the first year of the scheme applicants took the opportunity to bid for properties larger than their immediate needs in a significant minority of cases.

Our analysis of CORE lettings data (Evidence Paper 5) reveals the pattern of under-occupancy and over-crowding resulting from the more liberal assessment rules of the scheme in the first year compared to the year prior to Home Choice going live.

Assessing whether there has been any effect on occupancy at the point of letting is inexact because the CORE data does not indicate in any simple manner how many bedrooms an applicant 'needs'. Very crude (and not generous) assumptions were applied as follows:

- 1 elder needs 1 bedroom
- 2 elders need 1 bedroom
- 1 adult needs 1 bedroom
- 2 adults need 1 bedroom
- 2 & 3 person single parent family needs 2 bedrooms
- 4 & 5 person single parent family needs 3 bedrooms
- Larger single parent family needs 4 bedrooms
- 3 & 4 person two parent family needs 2 bedrooms
- 5 & 6 person two parent family needs 3 bedrooms
- Larger two parent family needs 4 bedrooms
- Other households excluded from the analysis

These assumptions do not necessarily mirror the regulations which will determine required house size for housing benefit purposes which require a much more detailed examination of relationships within households and the age and sex of children.

Table 18 applies these crude assumptions and shows the proportion of lettings made according to occupancy match in 2010/11 and 2011/12. Most lettings overall involve a direct occupancy match on these assumptions. However, this is not true for two elder and two adult households where most are allocated a two rather than a one bedroom property. In terms of change over time, there appears to have been a slight shift away from direct matches and towards 'under-occupation' by one bedroom. This is true of all types of household other than single parent families where the proportion for one bedroom under-occupation is unchanged. There has been no increase in the (tiny) proportion of properties let which are smaller than 'needed'. This suggests that Home Choice may have permitted more generous space standards in line with applicant choice. It is also related to the fact that fewer one bedroom properties were let in 2011/12 than in 2010/11.

	Direct match	+ 1 bedroom	+ 2 bedrooms	- 1 bedroom
2010-11				
1 elder	73	27	*	-
2 elders	30	69	1	-
1 adult	71	27	2	-
2 adults	25	67	8	-

1 adult + child	61	35	-	5
2+ adults + child	59	40	-	1
All	60	37	2	1
2011-12				
1 elder	69	31	1	-
2 elders	25	74	1	-
1 adult	68	31	1	-
2 adults	26	68	6	-
1 adult + child	64	35	-	1
2+ adults + child	55	43	2	1
All	57	41	1	*

Further analysis of this issue was included in Evidence Paper 1 based on an analysis of the Home Choice register in April 2012 and lettings between July 2011 and April 2012. In all, 26 per cent of lettings gave applicants one bedroom over their minimum requirements. This was most marked where the minimum requirement was for one bedroom and a further analysis was carried out for the 623 allocations made to applicants aged under 65 with a single bedroom minimum requirement. This found:

- Almost three-quarters (72 per cent) bid for and were allocated one bedroom and 28 per cent were allocated two.
- Higher priority groups were more likely to have been allocated a spare bedroom. The implication is that, if applicants no longer want a spare bedroom, a greater proportion of one bedroom properties would be allocated to Emergency and Gold band applicants with knock-on effects for those in Silver and Bronze bands.
- There are geographical differences in the extent of under-occupation occurring. Among the under 65s with a minimum requirement of a single bedroom, half were allocated two bedrooms in Craven compared with only 9 per cent in York. More exact matches between property and requirements would impact most strongly in Craven, then in Richmondshire, Hambleton and Selby. The impact would be less in Ryedale, Scarborough and, particularly, York.

At the time of the evaluation, It was anticipated that changes to housing benefit and the 'Bedroom Tax' implemented in April 2013 would be likely to change applicants' choices on number of bedrooms, with a consequent knock-on effect especially for those 'requiring' one bedroom only. In practice the opportunity of the Policy Review was taken to amend the bedroom category rules to prevent new applicants from moving into homes that would not have full housing benefit eligibility, thereby reducing the risk of non-payment of rent.

The revised Common Allocations Policy now reads ‘Applicants will be informed at registration what types and size of property they will be able to bid for. There will sometimes be other restrictions in the advert, for example where a property is designated for people over a certain age or for people with a particular assessed need for that type of accommodation, a rural settlement designation or section 106, planning or legal condition or a sensitive let⁴ where additional checks will be carried out. Bids from applicants will only count if they can match the requirements in the advert.’

However, the continued difficulties faced in responding to the ‘Bedroom Tax’ in view of the limited supply of smaller dwellings was highlighted by one respondent to the draft report who noted that: ‘*(The) Current register clearly shows actual demand is for smaller properties but have LA and RSLs got the finance to deliver this need?*’

In summary, one of the unusual features of the original Home Choice lettings policy was the opportunity provided to bid for properties either one bedroom larger or one bedroom smaller than strictly required under bedroom category assessment rules. All types of household other than single parent families showed an increase in under-occupancy under Home Choice compared with previous schemes. 26 per cent of lettings gave applicants one bedroom over minimum requirements. 623 allocations were made to applicants with a minimum requirement of one bedroom who were aged under 65 and thus potentially affected by the ‘Bedroom Tax’. Of these, 448 (72 per cent) bid for and were allocated one bedroom, and 175 (28 per cent) bid for and were allocated two. Changes to Housing Benefit commonly known as the ‘Bedroom tax’ led to changes to this aspect of the scheme in 2013. Applicants will now be informed at registration what types and size of property they will be able to bid for.

Bronze banding

The final theme selected for inclusion in this report is perhaps the most challenging. This concerns the largest group of applicants for social housing who stand little chance of securing sufficient priority to be rehoused whatever the allocation scheme and however much ‘choice’ is extended to them. In the case of North Yorkshire Home Choice 62 per cent of the register in Bronze band were competing for 13 per cent of the lettings. Across the study, Bronze band applicants were the least satisfied and most likely to regard the scheme as unfair. Furthermore, only just over a third of people in Bronze band had bid compared with over half in Silver and over two-thirds in Gold.

When Home Choice was introduced there was a view amongst some stakeholders that the main consequence of the scheme would be an increase in transparency so that Bronze band applicants would be more aware of their limited prospects of housing and would become ‘more realistic’ in their

⁴ Sensitive let; where there has been considerable nuisance and/or considerable problems in a block or area and it is necessary to prevent further detrimental issues. A standard policy operates. See appendix 17.

expectations. This might have two consequences. Firstly, there might be a willingness to widen choices and bid strategically and to take advantage of properties in lower demand. Secondly, there might be a reduced interest in engaging with social housing providers given an awareness of the futility of such engagement. It was therefore interesting after the first year of operation of Home Choice to assess the relative strength of these two reactions and to use this evidence to inform the Home Choice Policy review; the possible reactions are termed here the “optimistic” and “pessimistic” views.

Optimistic view

Our analysis of bid behaviour and the characteristics of bidders and non-bidders (Evidence Paper 1) and of customer understanding of the potential of the information provided by the system such as the recent lets pages to inform strategic bidding (Evidence Paper 2) aligned with the “optimistic” view. It provided a considerable sense of purpose in CBL and potential for Bronze banded applicants to follow the path from ‘points hunters to home seekers’. This analysis led to recommendations that would reduce the number of non-bidders and enhance the information available for strategic bidding. It is interesting to review the findings of tenant surveys and how these were used to support recommendations to enhance strategic bidding through better information provision.

The tenant surveys explored Home Choice customers’ views on existing feedback. Results presented in Table 19 show that the ‘Recent lets’ section of the website – which is the main way of providing feedback to bidders – works for around 40 per cent of them. The majority of survey respondents, however, have either not seen it or have not found it useful. This suggests that there is a scope for publicising the existence of this section further and for improving its design so that users understand and make more effective use of it to inform their bidding behaviour.

Table 19: Home Choice Customer Views on Existing Feedback - Responses to Statement: What is your opinion on the ‘Recent Lets’ section of the Home Choice website?					
	I have never seen it	I have seen it and I found it useful	I have seen it but I did not find it useful	Total (%)	N=
Tenants rehoused via Home Choice	40	51	9	100	95
Applicants so far unsuccessful	42	32	27	100	98
All Home Choice applicants	41	41	18	100	193

Evidence Paper 2 went on to combine the answers to these questions in a more in-depth analysis, to suggest that there was scope to improve customer

understanding of the system to inform their bidding behaviour. The analysis showed that of 117 respondents who declared that they know/knew where in the rank their bids fell, only 63 found the 'Recent lets' section useful, while 32 had not seen it and 20 did not find it useful⁵. This suggests that even apparently well informed bidders could make better use of the information provided in the 'Recent Lets' section, and that design improvements could make this section even more accessible and useful for better informed bidding. We should not underestimate the importance placed by a minority of customers on contact with their local offices to get feedback and it is therefore important that staff share understanding of the ways in which the 'recent lets' information can improve information for bidding.

Pessimistic view

However, the focus groups undertaken later in the project provided a less sanguine picture of the position of Bronze band applicants, particularly in contrast to the vulnerable client interviews who generally had higher banding (Evidence Paper 4). The focus groups communicated a sense of futility felt by many Bronze band applicants, helping to explain the much lower levels of bidding among this group revealed in Evidence Paper 1 (just 35 per cent of Bronze band had bid).

A key issue emerging from both focus groups (Evidence Paper 4) was the question of *'the Bronze band and the inability to get out of it'*. In both cases the limited prospects of Bronze banded applicants being successful in bidding had led applicants to question the fairness of the banding criteria. In practice, Bronze band was seen as a holding camp rather than a place to exercise choice.

As one Richmond participant put it – *'you could register as a teenager and die as a pensioner and still be Bronze – they should move you up a band after five years' registration, so you could be in Gold after ten years'*. Similarly in the York group it was felt to be unfair that people registered for a very short time should get housed, while others might wait for years without a successful bid. There were arguments to restore waiting time points which had operated in York prior to Home Choice.

This sense of futility was apparent amongst many Bronze banders. One participant felt that they could do nothing to get greater priority; this is a far cry from the 'responsibilised citizen' envisaged by advocates of active house hunting. Nevertheless, all but one of the Bronze banders in the focus groups were still actively bidding (compared to one in three of all Bronze band applicants). The exception said they *'had stopped in the last two weeks as they thought it was no good'*. Perhaps coming close to this conclusion another participant was *'getting to the stage where the question is whether it's worth bidding – but there is no alternative'*.

There was a recognition that, unless supply of housing increases, Bronze band will be of no use to most applicants. This probably exacerbates rather than

⁵ Of the 79 respondents who found the 'recent lets' section useful, 63 also declared that they know/knew where in the rank their bids fell, while 13 did not know or had no opinion.

reduces the feeling of unfairness and helplessness. Building more homes, making better use of the stock and using Home Choice as a gateway to other forms of rented and affordable housing were amongst the ideas discussed to ease this sense of helplessness. The Richmond focus group argued that housing shortages should mean more housing being provided. The shortage was seen as *'more marked in rural areas where young people can't afford to stay'*. There was also an argument to make better use of existing stock *'there should be more pressure on under-occupiers to free properties. There should be an annual review to see if properties are still needed'*. This chimes with some recent national policy directions to reduce security of tenure and, of course, the 'Bedroom Tax' incentives for under-occupiers to move to smaller accommodation.

Evidence Paper 4 concluded that the scope for Home Choice to offer meaningful alternative housing options to Bronze banders was likely to be a test of its long term acceptability. The extent to which it will be possible to respond to the aspirations for greater progression between bands, through increased supply or reduced security for existing tenants, is questionable. One potential development is for Home Choice to exploit its position to become a one-stop route into all rented and affordable housing in North Yorkshire and in this way to provide more options for Bronze banders to move on.

In practice the pessimistic analysis was said to have been quite influential in framing recommendations in the policy review. However, rather than making the case for extension of Home Choice to include other providers of rented homes, the logic adopted was to restrict the scale of the Bronze band problem by introducing more systematic review of applications.

The Revised Common Allocations Policy now reads 'All applicants who have not bid for any properties within a 12-month period will be contacted and asked if they want to remain on the Register. A failure to respond within 28 days will result in the application being cancelled. Applicants in the Emergency and Gold bands will be reviewed on a more regular basis to ensure they are not having difficulties with the scheme and to check that they are bidding for suitable properties when advertised.'

This procedure was introduced in 2012-13 leading to a reduction in the size of the register from 17,000 to 15,000 with particular impact on the Bronze band.

Recommendations and conclusions

The Evaluation was designed to provide feedback to inform policy development by the North Yorkshire Home Choice Partnership. Interim findings provided by the five evidence papers were discussed with Home Choice partners at several stages in the study; particularly at the Partnership Boards in October 2011 and 2012 and at the Equalities Monitoring Group in October 2011 and March 2012. This evidence was used by the Home Choice partnership to inform its own policy review from October 2012 – June 2013. This chapter begins by summarising the evaluation recommendations and partnership response, and continues with a brief summary of the policy review.

The study also provides insights that are of wider relevance and may be related back to the issues arising from the literature review in the Background section of the report. These are presented as broad conclusions to end the report.

North Yorkshire Home Choice responses to evaluation findings

The Five evidence papers made a total of 31 recommendations to the NYHC Partnership:

- Evidence Paper 1 – 7 recommendations
- Evidence Paper 2 – 5 recommendations
- Evidence Paper 3 – 7 recommendations
- Evidence Paper 4 – 12 recommendations
- Evidence Paper 5 – 0

The majority of these recommendations were responded to directly in the Equality Impact Assessment version 7 completed in November 2012 and taking into account the five evidence papers together with other new developments such as the Localism Act 2012 and Welfare Reform Act 2012.

One of the most positive responses to the evaluation was in response to Evidence Paper 3 reviewing customer facing materials. A full account of responses was included in the Equality Impact Assessment version 7 and a further explanation was provided in comments on the Draft Final Report on why a minority of recommendations were not accepted in full. On balance we feel that this represents an excellent example of a collaborative partnership between an evaluation and practice.

The full version of Equality Impact Assessment v 7 is included as an appendix to this report as a good practice example of the ongoing use of evidence in a continual cycle of policy review against clearly specified aims.

In addition to the Equality Impact Assessment there is further evidence of positive use made of the evaluation by individual Home Choice partners; for example in the detailed response to each of the Evidence papers produced by Richmondshire Council.

Review 2013

Alongside its response to the evaluation, the Home Choice Partnership undertook its own policy review in 2012-13. This was the subject of local consultation in 2012 and was finalised by the Partnership Board in May 2013.

The revised CBL Common Allocation policy is included as an appendix to this report.

Wider implications of the evaluation

In this final section we draw out the wider implications of the evaluation for our understanding of CBL systems and their impacts.

What difference has it made?

The 'before' and 'after' Home Choice analysis of lettings outcomes in Evidence Paper 5 identified several trends which *might* be the consequence of introducing choice-based lettings. These include:

- A fall in the proportion of lettings going to single parent families and a rise in the proportion going to two-parent families. This may be associated with an increase in the proportion of lettings to people in full-time employment.
- An increase in the proportion of lettings going to statutorily homeless people owed a duty, and an associated fall in the proportion going to people not homeless.
- Among young people (under 25), an increase in the proportion of homeless people housed and an associated fall in the proportion housed who are not homeless which is greater than for older age groups.
- A slight reduction in the average number of offers refused and in the average length of void period before letting.
- A slight increase in the proportion of lettings which provide one bedroom more than is strictly 'needed' (on very crude assumptions).
- Most unequivocally, an increase in movement within the Partnership area and, to a lesser extent, from outside the area.

It also set out some of the factors which appear not to have been influenced by the introduction of Home Choice. These included:

- The number of properties let.
- The size and ethnicity of households housed and the age of head of household.
- The proportion of lettings going to transferring tenants.
- The relative desirability of properties let to homeless and to non-homeless people.

This early impacts evidence suggests that the scheme appears to have had some substantial benefits for some groups, in particular statutorily homeless and young people with support needs.

This report focused on four significant themes generating findings that are also of wider relevance.

Vulnerability

NYHC has demonstrated that vulnerable clients can be effectively supported to overcome access and bidding barriers and the important role played by support providers outside the Home Choice partnership. However, this requires constant improvements to be made to make information about Home Choice more accessible and usable by vulnerable groups. It requires assistance with bidding, integration with social services support for people and recognition of the key role played by families and friends and by community-based advice and support agencies that have recently been subject to funding reductions. It is significant that the vulnerability theme attracted greater interest from North Yorkshire Home Choice than any other theme and accounted for the majority of recommendations adopted by the Partnership. This demonstrates the importance of values, leadership and institutionalised structures such as the EMG and EIA to keep these issues on the agenda.

Mobility

Home Choice has clearly increased mobility across local authority areas and this is perceived as a welcome extension of choice by a significant minority of customers. The potential for further mobility between high and low demand areas through strategic bidding and the opportunity to move for personal reasons is apparent. However, these advantages are not widely appreciated and for many applicants there are personal, medical and family barriers to moving as well as constraints imposed by the scheme itself. This evidence provides encouragement to others attempting to widen the scope of existing CBL schemes. But it also reminds us that the choice most valued is the chance of a decent affordable home locally rather than a chance to move away from local support, family and work simply in order to secure a place to live.

Occupancy

One of the unusual features of the original Home Choice lettings policy was the opportunity provided to bid for properties either one bedroom larger or one bedroom smaller than strictly required under bedroom category assessment rules. All types of household other than single parent families showed an increase in under-occupancy under Home Choice compared with previous schemes. However, this apparent advantage of the scheme turned to a problem when the shape of the welfare reform proposals became apparent, forcing a direct trade off between choice and costs. To avoid moral hazard of placing more and more households at risk of a gap between housing costs and

available resources NYHC amended the eligibility of bids to include a stricter size match.

Banding

The final theme is undoubtedly the most challenging for advocates of choice through widespread bidding. CBL as such does nothing to address the housing shortage and while active bidding is a very positive experience for high priority bands it can be a dispiriting experience for those with low priority banding. In our discussion of this theme we explored optimistic and pessimistic views of the value of CBL to low priority applicants. The optimistic view emphasises the role of enhanced information in enabling strategic bidding, mainly to extend areas of choice to include low demand properties. It stresses reforms to encourage more active bidding and better awareness and use of information. The pessimistic view acknowledges that the odds are stacked against Bronze band applicants becoming successful home seekers, with some harking back to 'points hunting' type activities that might have provided more hope of progression. The pessimistic view suggests two possible scenarios. One is to extend the stock of property available through CBL by including private renting and access to other non-social housing. The other is to discourage registration of lower priority applicants by more frequent review of the register and placing the onus on applicants to re-register to strict timescales.

Was it worth it?

The most significant achievement of NYHC was the establishment of an effective partnership covering very different types of housing authority and housing associations over a very extensive geographical area. Reaching agreement on the shape of the scheme involved compromise, with a fine line drawn between consistent implementation and local tailoring to enable a degree of local control by councils and a degree of independence for example to reflect the charitable status of some housing associations. A cautious approach was taken to the extent of integration, holding back from either a central administration or entirely common policies across the partners. Partners seeking extension of the scheme to include the private rented sector were disappointed by the cautious approach.

In the absence of a central administration to support the part-time co-ordinator a strong emphasis was placed on the Operations Group in developing shared practices. This proved very effective in achieving buy in and responsibility for resolving problems by all partners. The research found that support agencies outside the Home Choice partnership were vital in enabling vulnerable households to exercise choice and continued involvement of these agencies is therefore vital.

Unfortunately the evaluation was not able to access sufficient information on the costs of Home Choice or on the costs of individual arrangements by partners prior to Home Choice to draw a conclusive view about the financial costs and benefits of the scheme. A request for such information in response to comments on the first draft did not generate any additional information. As

reported earlier, however, cost saving was not a dominant motivation in setting up the scheme. The grant available from DCLG had reduced concerns about initial set up costs. While costs may have been a barrier to expanding the central administration function, aspects of the dispersed arrangements were recognised to have involved higher costs.

Much diversity still remains, not just because of caution about over-integration but because local differences in housing supply and demand mean that one size really would not fit all. Local lettings schemes in rural areas were retained to fit with planning agreements and local sentiment. Tie breaks were also used to maintain local connection as a consideration in lettings.

Evolving context

The extent to which all of the effort involved was worth it will become clearer in the next few years. Early wins included the boost given to sub-regional collaboration, for example for the development of the sub-regional housing and homelessness strategy and much improved collaboration between housing and support providers on a pathway out of homelessness for young people. Vulnerable clients, including homeless people, have generally fared well. Many applicants welcome the increased 'choice' offered by the scheme, although unsuccessful bidders are more sceptical, and some people preferred the old system. The biggest challenge remains to create meaningful choices for customers in the lowest priority bands.

One important factor to consider is the extent to which the national momentum behind the adoption of choice based lettings schemes has dissipated since the period in which Home Choice was set up. The Localism Act 2011 and associated guidance enabling local discretion in allocation schemes has taken policy in a rather different direction to the consumerist focus of choice based lettings. The increasing drive to welfare conditionality and to reducing the scope of social housing as life time homes has tended to place less focus on creating choice within the social housing sector. Furthermore, the continued drive to encourage low income households into the private rented sector, for example through amendments to homelessness duties whereby a private tenancy can be considered a reasonable discharge of duty, has also shifted the agenda. In this respect the inclusion of the PRS might become a more important future consideration for the development of the Home Choice scheme.

References

- Appleton, N. and Molyneux, P. (2009) *The impact of choice based lettings on the access of vulnerable adults to social housing*. Housing Learning Improvement Network LIN.
- Brown, T., Dearling, A. Hunt, R. Richardson, J. and Yates, N. (2003) *Allocate or let? Your Choice: Lessons from Harborough Home Search*. Chartered Institute of Housing for Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- DCLG (2011) *Local authority housing statistics 2010-11*. London, Department of Communities and Local Government.
- Bochel, C., Bochel, H. and Somerville, P. (2008) Marginalised or enabled voices? User participation in research and policy. *Social Policy and Society* 7.2 201-10
- Dowding, K. and John, P. (2009) The value of choice in public policy. *Public Administration* 87.2 219-233.
- Flint, J. (2003) Housing and ethopolitics: constructing identities of active consumption and responsible community. *Economy and Society* 32.4 611-629.
- Haffner, M. and Hoekstra, J. (2006) Housing Allocation and Freedom of Movement: A European Comparison. *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 97.4 pp443-451.
- Hall, C., Hooks, W., Perez, W. and Wood, A. (2008) *Choice based lettings and people with learning difficulties*. Report for the Valuing People Support Team Care Service Improvement Partnership.
- Inside Housing* (2011) Letters 4 April 2011.
- Manley, D. and van Ham, M. (2011) Choice-based letting, Ethnicity and Segregation in England. *Urban Studies* 48.14 pp 3125-3143.
- Manzi, T. (2010) Promoting responsibility. Shaping behaviour: Housing management, mixed communities and the construction of citizenship. *Housing Studies* 25.1 5-19.
- Marsh, A. (2004) The inexorable rise of the rational consumer? The Blair Government and the reshaping of social housing. *European Journal of Housing Policy*. 4.2 185-207.
- Marsh, A., Cowan, D., Cameron, A., Jones, M., Kiddle, C. and Whitehead, C. (2004) *Piloting Choice Based Lettings. An Evaluation*. London, Department of Communities and Local Government.

Mullins, D. and Rowlands, R. (2004) Choice Based Lettings in Hughes, M. (ed) *Enabling Choice: Research on Choice in Public Services*. London, Local Government Association.

Mullins, D. and Pawson, H. (2005) The land that time forgot. Reforming access to social housing in England. *Policy and Politics* 33.2 205-230.

Needham, C. (2008) Choice in Public Services: No choice but to choose. In Powell, M. (ed) *Modernising the Welfare State. The Blair Legacy*. 179-197.

Pawson, H., Jones, C., Donohoe, T., Netto, G., Fancy, S., Clegg, S. and Thomas, A. (2006) *Monitoring the Longer Term Impact of Choice Based Lettings*. London, Department of Communities and Local Government.

Pawson, H. and Hulse, K. (2011) Policy Transfer of choice based lettings to Britain and Australia: How extensive? How faithful? How appropriate? *International Journal of Housing Policy* 11.2 113-132.

Robinson, D. (2009) New immigrants and migrants in social housing in Britain: discursive themes and lived realities. *Policy and Politics* 38.1 57-77.

Van Ham, M. and Manley, D. (2009) Social Housing Allocation. Choice and neighbourhood ethnic mix in England. *Journal of Housing and Built Environment* 24.4 407-422.

Wood, A. and Hall, C. (2008) *Choice-based letting and people with learning disabilities*. Care Services Improvement Partnership

Appendices

Appendix A Evidence papers

<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/social-policy/research/projects/2012/evaluation-north-yorkshire-cbl.aspx>.

Appendix B Equality Impact Assessment version 7 – November 2012. *This is a draft version of a rolling assessment.*

Appendix C North Yorkshire Common Allocations Policy – September 2013

<http://www.northyorkshirehomechoice.org.uk/NovaWeb/Infrastructure/ViewLibraryDocument.aspx?ObjectID=284>

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has supported this project as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policy-makers, practitioners and service users. The facts presented and views expressed in this report are, however, those of the authors and not necessarily those of JRF or the Place programme.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead
40 Water End
York YO30 6WP
www.jrf.org.uk

This report, or any other JRF publication, can be downloaded free from the JRF website (www.jrf.org.uk/publications).

© Heriot-Watt University 2014

First published 2014 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

All rights reserved. Reproduction of this report by photocopying or electronic means for non-commercial purposes is permitted. Otherwise, no part of this report may be reproduced, adapted, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise without the prior written permission of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

ISBN: 978 1 90958 609 3 (pdf)

Ref: 2970

Contact:
John Low
john.low@jrf.org.uk

North Yorkshire Home Choice – Sub regional Choice Based Lettings Scheme



Equality Impact Assessment

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – NOV 2012 DRAFT

Contents:

Number	Description	Page
1	Service Area and Function	2 - 3
2	Equalities Impact Assessment - summary	3 - 8
3	Monitoring Framework	9
4	Summary of the Key issues and Actions arising from JRF Evaluation of North Yorkshire Home Choice 2012/13	10 - 15

Appendices

Appendix 1: Consultation Summary (Autumn 2009)

Appendix 2: Equalities Action Plan

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – NOV 2012

1. Service Area and Function:

Name of service area / function:	Lead officer for this EIA:
Housing (North Yorkshire Sub Regional Choice based Lettings)	Name: Karen Jackson, Project Manager Phone Number: 01904-554237 Job Title: North Yorkshire Home Choice Co-ordinator
Describe the service area / function: North Yorkshire Home Choice	
<p>North Yorkshire Home Choice is the brand name given to affordable housing let using a Choice Based lettings (CBL) system supplied by Abritas. The scheme was developed following a period of consultation – a summary of the key issues arising and actions arising can be found at Appendix 1 – Consultation Summary & Actions Arising Autumn 2009. Participating landlords advertise all properties available to let using a variety of means including the internet and applicants registered with North Yorkshire Home Choice are able to register an interest for those properties that they wish to be considered for.</p> <p>Properties are advertised on a 6-day cycle Thurs – Tues. All bids are automatically shortlisted by the Abritas CBL system and subsequently verified prior to the offer of accommodation to the successful bidder. The principle for selecting the successful applicant is set down in the lettings policy; which takes into account law and guidance on local authority lettings schemes for Affordable Housing, including that which relates to housing need.</p> <p>The government recommends that local authorities develop sub-regional schemes. North Yorkshire Home Choice Partnership Board which includes representation from Craven, Ryedale, York, Hambleton, Richmondshire, Selby and Scarborough local authorities and their Large Scale Voluntary Partners was formed to develop a sub-regional scheme. This means that households seeking accommodation within the partnership area are able to complete a single application form and a joint approach to assessing and letting of properties is undertaken in accordance with the North Yorkshire Home Choice Allocations Policy.</p> <p>Primarily North Yorkshire Home Choice will advertise partner organisation social housing lettings but since introduction in 2010 has been developed further to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other Housing Association properties available for let within the Partnership Area • Low Cost Home Ownership options • Council accredited private sector landlord or Empty Homes Grant properties available for let • Home Swap opportunities • Information on adapted properties 	

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – NOV 2012

EIA start date:	EIA finish date:.	Date EIA reviewed:	EIA signed off by:.
June 2009	No end date	To be reviewed Quarterly/Annually Last Reviewed: Nov 2012	Sub Regional Equalities Monitoring Group established by the Project Board

2. Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) – summary document

CBL was evaluated by the CLG during 2004 and this document formed the basis of the original EIA in 2009 to summarise the key impacts and responses required in relation to the 6 Equality Strands and external factors including Financial Inclusion and rurality of the partnership area.

Our EIA is a working document which has subsequently been updated in light of further *national* and sub-regional research evidence including:

- a) 2004 National Evaluation of CBL
- b) Welfare Reform 2012
- c) Joseph Rowntree Foundation Research 2012:
- d) Localism Act 2012
- e) Allocation of accommodation

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – NOV 2012

EQUALITY STRAND	IMPACT	RESPONSE
<p>Race</p>	<p>The 2004 National Evaluation of CBL does not suggest any negative Equality Impact on the grounds of race. On the contrary, early evidence suggests CBL encourages racial integration.</p> <p>Barriers, which may have a racial/national dimension, relate to recent immigrants who do not speak English to a high standard. Evaluation suggests that non-English speakers or persons where English is not the first language have the most difficulty in accessing CBL.</p> <p>The JRF research confirmed the importance of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • providing a range of options to help people whose first language is not English to access the scheme • providing a consistent service to Gypsy, Travellers and Showpeople 	<p>a) Website: The North Yorkshire Home Choice website has a ‘Google Translate’ facility. However the JRF research in 2012 concluded that this had limitations so actions to improve access to other options such as Language Line have been included within the Equalities Action Plan.</p> <p>b) Application Form: includes the following opportunities for applicants to request assistance or translation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Front Cover: “If you need help in person, please contact your local housing office, full contact details are given at the end of this document.” in five relevant languages (Urdu, Polish, Turkish, Fijian, Cantonese) • Section 2 – Help to Use This Scheme – Q19 • Section 10 – Equalities Monitoring – Q71 & 72 – information in another language • Section 10 – Religion – Q74 – Cultural or religious requirements • Section 11 – Communication Q79,80,81,82 – preferred method/language of communication • An “ if you need help with translation.” message will be integrated into the hard copy application form and scheme guide in <p>c) The call centre provided by the IT supplier provides help in 20 languages, including those above.</p> <p>d) Actions to scope the service available for Gypsy, Travellers and Showpeople has been included within the EIA.</p>

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – NOV 2012

EQUALITY STRAND	IMPACT	RESPONSE
<p>Disability</p>	<p>Taking a broad view of the term 'Disability' National Evaluation suggests that CBL will impact on</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Very elderly or infirm 2. People with learning Difficulties 3. People with limited literacy <p>One should also add people with mental health issues</p> <p>The National Evaluation found that CBL enables key and support workers to have an increased involvement in the housing needs of their clients, due to the public advertising of vacancies.</p> <p>The JRF research confirmed that</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • vulnerable groups were not disadvantaged by CBL • there are potential inconsistencies across the area in banding decisions for Health & Well Being Gold banding • there were disproportionately fewer older persons bidding and a high numbers of older persons requiring assistance to bid and adapted properties in some partnership areas. 	<p>Interventions to reduce negative impact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> √ ACCESS: CBL enables customers to bid from home (or key local Public Access Centres (PACs)) by internet or phone, which may be of great assistance to these groups in many cases. Property Sheets are available at all PACs and training of library staff in some areas. √ SURGERIES: Gypsy and Travellers can take advantage of drop in Surgeries in Selby or assistance from the G&T Support service provided by Horton Housing √ ASSISTANCE TO REGISTER/BID: On application to NY Home Choice the support requirements of individuals are identified and appropriate assistance given. With informed consent, support workers, advocates or friends/relatives can bid on behalf of an applicant. Where such applicants have not identified an advocate, Housing Options staff will contact them to establish their support needs and put in place an assisted bidding service where necessary. An AUTOMATED BIDDING service : (where bids are placed by the IT software) will also be available where necessary. √ GUIDES: The web site provides a guide to 'Supporting Others' and an Easy Read version of the Guide to NY Home Choice. Copies are also available at PACs. Easy Read User Guides are provided for customers with Learning Disabilities or those with literacy problems. √ TRAINING: Training has been delivered to support workers across the County – including Support Workers for the following client groups: Mental Health, vulnerable adults, adults with learning/physical disabilities, young people. <p>A review of these interventions and on-going training for support workers and PAC staff has been included within the EAP.</p> <p>Actions to address the findings of the JRF research have been included within the EAP to ensure consistency of banding decisions through investigation, training and learning from good practice in other areas. These will further improve the review and monitoring processes already in place.</p>

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – **NOV 2012**

EQUALITY STRAND	IMPACT	RESPONSE
Gender	No specific impacts noted by the National Evaluation or JRF Research.	
Sexuality	No specific impacts noted by the National Evaluation or JRF Research.	
Religion /Belief	No specific impacts noted by the National Evaluation or JRF Research..	See Race above item d)
Age	<p>There is considerable cross over with the disability heading. Again, the fact that CBL entails the public advertising of properties can make it easier for key workers or relatives to support the elderly in seeking a new home.</p> <p>Generally, older and disabled people may be less likely to have IT access in the home and in some cases may have greater difficulty in accessing public offices.</p> <p>The JRF research identified a “Mismatch” of bidding patterns of elderly persons which requires further investigation to ensure that North Yorkshire Home Choice is not adversely affecting their ability to bid/access affordable housing. This is especially important due to the increase proportion of older persons in North Yorkshire.</p>	<p>Interventions to reduce negative impact as detailed above for the DISABILITY strand.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ACCESS • ASSISTANCE TO REGISTER/BID • GUIDES • TRAINING <p>Lack of IT skills: Home Choice applicants are able to access ID Skills Courses at their local library.</p> <p>√ AWARENESS RAISING: Opportunities taken up within each local district to increase awareness of the scheme and help available to older persons. E.g. Elder Persons Reference Group in Craven.</p> <p>√ REACHING OUT TO THE ELDERLY: New 2012. Further interventions specific to older persons to be explored and developed during 2013 to support existing methods of access/bidding for affordable housing. Further work required to understand the potential barriers that older people experience to inform further actions for inclusion in the EAP.</p> <p>Access to available properties via Digital TV is commonplace in other CBL schemes nationally. This option will be considered at the first review of this scheme.</p>
EQUALITY STRAND	IMPACT	RESPONSE

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – NOV 2012

<p>Financial Inclusion</p>	<p>Financial Inclusion has emerged since the “recession” or “downturn in the economy” since 2010 as an area for concern for local authorities in North Yorkshire where many of its rural areas are characterised by lower wages. In response a North Yorkshire Financial Inclusion Strategy has been developed and forums established within each area to deliver key actions identified.</p> <p>The Welfare Reform Act 2012 and preceding Public Spending Review benefit cuts has had an adverse financial effect on households and increased pressure on social housing. For example, the Under-occupancy restrictions for social housing tenants due April 2012 – potentially will see an increase in households downsizing, seeking home swap options and/or at risk of accruing rent arrears</p>	<p>Issues specific to the implementation of North Yorkshire Home Choice are in terms of minimising the cost to the applicants in accessing the scheme. Predominantly the scheme is accessible via the internet, however, for those people without internet connection or who wish to access the scheme or seek advice/assistance in person they are able to do so using the following methods of contact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • by telephoning their local housing office to access Property Sheet, bidding by phone and accessing advice and assistance • by using the Automated bidding Line • by visiting their local housing office. <p>All calls to local housing offices or the Automated Bidding line uses an 0300 for phone bidders charged at a local rate whether using a landline or mobile phone.</p> <p>Following the evaluation of the scheme – the feasibility of outreach/housing surgeries will be considered.</p> <p>In 2012 Mutual Exchange Properties were included in the weekly advertisements and as at Nov 8 there were 85% more Mutual Exchange properties advertised than social housing lets available.</p>
<p>Rurality</p>	<p>North Yorkshire is predominantly rural and over half of its population live in</p>	<p>Problems of access have been addressed in the following ways</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach activity, based on self identification as vulnerable

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – NOV 2012

	<p>areas defined as 'sparse' or 'super sparse'. This can make accessing services more difficult.</p> <p>The JRF research found that applicants are most likely to bid in York and least likely to bid in Richmondshire or Craven. Applicants from lower priority bands stand a much better chance of being housed in some areas.(notably Craven and to a lesser extent Ryedale Selby & Hambleton) than others (notably York & Scarborough).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self identification as vulnerable, with a named advocate• Assisted bidding• Automated bidding• Operation of the scheme remotely via phone or internet• Access to Officer support at public offices.• Maximisation of the number of Public Access Centres (including libraries and community venues) at a local level• Use of free advertising opportunities (i.e. posters in key public places and advice centres e.g. CABs)• The opportunity to bid by post, which will help anyone uncertain about phone or internet bidding• Drop in “surgeries” at Selby District Council for Gypsy & Travellers• Horton Housing support services for Gypsy and Travellers across North Yorkshire <p>Raising awareness of scheme and access points at community events</p> <p>Awareness raising amongst key 3rd and public sector partners has taken place and will continue to do so. This will maximise the range of people able to act as assisted bidders or advocates for vulnerable customers. The profile of CBL and its implementation has been promoted in particular to Supporting People teams, Social Services, Parish councils, Local housing forums and General public</p> <p>A network database for the distribution of the Property Sheet via email has been established through this process.</p> <p>The regular monitoring of the scheme and changing environment in terms of pressure on public services to maximise resources and reduce costs will inform future interventions required or improved upon to target resources to where they are needed most.</p>
--	---	---

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – NOV 2012

3. Monitoring Framework:

The 'Equalities Monitoring Group' (EMG) established 1st May 2009 continues to operate as a sub group of the Board to monitor the implementation of the scheme to ensure that no – one client group or household falling within the equality strands identified are adversely affected by the introduction of the scheme. (Please see EMG Terms of Reference).

The Equalities Monitoring Framework (Agreed Sept 2011) includes the monitoring of

a) Profile of the register - **report to the Partnership Board/EMG detailing:**

- Ethnic profile of those registered with the scheme
- Additional needs identified of those registered
- Age profile of register
- Number of applicants indicating need for additional support with bidding
- Number of clients requiring adapted properties

b) Bidding behaviour – **report to the Partnership Board/EMG detailing:**

- How people bid
- And, for each bidding method, breakdown by
 - Age
 - Ethnicity
 - Additional needs

c) Outcomes – **report to the Partnership Board/EMG detailing:**

- Percentage of lets to each band
- Lettings outcomes by age, ethnicity and additional needs – with comparison to register, banding and bidding profiles
- Lets to applicants cross border – within the partnership area, and from without
- And how many disabled adapted properties let to applicants with an identified need for those adaptations





d) Customer Complaints – **report to the Partnership Board/EMG detailing nature and customer profile of complaints to inform service improvement.**

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – NOV 2012


4. Summary of the Key issues and Actions arising from JRF Evaluation of North Yorkshire Home Choice 2012/13:

This document is a working document and as such is updated and amended annually and following the completion and publication of evaluations carried out. In 2012 the Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded the University of Birmingham and Heriot-Watt University to carry out an Evaluation of North Yorkshire Home Choice. The full report is due in 2013. The EIA has been reviewed 2012 in light of their initial findings and the relevant interventions required included within the Equalities Action Plan (see APPENDIX 2):

i. Evidence Paper 1: Analysis of CBL Data

Issue Area	Evaluation Response
Gold Banding	 Variances across Area in relation to Need help bidding, Serious health/well-being issue and requirement for adapted property . Need to ensure consistency in interpretation of the policy, thresholds applied and resources available across the area to address these variances. Investigation at a local level to confirm if there are significant contextual issues affecting results (i.e. particular profile of applicants in one area to another such as elderly, disabled)
Good Neighbours	 Variances across Area requiring further investigation to ensure standardisation of assessment processes between partner landlords. Issue for EIA as affects ability of applicants requiring to move/downsize due to financial reasons.
Non Bidders	 Significant number of non-bidders and limited information as to why. Important for EIA to ensure that those who have expressed that they need help with bidding are having their needs met.
Vulnerable Groups	 On the whole vulnerable people are not disadvantaged with the exception of older persons. “Need to reach out to older persons” and develop actions accordingly

ii. Evidence Paper 2: Home Choice Customer Perspectives: Survey results









Issue Area	Evaluation Response
Customer Service contacts	 The importance of face to face contact and leaflets was evidenced. This has relevance for the EAP to ensure staff are well trained and informed and the website/leaflets are up to date, clear and draw attention to key sources of information and how to use them for more effective bidding. Work required to address issue of consistency and quality of advice given

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – NOV 2012

iii. Evidence Paper 3: Review of Customer Facing Materials:

The focus of this evaluation was the Scrutiny of customer-facing materials and bidding methods with regards to their usefulness for vulnerable users. The evaluation was completed in December 2011 and the full report is appended to this document.










In brief the key findings of the evaluation of documents/website were:

Document/media	Evaluation Response
Key areas covered	
Application Form:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translation • Easy read/Braille 	 It is reasonable to provide Translation, large print and/or Braille copies of this form on request. Recommendation: Review annually
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help to use the scheme 	 Recommends amendment to request vulnerability details of applicants who require advocate. Action already actioned in subsequent revision of Application Form 2011.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List of vulnerabilities 	 The list is restrictive with only 5 “closed” options covering broad areas Recommendation: Extend list and include lack of English or literacy skills and Mental health issues.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applicants under 18 	 Useful category capturing information to link to legal responsibilities. Recommendation: Link questions to outcome star data collection
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptations 	 List of adaptations in place or required does not include relevant adaptations for visually impaired Recommendation: Include “reflective stripes”, facilities/space for guide dogs Q35 does not include adaptations required by other household members: Recommendation: change wording to “what adaptations do you or other people in your household need.....”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health, housing and support 	 Missed opportunity to collect relevant data on all household members. Recommendation: To amend in accordance with Appendix B. Change wording to “ Do you or your family have health or disability problems that are affected by your current home and could be improved by moving to another home?”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equalities Monitoring 	 Useful data collection for Equalities Monitoring Group
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication 	 Collects vulnerability information but options for communication incomplete Recommendation: Include Home visit


NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – NOV 2012

Document/media	Evaluation Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key areas covered • Other issues 	<p>⇒ Recommendations: Consideration of including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signature for advocate • Posting of property sheets • Tenancy sustainment support referral • Economic status details <p>Use of “registration” and “application” interchangeable throughout document has already been action in subsequent revision of Application Form 2011.</p>
<p>Guide to completing the application form:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translation • Easy read/Braille 	<p>⇒ It is reasonable to provide Translation, large print and/or Braille copies of this form on request. Recommendation: Review annually</p>
<p>Easy Read Guide:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translation • Easy read/Braille • Map 	<p>⇒ Format of guide is easy to follow. It has clearly benefitted from plain English review. It is reasonable to provide Translation, large print and/or Braille copies of this form on request. Recommendation: To add accessibility, translation or assistance-related information.</p> <p>⇒ Recommendation: Amend Graph to be meaningful in black and white</p>
<p>Full Scheme Guide:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Last Page 	<p>⇒ Does not include notice of assistance for people with reading/completion difficulties Recommendation: Include assistance details</p>
<p>NY Housing Allocation Policy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Last Page 	<p>⇒ Does not include notice of assistance for people with reading/completion difficulties Recommendation: Include assistance details</p>
<p>Guide to supporting Others:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Last Page 	<p>⇒ Does not include notice of assistance for people with reading/completion difficulties Recommendation: Include assistance details</p>
<p>Home Choice Website :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translation facilities 	<p>⇒ Browsealoud, Google Translate and changeable text-size available. Recommendations: Google Translate has “limitations” and should promote Language Line and put icon on all pages.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charitable status 	<p>⇒ Link to further details of housing associations Recommendation: Change name of link to “restrictions”</p>



NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – NOV 2012

Document/media	Evaluation Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key areas covered 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acronyms 	 CBL is used without explaining what it stands for Recommendation: Ensure use full title when first used within a document/page or only use descriptive term “Home Choice”.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Property Search 	 Dummy link leading no where Recommendation: Delete (?)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adverts 	 Identical pictures used Recommendation: Include caption “picture of similar and not actual property”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memorable date Login 	 Use of date may not be “memorable” Recommendation: Explore other formats for memorable data
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recent Lets list 	 Clarity required for Band and Priority Band Date titles amended to Band and Priority Date. Consideration of providing information in another format not possible within confines of system
Registration Form (online)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time to complete 	 Applicants only have 30 minutes to complete first section before “time out” and data not saved. Recommendation: To extend period or have a “save later” option
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Area selection 	 Electronic application includes facility to select areas of choice although not clear if subsequently able to bid for properties outside this selection Recommendation: To provide clarity on webpage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PIN /Memorable data 	 Applicants receive Memorable date, PIN Number (in date format) and Unique reference number Recommendation: To rationalise requirement for memorable data
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Erroneous messages 	 After first few pages message “ You currently do not have an active social housing application. Click here.....” Recommendation: Delete message At end of process – message displayed “Currently you are not eligible to bid...” Recommendation: Replace with “You can’t bid yet because your application is pending.”





The evaluation of the bidding methods concluded:

Method	Evaluation Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key areas covered 	
Bidding by Phone	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated phone line 	 Automated and multi-lingual telephone line not advertised in Easy Read Guide Recommendation: Include number in Easy Read Guide

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – NOV 2012

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Type Talk 		Facility is not available Recommendation: Consider providing facility for people with speech and hearing difficulties
Bidding on Line		Unable to test

The evaluation of assistance available concluded:






Method		Evaluation Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key areas covered 		
Assistance/support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visual Impairment Learning Disability Mobile Travellers 		Consistency of assistance and availability of home visits across the Sub-region is unknown Recommendation: Scope assistance available for each client group and document/signpost
Induction Loops / Language line		Consistency of Hearing Loops & Language Line across the Sub-region PACs is unknown Recommendation: Scope availability of Loops across sub-region PACs
Postal copies of Newsletter		Unable to request Recommendation: Review policy of no postal newsletters (?)
Newsletter adverts		In English only Recommendation: more use of symbols and pictures

The recommendations have been included within the Equalities Action Plan and when actioned will address access and utilisation issues for the following client groups:

- Clients with visual sensory impairment
- Clients with hearing impairment
- Clients with mobility difficulties
- Clients with poor or no command of English
- Clients with learning difficulties
- Clients with literacy difficulties
- Mobile Travellers

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – NOV 2012

iv. Evidence Paper 4: Focus Groups and Depth Interviews:

Issue Area	Evaluation Response
Priority groups, support and barriers	 Uncertainty that the needs of vulnerable groups are reflected in Home Choice priorities, barriers have been overcome and whether rurality is an issue or not. Further investigation or on-going monitoring required to ensure that we are not complacent.
People with learning difficulties	 Mis-fit/match of whether Home Choice can meet the long term or emergency housing needs of people with a learning difficulties. Further work required to ensure that “road map” to housing for LD “fits” with Home Choice and Social Care support requirements.
Support worker role	 Looking specifically at Mental health and G&T – how can support be organised in a consistent way across the Area and also provide consistent advice.
Training for Support workers	 Identified need for rolling programme of training for support workers across the Area to promote access to support and consistency of advice
Financial constraints affecting external support services	 Intervention required to mitigate the potential loss of external support services – through increasing support capacity of statutory services e.g. Libraries?

v. Evidence Paper 5: Lettings in North Yorkshire: Before and after Home Choice:

Initial reading of the analysis has not identified any specific issues for the EIA/EAP

Consultation Summary (Autumn 2009)

This Project is Sub Regional involving seven local authority areas.

Each authority had consultation arrangements in place already relating to the operation of its Affordable Housing Allocation Scheme. These arrangements remain in place post NY Home Choice implementation. Typically, the seven authorities and their partners undertake Customer Satisfaction surveys with new tenants, which covers the experience of being an applicant.

The scheme presently involves a range of stakeholders:

- The seven local authorities with their three transfer partners
- A number of Independent Housing Associations operating in North Yorkshire
- The York and North Yorkshire 'Supporting People' services
- NYY PCT
- North Yorkshire HARP (Housing Advice Resource Project – an independent housing advice agency)

Subsequent to the finalising of the initial 'draft proposal', the formal Consultation period commenced w/c 27th July 2009 for 12 weeks. This included:

- A minimum of 7 open days for the public and for invited agencies with an interest in this matter.
- All applicants to receive a copy of the draft proposal and to have an opportunity for comment
- Focus groups of staff drawn from each of the 10 partners
- A questionnaire for the public
- Co-ordinated media strategy
- Attendance by staff involved in the project at public forums such as Parish councils etc
- A briefing for from the Project Manager for all stakeholders.
- Drop in sessions for specific groups, extending beyond the formal consultation period.

There was also on-going Consultation activity. The cross partner sub group examining the Medical Need and Vulnerability strategy within the emerging new scheme was invited by the Project Board to continue for the lifetime of the entire project. The Sub Group was re-named the 'Equalities Monitoring Group' and carries out the following tasks: (Please refer to the Equalities Monitoring Group Terms of Reference)

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – NOV 2012

- Ensure the key recommendations of this assessment are implemented
- Monitor emerging good practice in this area
- Ensure the access needs of all a scheme users are met

This group developed the User Guides for people with Learning Disabilities and/or literacy skills.

The results of Consultation were incorporated into the final design of the scheme; a full report of the formal public Consultation is available on request from the Project Manager karen.jackson@york.gov.uk or on www.northyorkshirehomechoice.org.uk.

5. Summary of the Key issues and Actions arising:

Summary	Action Identified	Intervention completed
Key issues identified	1. Access for applicants with low literacy level or very little English.	√
	2. Access issues for people who are chaotic or very elderly/infirm	√
	3. Ensure the public can receive advice and support at a properly facilitated office or Customer Access Point.	√
	4. Ensure that geographically isolated customers can access the scheme, even without IT access in their home.	√
	5. Need for a variety of information formats	√
Key action points	1. Establishment of the 'Equalities Monitoring Group for the lifetime of the project, with representation from the ten partners and relevant stakeholders.	√
	2. Need for the scheme to embrace an outreach strategy for isolated or vulnerable customers	√
	3. User Guides in a variety of formats for different needs	√
	4. Need for assisted bidding for identified highly vulnerable clients on the basis of informed consent.	√
	5. Need for the public to be able to access the scheme both from home or from a public office, without financial disincentive.	√

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – NOV 2012

Equalities actions identified by the lettings scheme:

Action Identified	Intervention completed/progress
The EMG will jointly develop the guidance on health with the NHS.	The EMG sample a percentage of medical assessment forms to check that consistency is being achieved
Tailored user guides for certain groups (hearing impaired, sight impaired, speakers of some languages other than English, people with Learning Disabilities, etc) will be provided	User guides completed
Where necessary and with informed consent, <i>assisted bidding</i> will be undertaken by an appropriate key worker, friend or relative on behalf of their client	Bidding patterns are monitored to identify vulnerable clients who are not bidding
People who are self identifying as vulnerable will be contacted to establish how they can be supported	Integrated within application registration process
The scheme will ensure that applicants can highlight support needs on their application form	Integrated within application registration process
Automated bidding will be available to customers on a referral basis	Integrated within application registration process
Applicants will be able to receive help completing an application at any public office supporting the scheme	A flexible approach will be taken as to what constitutes a 'public office' supporting the scheme. Information on the scheme could be provided from a variety of locations.

Three at risk issues were highlighted and addressed prior to implementation:

- (1) A method for sampling health assessments to be formulated - this will need the design of a common interview form - completed
- (2) Support to people who have self identified as vulnerable could be less effective or frequent due to possible staffing cuts – not raised as an issue post implementation
- (3) The likelihood is that there will be fewer locations in rural places that can support the scheme, again as a result of the public expenditure cuts, Customers who are simply disenfranchised by geography/lack of internet access will be able to make informal telephone contact with participating offices, such customers could also be assisted at existing outreach Housing Management surgeries provided by partner landlords. These solutions will be partly compromised by public expenditure cuts – potential cuts to library services were not implemented and other access points within voluntary and community group buildings were identified.

The EMG has met regularly to advise the board on how to progress these commitments and issues highlighted as needing attention.

Equalities Action Plan (EAP) 2012

Action description	By who?	By when?	Comments
RACE			
<p>Gypsy, Travellers and Show People:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To scope assistance available across the Area To investigate how support can be organised in a consistent way across the Area to provide a consist level and quality of advice. 	<p>XX in association with Supporting People and Horton Housing</p>		
<p>Non-speaking/reading English:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To investigate limitations of “Google Translate” to see if alternative vocabulary could be used To scope availability of Language Line across the area and address gaps in provision 	<p>XX in association with NYCC Community Cohesion workers</p>		
DISABILITY			
<p>Visual and Hearing Impairment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To scope assistance available across the area for people with Visually impairment To scope availability of Induction Loops across the area and address gaps in provision To investigate Type Talk options for people with speech and hearing difficulties 			

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – **NOV 2012**

Action description	By who?	By when?	Comments
DISABILITY Contd.....			
Learning Disability: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To scope assistance available across the area for people with Learning disability • To investigate whether Home Choice can meet the long term or emergency housing needs of people with Learning Difficulties and “fit” with Social Care support requirements. 			
Health & Wellbeing Priority: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To ensure consistency of applying policy thresholds for health and wellbeing status: • To establish mechanism for sampling of health and well being cases • To investigate variances across area 	NY Homechoice coordinator and CYC	March 2012	From 2013 bi-monthly health & wellbeing meeting held. Review policy & process. Review cases. Promote consistency across SR.
Mental health: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To consider focus on impacts of Homechoice on clients with mental health problems • To investigate how can support and advice be delivered in a consistent way across the Area 	Equalities Group	July 2012	Lorraine Gould to lead initial scoping – consider whether still relevant following JRF findings
Non-bidders: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To investigate reasons for non-bidding • To investigate variances across the area • To address barriers to non-bidding 	Each Locality to confirm if there are significant contextual issues affecting results (i.e. particular profile of applicants such as elderly, disabled)		

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – NOV 2012

Action description	By who?	By when?	Comments
AGE			
Reaching out to the elderly: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To consult with older persons groups • To investigate age specific barriers to access • To develop actions accordingly 			
FINANCIAL INCLUSION			
Good Neighbours: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To ensure standardisation of Good Neighbour assessment processes between partner landlords to enable opportunities for households to downsize. 			
RURALITY (Access)			
Telephone Advertising: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To make recommendations to Project Board about roll out of telephone advertising service 	HF and NY Homechoice coordinator	March 2012	
Customer Face to Face contacts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) To carry out audit of PACs to identify and address gaps in provision across the area b) To introduce rolling programme of training for staff to ensure quality and consistency of advice given c) To develop interventions to mitigate the potential loss of external support services – through increasing support capacity of statutory services e.g. Libraries? 			

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – **NOV 2012**

Action description	By who?	By when?	Comments
WEBSITE AND DOCUMENT IMPROVEMENTS			
Amendments to Application Form: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List of vulnerabilities to include lack of English , literacy skills and Mental health issues. • under 18 questions linked to outcome star • Increase Adaptation options/amend wording • Health Housing and support – amend wording • Communication – add home visit • Other issues to consider including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Signature for advocate ○ Posting of property sheets ○ Tenancy sustainment support referral ○ Economic status details 			
Amendments to Guides (Easy read, Scheme Guide, Allocations Policy, Supporting Others) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amend colour of Map • Add Accessibility/translation info • Add assistance details on back page • Add automated phone line number 	Nina Pinder	May 2012	
Amendments to Website: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of languageline due to limitations of Google Translate – include icons on all pages. • Amend Charitable status link to “restrictions” • Check and correct use of Acronyms 			

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – **NOV 2012**

Action description	By who?	By when?	Comments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dummy links – deleted • Improve picture detail of adverts • Use of symbols in adverts • Explore memorable data formats 			
<p>Improvements to on line registration:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extend period before timed out • Clarification for areas of choice • Rationalise “memorable” data (s) • Delete/amend erroneous messages 			
<p>Review of all documents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To ensure Translation/Easy Read/Braille version “on request” meets customer requirements 	Equalities Group	Annually – July 2012	
<p>Newsletter:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Increase use of symbols and pictures b) Improve “Recent Lets Page” to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better headings/clearer wording • ADD OTHER SUGGESTIONS AS PER RESEARCH 			
OTHER			
<p>Monitoring Framework:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To produce monitoring framework reports and information quarterly • To develop plan for capturing and monitoring customer feedback • To refresh and revise EIA and keep under review 	<p>NY Homechoice coordinator</p> <p>Equalities Group</p>	<p>By January 2012, and quarterly thereafter</p> <p>July 2012</p>	<p>Customer survey in place. Periodic review required -</p> <p>Revised Draft Version in light of JRF analysis Nov 2012</p>
<p>EMG Membership:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To review membership of Equalities Group to ensure appropriate scrutiny and support 	CYC – Adult Services?	January 2012	Further to feedback received about ongoing operation of Homechoice

NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE – EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT V7 – NOV 2012

Action description	By who?	By when?	Comments
OTHER Contd.....			
Complaints & Review Procedures: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To develop complaints and review procedures for Homechoice 	NY Homechoice coordinator/CYC	December 2011	Responsibility of Project Co-ordinator to monitor centrally.
Posted Newsletters: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To annually review policy “not to send out Newsletters” 	Equalities Group	July 2012	
Up Bidding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To quarterly monitor the use of discretion used by landlords in advertising and letting 2+ bedroomed properties to singles/couples or others into larger properties than their bedroom need (as per Housing Benefit regulations) 			