

Challenge for Change

Scrutiny Report
Quality of Rehousing Services

June 2017





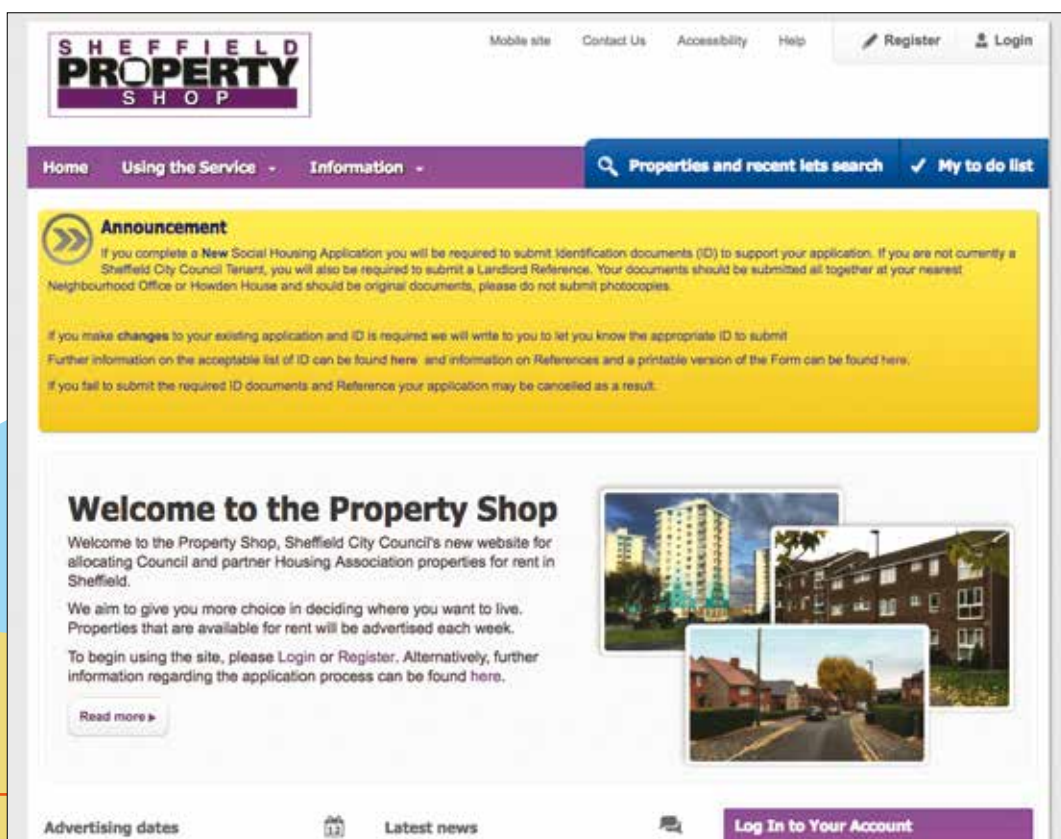


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1. Introduction and Background

- 1.1 Challenge for Change is a customer scrutiny panel that was set up to review different parts of the Council Housing Service. Open to tenants, leaseholders and customers of the service. The group has carried out several reviews, produced a series of reports and recommendations for service improvement. Throughout this report the scrutiny will be called C4C.
- 1.2 This project was suggested by the Council Housing Service during late summer 2016 and involved, Linda Moxon, Max Richardson, Ian Alexander, Clive Alexander, Dene Stockdale, Terence Oaks and Angela Moreno.
- 1.3 The subject is how effective the Council Housing Service's registration process and bidding works for customers.
- 1.4 In this report C4C has detailed its findings following investigations that have included: meeting with staff at all levels, reviewing information being provided to customers including the website, mystery shoppers, review of SCC, interviewing customers and other websites.
- 1.5 C4C has made a number of judgements and recommendations based on its findings. These are detailed within the report and in a summary appendix which includes evidence and impacts.
- 1.6 The overall purpose of the project was to see how well the Council Housing Service delivers Rehousing Services and to check how it compares with similar organisations e.g. how accessible is the services? How easy is it to use the services? What help is there available for customers?





2. Objectives

From C4C's initial research and discussions, it identified the following objectives for this project:

- The website, how usable is it? Is it working for everyone? What is it meant to do? How up to date is it?
- How user friendly are the offices for customers. Have they got capacity e.g. is Howden House too busy? How well does the phone service work?
- Staff perspective. What impact Housing+ is making. Is there staff training to help vulnerable customers?
- What support is available to vulnerable groups? What form does it take?
- What type of information is available in offices e.g. local area Housing Offices?
- In Howden House properties can be viewed. What is the quality of information such as quantity, photos, and internal photos of properties? Is information available in different Languages and is there any pre visit information, Benefit information and Community information?
- How to get a Council House. Understanding the eligibility and the impact of changes in circumstances e.g. household composition.
- How easy is it to register? How easy is it to bid for a property? How easy is it to update your information after registration?
- Understand banding. Test the quality of written material.
- What is done to help new tenants and keep them where they are and give them assurance of stability?



3. Summary of reality checks

3.1 Meetings with Staff

C4C has met a group of staff during the course of our investigation from senior managers to front line officers in Rehousing and a Housing area. Rehousing staff told us about their role and how they support and interact with customers. A lack of clear signposting for the property shop was raised which affected customers and staff.

Staff in the area told us they try to see new tenants within 2 weeks. They talked with new tenants about any problems and told them about the local amenities. Because they have more contact with tenants they are able to head off problems before they get serious

The manager of the Rehousing Service confirmed that the same services should be available in the local housing offices as in Howden House.

3.2 Review of Rehousing Website

When C4C started the project the website was the old one, which had many problems and issues with registering and bidding.

During the project the group were able to review the new website and test it. It was easier to use and is improved. It can be accessed on smart phones or tablets.

To find out how the registration works we did a number of real registrations and looked at the bidding process. We reviewed the information available to understand how banding works, who is eligible for priority to get a property and why.

We have looked into other organisations and compared with the Property Shop website and found there's not much difference between them.

3.3 Talking to Customers

We have talked with a customer whose English was not their first language, who was bidding for a property (using the translation facility) and found the website easy to use and understood the banding process. An interpreter was provided during the housing agreement process because it is a legal document to sign. Housing officers did go out after two weeks to check if everything was fine and if they were settled.

We have talked to an elderly person and we found out that they had registered on a tablet and found it straight forward and easy to understand.

At the Housing Equalities meeting, customers with a brain injury said that they can feel pressurized into accepting any property. NHS staff advised that they offer a free course for “Mental Awareness”.

3.4 Mystery Shops

In some cases services were excellent such as at Hillsborough First Point where the member of staff spent a lot of time helping a challenger register.

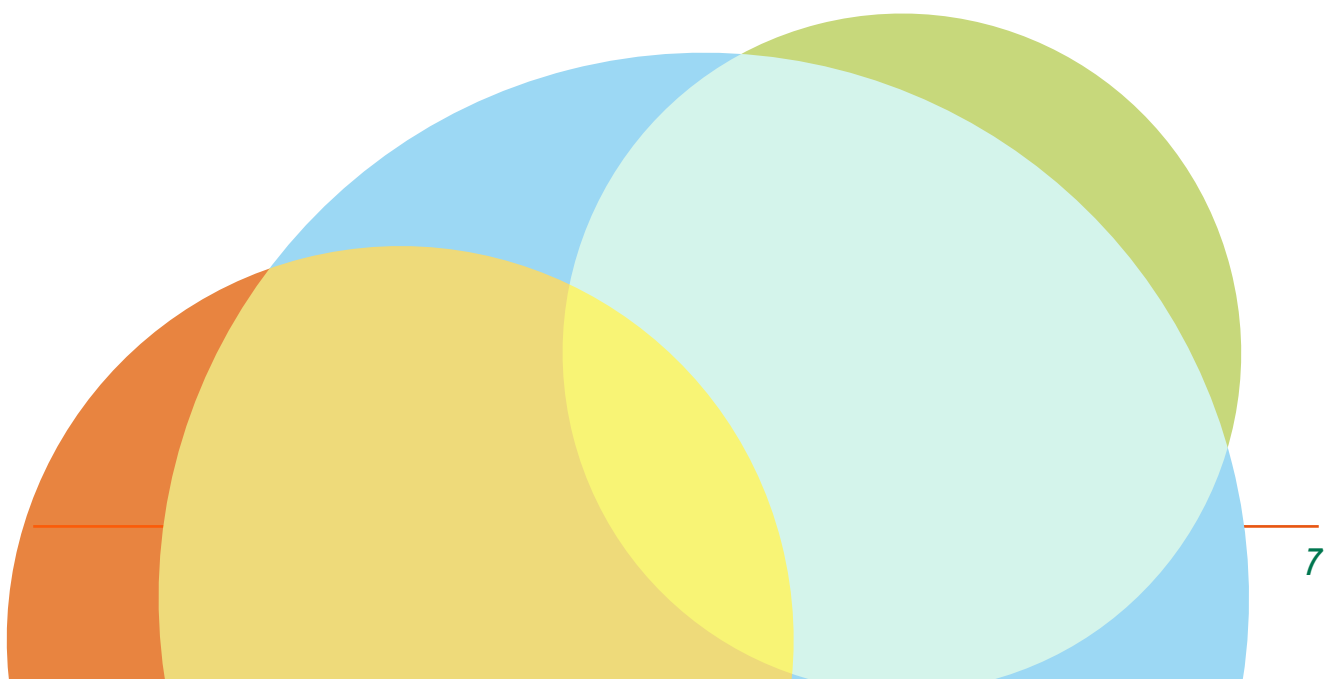
In other cases wrong information was given to the challengers which caused them problems.

A challenger was also sent to Howden House from one of the areas officers when they requested information about rehousing in another language.

3.5 Review of Information

Written information was not easily found in the areas offices because they were hidden out of sight. In one office information was not available.

Information available on the leaflet and website was useful and clear.



4. Conclusions

- 4.1 Challenge for Change compared how the new website system works and compares with other organisations. We felt that it works well.
- 4.2 Looking at the new web page, this appears to be a big improvement on the old one, easier to use and looks more appealing.
- 4.3 Training could be improved, particularly in customer service at Howden House and at local housing offices.
- 4.4 Deregistration is not always necessary as upset and work is created to no value.
- 4.5 Answering of emails should always happen, even if it's just to say you have received it, a letter with more information can always follow.
- 4.6 Housing+ should be able to be of assistance to customers needing help in their area, particularly the vulnerable.



5. Recommendations

- R1. Provide ongoing staff training in customer services, and test staff learning.
- R2. Ensure action is taken following any satisfaction surveys.
- R3. Make sure staff in the local offices are trained and are providing the correct information to customers.
- R4. Ensure staff offer customers the option to discuss personal information in a private space.
- R5. Plan and increase staffing at busy times; back office staff could be more flexible and help out at busier times.
- R6. Offer one to one appointments for customers.
- R7. Local Housing Offices need to know what is available for customers whose first language isn't English.
- R8. Ensure Housing Plus officers use their knowledge of vulnerable people to support rehousing process where required.
- R9. Review and ensure staff training includes providing appropriate support for vulnerable people.
- R10. Make available (for perspective and new tenants) additional information for local services such as:- schools, pharmacy, doctor, dentist and places of worship.
- R11. Improve staff training to increase knowledge of registration process.
- R12. Ensure written information such as leaflets are available and refreshed at Housing Offices.
- R13. At the beginning of the on-line registration process let customers know what ID information they need to have with them as registering is time limited.
- R14. Review the de-registration process; If someone is still living in the same property give staff the authority to re-instate their waiting time (by not doing this challengers feel that extra work and upset is created to no value).
- R15. Manage de-registration by E-mailing out to tenants who prefer this format of communication; however send a letter first before emailing.
- R16. Improve processes for dealing with electronic communication to ensure tenants receive an initial acknowledgement and answer is provided.
- R17. On a web search if there are no properties available in that postcode area the website should say that, as well as giving nearby properties.

Appendix 1 lists the evidence and impact exercise that supports the recommendations.

6. Budget

6.1 C4C were allocated a budget for the duration of the scrutiny project and spent well within it. Expenses were incurred as follows from April 2016 to March 2017.

- Refreshments £130.94
- C4C members expenses £100.97

7. Acknowledgments

The team would like to thank Tina Gilbert and Josie Billings from Business Planning, Strategy and Improvement for their invaluable assistance with this project. Without their support, this project would not have got off the ground.

They were also instrumental in arranging manager/staff interviews and other meetings we have been to as part of our investigations.

We would also like to thank the following for their co-operation with our investigations, allowing us to carry out interviews, giving up time to answer questions and attend meetings to gather information.

Rehousing Service Manager – Rehousing Team

Rehousing Project Manager

Housing Plus and Rehousing Staff

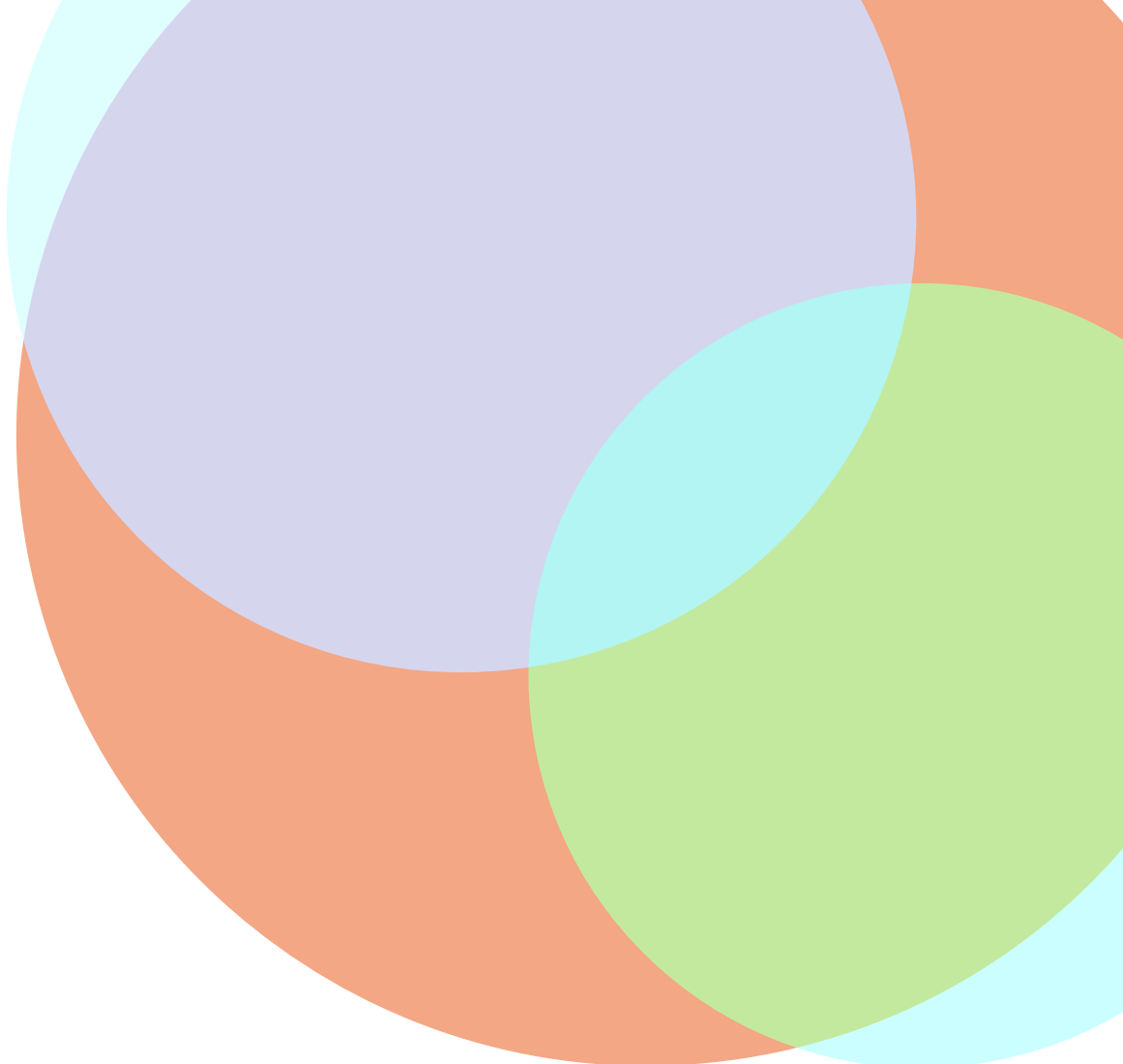
Appendix 1

	What is the C4C Judgement?	What Evidence do we have to support that judgement?	What Impact is this having on customers?	Recommendation
1 CUSTOMER SERVICE				
1.1	Variable customer service received depending on the member of staff – from “couldn’t do enough to help” to “uninterested”.	Mystery Shops. 1 x Hillsbrough. 3 x Howden House. 1 x Newfield Green. 1 x Darnall. 1 x Housing Call Centre.	Inconsistent service is provided which can make customers feel inferior or that they are not important.	Training in customer services. Test staff learning. Ensure action is taken following any Satisfaction survey.
1.2	Good consistent customer services are not always provided at the local area office.	A number of mystery shops – where challengers were directed to Howden House.	Inconvenience, confusion, poor service, financial hardship for customers on limited income to travel to Howden House.	Make sure staff in the local offices are trained and are providing the correct information to customers.
1.3	The offer of going to a private space when discussing confidential issues isn’t offered to customers.	Mystery Shops. Howden House.	Customers feel uncomfortable, and may feel that they can’t provide the answers.	Staff should offer customers the option to discuss personal information in a private space.
1.4	At busy times staff are not able to help those who need support with the website.	Mystery Shops. Howden House. Customer Feedback. Newfield Green Office.	No support available for those with no/ limited IT skills who then cannot register/ bid.	Plan and increase staffing at busy times. Back office staff could be more flexible and help out at busier times. Offer one to one appointments for customers.
1.5	Support for those with language needs is mixed depending on where the customer goes.	Area staff directed customer to contact Howden House. Call centre said they would be able to help. Property Shop staff confirmed they had facilities. Interpreter was available for sign-up.	All customers do not have access to the help they require.	Local housing offices need to know what is available.

	What is the C4C Judgement?	What Evidence do we have to support that judgement?	What Impact is this having on customers?	Recommendation
1.6	Support for vulnerable people is available when it's identified.	Mystery Shops. Staff feedback from rehousing interviews. Rehousing Manager confirmed support was available.	People do receive the support they need when it's identified. Support is available for people such as the blind and people with dementia. Loop system is available in council buildings. The website can change language and the text size can be also increase.	Housing Plus officer to use their knowledge of vulnerable people to support rehousing process where required. Make sure staff training includes providing appropriate support.
1.7	Support for new tenants is positive.	Interview with staff carrying out Housing Plus role. Non - English speaker tenant sign up.	New tenants are helped with practical issues for example utilities, rent and local facilities. Tenant felt supported and made to feel welcome and language needs met.	Make available additional information for local services (schools, pharmacy, doctor, dentist and places of worship).
1.8	The move of the Property Shop to Howden House has reduced the space available for dedicated computers and help isn't as easily available.	Mystery Shops in Howden House compared to previous experience of the old Property Shop.	The customer focus, which was previously friendly, has reduced. Customers can feel lost in Howden House and less help is available.	Improve signage and ensure customer service is friendly. New and improved signage is now available.
2 INFORMATION				
2.1	Limited or incorrect information is provided in some cases.	Mystery Shops 2 x Howden House 1 x Newfield Green 1 x Darnall 1 x Call Centre Staff interviews.	Customers are not always getting good support and advice from experienced and knowledgeable staff. Their situation may be made worse.	Training to increase knowledge of registration process. Test staff learning. Satisfaction survey to evaluate the impact of service on customers.
2.2	Lack of information (i.e. leaflets) available for customers to take away.	Mystery Shops 1 x Newfield Green 1 x Darnall 1 x Howden House.	Customers are directed to either Howden House or directed to the website. Customers who are digitally excluded feel isolated.	Ensure written information is available and refreshed at Housing Offices.

	What is the C4C Judgement?	What Evidence do we have to support that judgement?	What Impact is this having on customers?	Recommendation
2.3	Registering requires evidence of information that you don't know is required until you get to those questions.	Review and testing. Review of other sites.	Registering becomes a frustrating process and may cause delays while required information is sought. Can become stressful with the on-line time limits imposed.	At the beginning of the process let customers know what ID information they need to have with them.
2.4	Signage in both Howden House and Hillsborough is not clear.	Mystery Shops. Staff feedback.	It is confusing for customers who are not clear where to go. Possibility of wasting time in the wrong queue.	Put up clear signs for example 'Property Shop Enquiries – queue here'. Improve signage at the entrance to Howden House. There needs to be better understanding by the floor walkers regarding where to send customers. We understand this has now happened in Howden House.
2.5	Quality of information on the website is good and much improved.	Review of the website.	Customers should find it easy to use and understand.	
2.6	De-registration – Inconsistency of experiences and unreliable information.	Staff feedback on a frequent complaint is that “people don't receive letters” informing of need to confirm registration details; confirmed as per manager interview. Experience of challenger' letter not being received.	Tenants feel scared that they've lost their waiting time. Tenants feel stressed that they now have to write a letter to explain.	If someone is still living in the same property give staff the authority to re-instate their waiting time (by not doing this challengers feel that extra work and upset is created to no value). E-mail out to tenants who prefer this format of communication; however send a letter first before emailing.
2.7	There are some issues with the use of electronic communication.	2 x email contacts. Customer satisfaction survey.	Two emails sent and not answered leaving customers in limbo.	Improve processes for dealing with electronic communication to ensure an acknowledgement and answer is provided.

	What is the C4C Judgement?	What Evidence do we have to support that judgement?	What Impact is this having on customers?	Recommendation
3 WEBSITE				
3.1	<p>The new website is a significant improvement on the old one.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear and easy to use. • Additional area information is useful. • The look is uncluttered. • Can browse all properties without being logged in. • It compares well with other sites. 	<p>Review and testing of website.</p> <p>Comparison with other sites.</p>	<p>Customers who are IT literate will find the site easy to use and the additional area information will help customers choose an appropriate property.</p>	<p>On a web search if there are no properties available in that postcode area the website should say that, as well as giving nearby properties.</p>
3.2	<p>The site works well on a tablet and mobile phone.</p>	<p>Review and testing.</p> <p>Registration completed by a 76 year old.</p>	<p>Gives customers choice in how to access the website.</p> <p>Process was easy to follow.</p>	
3.3	<p>Accessibility issues have been considered – it quickly translates to alternative languages and is easy to change the size.</p>	<p>Review and customer testing in different languages.</p>	<p>Customers with specific needs using the website are having their needs met.</p>	



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