NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE EVALUATION

EVIDENCE PAPER 3:
REVIEW OF CUSTOMER FACING MATERIALS

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This is the third Evidence Paper produced as part of the Evaluation of North Yorkshire Home Choice by the University of Birmingham and Heriot-Watt University and funded by Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It has been drafted by Filip Sosenko with input from David Mullins and Pat Niner. The paper has previously been shared with the Partnership Board and the Equalities Group and comments on how the Partnership has responded are now requested for inclusion in the Final Evaluation Report.

Contents
1. Scrutiny of documents .................................................................................................................... 3
   1.1 Application form (paper) ........................................................................................................... 3
   1.2 Guide to completing the application form ............................................................................... 6
   1.3 Easy Read Guide ....................................................................................................................... 6
   1.4 Full Scheme Guide .................................................................................................................... 6
   1.5 NY Housing Allocation Policy .................................................................................................. 6
   1.6 Guide to Supporting Others .................................................................................................... 6
2 Home Choice Website ‘Tour’ ........................................................................................................... 7
   2.1 Home page and sub-pages ........................................................................................................ 7
   2.2 Registration form (online) ........................................................................................................ 8
3. Test of bidding methods .................................................................................................................. 9
   3.1 Bidding by phone ....................................................................................................................... 9
   3.2 Bidding online .......................................................................................................................... 9
4. Conclusions ........................................................................................................................................ 9
   3.1 Customers with visual sensory impairment .............................................................................. 10
   3.2 Customers with hearing impairment ....................................................................................... 10
   3.3 Customers with mobility difficulties ....................................................................................... 11
   3.4 Customers with no or poor command of English .................................................................. 11
   3.5 Customers with learning difficulties ....................................................................................... 12
   3.6 Customers with literacy difficulties ......................................................................................... 12
   3.7 Mobile Travellers ..................................................................................................................... 12
5. Appendices ....................................................................................................................................... 12
   A. ‘Needing help to bid for properties’ ....................................................................................... 12
   B. ‘Medical or social conditions affected by your housing’ .......................................................... 14
Background, Purpose, Coverage and Credentials

This review has been undertaken in response to a request from NY Home Choice made at the first project planning meeting in September 2011. It draws on the evaluation team’s experience in evaluating choice based lettings schemes in other areas to comment on and make recommendations for improvement in relation to the customer-facing materials listed above. It draws only on our preliminary review of the web-based and written materials produced at the outset by NY Home Choice to guide customers through their applications. Particular attention is given to the focus of the evaluation brief on impacts on vulnerable groups. It has been produced at a very early stage in the evaluation so that it can be drawn on in the planned refresh of the NY Home Choice website. We returned to consider the impact of the operation of the scheme on vulnerable groups in 2012 based on depth interviews (which will be included in Evidence Report 4) and bids and lettings analysis (in Evidence Reports 1 and 6).

1. Scrutiny of documents

1.1 Application form (paper)

The front cover of the form contains information in five community languages that indicates that help is available in person at local offices of partner organisations. The list of the offices is provided on the last page of the form, as is information that applicants who find reading or completing the form difficult can seek assistance at one of the offices. The latter piece of advice is written in a very large font. On this basis it is understood that the entire application form is not available in large print or Braille, and that translation into community languages can be arranged on ad-hoc, face-to-face basis (rather than the entire document being available in translation). This seems to be a reasonable response given the relatively low numbers of minority language speakers in the county. However, we would advise that the take up of these options is monitored and that, at the end of the first year, the adequacy of response to minority language speakers, and people with sight impairment is reviewed.

Section 2 of the form (‘Help to use this scheme’) provides an opportunity for vulnerable clients to flag up the fact that they may need assistance in participating in the system. It is also an opportunity for scheme managers to collect vital monitoring information. However, applicants who nominate someone to act on their behalf are asked to skip the question where their vulnerability would be explored in detail (q.21). It is recommended that this instruction is deleted as it unnecessarily reduces the information collected on the form that may be useful in future reviews of the service.

The list of vulnerabilities (q21) has a few drawbacks:
• While the list of vulnerabilities (q.21) is a ‘closed’ one, there is no option of ‘Other’ for those applicants whose vulnerability is not listed;

• The option of ‘difficulty in reaching an office’ is useful in itself in providing an opportunity to count all users with this problem. However, an applicant may tick it when s/he has mobility issues, or when s/he lives in a rural area with no car or appropriate public transport, or when the applicant is visually impaired; these more specific problems should be picked up by a more comprehensive listing of the main vulnerabilities.

• The option ‘disabled’ is also very broad and would be ticked by applicants with mobility problems as well as applicants with visual impairment, hearing impairment, or speech impairment. It also overlaps with two other options (‘difficulty in reaching an office’ and ‘housebound’). Hence someone who is visually impaired would tick the same boxes as someone who uses a wheelchair. It is recommended that a fuller list of the main vulnerabilities is included to enable more detailed review for future service planning.

• The list does not accommodate for the following types of vulnerability: lack of English skills or literacy skills; mental health problem.

• It is recommended that this question is reworded to take account of these comments.

Section 3 of the form addresses the needs of young persons under 18 including those leaving care. This is a useful category to collect given the legal limitations on granting tenancies to under 18s and the recent development of young people’s hubs in each NY local authority with Supporting People funding and links to Social Services Children’s Services. The link with the outcome star data being collected by these hubs should be considered in any redesign of questions 22-26.

Questions 31 and 32 concern adaptations. However, the list of adaptations in Q31 & Q32 does not include reflective stripes for visually impaired clients. Similarly, Section 4 does not provide space for visually impaired clients to express a need for extra room for guide dog(s) or garden for toileting guide dog(s).

It is also suggested that Q32 should be reworded to read ‘what adaptations do you or other people in your household need...’ rather than ‘do you need...’.

Section 9 provides an opportunity to explore an applicant’s medical conditions where the applicant is applying for re-housing on health grounds. Since other applicants are asked to skip this question, an opportunity is - arguably - missed to collect data about medical and social conditions affecting households that are not seeking a move on health grounds but
nevertheless have some issues (see Appendix B for an example). Provision is made to record health needs of any household member.

Drug and alcohol issues are not covered here but arguably knowing which tenants have, for example, a drug or alcohol issue may help the landlord in distributing information about available support programmes, and by doing so contribute to tenancy sustainment. The wording of the instructions may also be confusing for some applicants – perhaps it would be better to say ‘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?’ instead of ‘Only complete this section if you are applying for re-housing on health grounds’.  

Disability is probed again in Section 10 (‘Equalities Monitoring’), as are language skills. Applicants are asked to write in what disability they have. This should provide useful information for the Equalities Monitoring Group.

Section 11 explores vulnerability in an indirect manner, by asking about preferred forms of communication. The list includes Braille, large print, CD, BSL and induction loop but does not include ‘home visits’ or ‘letter’. (The online version of the application form also lists ‘standard size print’ – which presumably means just ‘letter’).

The examination of the form revealed six other issues which NY Home Choice may wish to address at the next review:

- The form does not allow for signature by the person who helped the applicant fill in the form;
- There is no explicit space to indicate that the applicant would like to receive property sheets by post on grounds of vulnerability or geographical isolation. There is only an implicit indication of such need when the applicant ticks that s/he has ‘difficulty in reaching an office’. This answer, however, may be given by a visually impaired applicant who would need to be a sent a copy of the property sheet in large print, or be provided with a special magnifying sheet (a solution employed by some LAs);
- There is no question whether the applicant may need support in sustaining the tenancy when s/he is successful with her/his application;
- There is no question about the applicant’s economic status. Arguably, knowing which tenants are, for example, looking for work, retired, or long-term sick may facilitate tailoring landlord’s actions aimed at specific economic categories of tenants and thus improve tenancy sustainment; Given developments in national policy this may be useful information in the future.
- Terms ‘Registration’ and ‘Application’ are used interchangeably, which may be confusing for non-native speakers as they may think there is some difference between the two.
Overall the form is very long and not particularly user friendly. The option of completing on-line could make it more attractive, particularly if existing gremlins which make it difficult to save early pages can be overcome.

1.2 Guide to completing the application form
The front and the last pages of the document carry the same information about available assistance as the Application Form (see above).

1.3 Easy Read Guide
The format of the guide is easy to follow, adopting a FAQs format. This does cover the main issues that the evaluation team wanted to find out more on. It has clearly benefited from a plain English review.

No accessibility, translation or assistance-related information is mentioned in the Guide.

When the Guide is printed in Black & White, the map of the partnership stops being meaningful as the original colour on screen is blue. Perhaps employing a graphic overlay (such as stripes) would be more suitable.

1.4 Full Scheme Guide
The front cover contains information in five community languages that help with translation is available at local offices of partner organisations. The list of the offices is provided on the last page of the form. Unlike the Application Form, the last page of the Full Scheme Guide does not say that applicants who find reading or completing the form difficult can seek assistance at one of the offices.

1.5 NY Housing Allocation Policy
No accessibility, translation or assistance-related information is mentioned in the document.

1.6 Guide to Supporting Others
No accessibility, translation or assistance-related information is mentioned in the Guide.
2 Home Choice Website ‘Tour’

2.1 Home page and sub-pages

2.1.1 The main webpage contains a link to Browsealoud (plug-in allowing for content to be read out by the computer; also present on sub-pages), a link to Google Translate, and an icon allowing for changing text size (also on sub-pages).

Google Translate allows for only very crude translation. The evaluation team carried out a test of this service by asking the content to be translated into Polish. Words such as ‘lets’ and ‘Guide’ remained un-translated. The JRF project officer also commented adversely on this facility. Perhaps greater emphasis should be placed on Language Line rather than Google Translate.

Sub-pages do not carry the Google Translate icon and therefore cannot be easily translated (unless one copies the text and pastes it into a separate page with Google Translate running).

Items on the menu on the left-hand side of the main page change position upwards and downwards when the user moves between sub-pages, which may confuse users less familiar with computers.

One of the items on the menu is called ‘Charitable status’. Upon clicking on the link, the user is taken to a sub-page explaining that social landlords who have a charitable status may have restrictions regarding who can be allocated in their housing stock to reflect their specific charitable purposes and beneficiaries. It appears to us that there is a disadvantage to the current arrangement: the name of the link is not meaningful to users and therefore there is little chance of the link being clicked. It would be better to name the link ‘restrictions’ rather than ‘Charitable status’.

The acronym ‘CBL’ is not explained but is used on sub-pages. (The acronym is explained only in ‘North Yorkshire Housing Allocation Policy’ – it is not very likely that an average user will read this document before reading the content on the website). It may be best to use the more locally familiar descriptive term ‘Home Choice’ throughout

2.1.2 Property Search

The menu on the left-hand side of this page contains an item called ‘Property Details’. This is, however, a ‘dummy’ link that does not lead the user anywhere, which may be confusing for some users.

2.1.3 Adverts

Some properties are advertised using identical pictures, which may be confusing to some users. It would be useful to have a caption stating ‘Picture of similar and not actual property’, or simply have no picture at all.
2.1.4 Login/My Account

Users need to provide their ‘memorable date’ in order to log in. It would arguably be more user-friendly if users could choose a password or memorable name such as ‘favourite pet’ rather than a date, since most users already have their favourite password that they remember well.

2.1.5 Recent Lets

At first sight it is not absolutely clear what ‘Band’ and ‘Priority Band Date’ mean. It would probably be better to name those two columns ‘Band of the highest bidder’ and ‘Priority Band date of the highest bidder’, respectively.

Another observation is that users would have a much better idea where their bids fell in the rank if full lists of bids were provided on this page. Obviously such rankings would need to be anonymised, e.g. “15. Bidder in Silver band with Priority band Date of …….. and with a Local Connection”.

2.2 Registration form (online)

Applicants have only 30 minutes to complete the form before their application is automatically cleared. I believe you need to get beyond a certain point before any details can be saved. In our opinion this may not be possible for many users, particularly those who are less familiar with computers, those who are vulnerable and therefore need to provide details of supporting agencies, or those who have many children and need to provide details about them. It would be better to have no time limitation or to have a ‘save for later’ option at the end of each section or page.

The electronic form is different from the paper form in that the former asks applicants to select areas they are interested in. Applicants are allowed to choose a maximum of five areas out of around 110. It is unclear whether applicants are allowed to bid for properties outside the areas they selected as their preferred ones. Such a limitation would call into question the extent to which the scheme is truly sub-regional.

The application process also results in the applicant being assigned a PIN, aside from the ‘unique reference number’ and ‘memorable date’. This proliferation of details to remember may create difficulties for some users (e.g. they may confuse their PIN with their memorable date, since PIN is also in date format).

After completing the first few pages of the electronic application, the applicant is confusingly presented with a screen message saying ‘You currently do not have an active social housing application. Click here to complete a new social housing application’. Upon clicking the link to ‘Social Housing Application’ below this message, the application process continues. This may be highly confusing to all users, let alone those less familiar with IT.
is recommended that this message is deleted unless it has some purpose that is not clear to the evaluators.

When the application form is completed and submitted, the applicant can access his or her online account. Here the applicant may be confused as one of the sections of the online account (‘Properties that you can bid for’) says ‘Currently you are not eligible for any properties because you have no active applications’. It would be clearer to state ‘You cannot bid yet because your application is pending’.

3. Test of bidding methods

3.1 Bidding by phone

There is a dedicated telephone number for bidding. (The number is revealed in the Full Scheme Guide but is not in the ‘Easy Read Guide’). The service is automated and multi-lingual.

It is understood that ‘Typetalk’ is not available to customers. Typetalk connects people who cannot speak or hear on the phone, with other people using a telephone, by providing a text-to-voice and voice-to-text relay service.

3.2 Bidding online

The author of this report could not test to what extent bidding online is user-friendly for vulnerable clients as he is currently waiting for his application to be processed (the process takes 3-4 weeks).

4. Conclusions

This final, section summarises the issues the report has identified for each of seven potentially vulnerable groups in turn. It is hoped that these comments and suggestions can be reviewed by the Equalities Monitoring Group.

3.1 Clients with visual sensory impairment
3.2 Clients with hearing impairment
3.3 Clients with mobility difficulties
3.4 Clients with poor or no command of English
3.5 Clients with learning difficulties
3.6 Clients with literacy difficulties
3.7 Mobile Travellers
3.1 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 by the fact that they cannot register independently using the paper form. They would have had this option had the registration 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 present 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 Browsealoud, the font size changer, and symbols.

Bidding

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

3.2 Customers with hearing impairment

Registration

There are no difficulties here with regards to filling in the form. For those who have no access to the Internet, obtaining a paper copy of the application form may be an obstacle. The website and scheme documents do not state whether all local offices are equipped with the induction-loop system, or whether sign interpretation is available. The client could request the application form by writing a letter to his or her local office.

Understanding the system
No difficulties for clients who can access the Internet. Other clients may find it difficult to obtain paper copies of scheme brochures if their local office is not equipped with the induction-loop system. In such case, the client would need to write a letter to his or her local office with a request for brochures.

*Finding available properties*

No difficulties.

*Bidding*

Customers with access to the Internet can bid online. Others may put a bid by post or text but they cannot use the phone as Typetalk is not available. Visiting the local office may be challenging for reasons mentioned above.

### 3.3 Customers with mobility difficulties

Clients with access to the Internet should not experience any difficulties. Others may find it difficult to visit their local office in person, which may be challenging for those with a more severe mobility problem and those living in remote areas. The possibility of a scheme officer paying a home visit in such circumstances is not mentioned on the registration form or scheme documentation although it is understood that home visits are made at a late stage of the process by some landlords at least in order to check eligibility. It is not possible for applicants to indicate on the registration form that they would like to receive a copy of property sheet by post.

### 3.4 Customers with no or poor command of English

*Registration*

Assistance with translation is available for applicants on request. As for registering online, Google Translate is not accurate enough for this purpose.

*Understanding the system*

It is understood that scheme documentation is not available in community languages. Ad-hoc, face-to-face translation may be helpful but clients receiving this kind of assistance are not likely to remember all details, which may put them in a disadvantage.

*Finding available properties*

This is probably the biggest challenge for non-native speakers as adverts are only in English. Symbols and illustrations of property types may help but do not resolve the issue completely.
All CBL schemes face a challenge with translating adverts as they appear only for one week, which requires a fast interpreting ‘response’ from the scheme provider.

**Bidding**

Customers can bid by phone using an automated multi-lingual bidding line.

### 3.5 Customers with learning difficulties

Such clients can receive assistance from their local office. Some of them would presumably welcome a possibility of being visited at home by a scheme officer. They can also nominate a support agency.

### 3.6 Customers with literacy difficulties

Customers from this group face similar difficulties to those who have severe visual impairment or those who cannot read English. Availability of the Browsealoud service on the website and the use of symbols help them with understanding the system and finding available properties. Those who have no access to the Internet can request assistance from local offices.

### 3.7 Mobile Travellers

Those Travellers who do not live in houses and do not have access to the Internet may find it difficult to participate in the system. They would rely on weekly visits to their local office (which may be not practically possible) or on receiving the property sheet by post (which may be difficult due to frequent changes of the address, or not having a fixed address in the case of Travellers living on roadsides). It is understood that in York the Housing Options team has been providing assistance to Travellers with registering and bidding and that this support has been welcomed. It would be good if similar support were available in all NY Home Choice partners.

### 5. Appendices

Both Appendices are excerpts from the Blyth Valley Homefinder application form (2009).

**A. ‘Needing help to bid for properties’**
### Needing help to bid for properties

Do you understand how to find out about homes available for letting and how to put in a bid when they are advertised? [Yes] [No]

If no, is there someone who can do this on your behalf? [Yes] [No]

Please give their details below so we can contact them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Telephone number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you need to move closer to relatives in Blyth Valley for support? [Yes] [No]

If yes, please give their details.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Telephone number</th>
</tr>
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</table>

Do you need to move near to a special facility such as a special school or special medical facility in Blyth Valley? [Yes] [No]

If yes, please give details.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Address</th>
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### Why do you want to move?

Please give your main reason(s) for applying for housing (please tick one or more boxes.)

- [ ] Relationship breakdown
- [ ] Discharged from prison
- [ ] Discharged from a long stay in hospital
- [ ] End of my tenancy
- [ ] Loss of tied accommodation
- [ ] Eviction or repossession
- [ ] Asked to leave by family or friends
- [ ] Experiencing domestic violence
- [ ] Experiencing harassment
- [ ] Experiencing sexual or racial harassment
- [ ] Problems with neighbours
- [ ] Home unsuitable due to ill health or disability
- [ ] Home unsuitable due to overcrowding
- [ ] Property unsuitable due to poor condition
- [ ] To move nearer to work
- [ ] To give support to family
- [ ] Home too large
- [ ] Other (please give details): 

If you are homeless or shortly to become homeless, we will ask our housing advice officers to contact you.
B. ‘Medical or social conditions affected by your housing’

Medical or social conditions affected by your housing

Do you or any members of your family have health or disability problems that are affected by your current home and could be improved by moving to another home? Yes [ ] No [ ]

If yes, ask us to send you a medical self-assessment form for you to give us more details. To speed up your application, please complete the form and send it in with your housing application.

Special needs

Do you or any person applying with you have a special need because of any of the following?

- Young person leaving care [ ]
- Ex-offender [ ]
- Problem with alcohol misuse [ ]
- Problem with drug misuse [ ]
- In supported accommodation [ ]
- Mental health problem [ ]

Do you get any help from any organisation like social services, probation service or a professional support worker? Yes [ ] No [ ]

If yes, please give us their details below. We may write to them for further information. It will speed up your application if you can get a letter of support from this person and send it in with your housing application.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Telephone number</th>
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</table>

Please use the space below to tell us any further information you think we should know about why you want to move home.

What kind of home would you like to be considered for?

Type of home [ ] Number of bedrooms [ ]