NORTH YORKSHIRE HOME CHOICE EVALUATION

EVIDENCE PAPER 4:
FOCUS GROUPS AND DEPTH INTERVIEWS

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This is the fourth 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 David Mullins based on fieldwork undertaken with Pat Niner between April and July 2012. The paper is being shared with the Equalities Group who helped us in defining the scope and identifying the sample for the depth interviews with vulnerable applicants. Findings will then be further refined for inclusion in the Final Evaluation Report. Particular thanks are due to Hannah Brown, Yvonne Burns, Jack Davis, Susie Eales, Helen Fielding, Lorraine Gould, Alison Morton, and Claire Willoughby who hosted events or otherwise assisted in recruiting applicants and getting them to the venues in York and Richmond for focus groups and Northallerton, Malton, Scarborough, Selby and Skipton for the depth interviews. Finally, many thanks to 31 Home Choice applicants for taking part in the study, without their input none of this would have been possible.
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1. Introduction and methodology

This report presents findings from two small scale focus groups with a total of 16 individuals (12 applicant households) and 15 depth interviews with Home Choice applicants held between April and July 2012. These qualitative interviews and discussions were intended to complement the larger scale surveys reported in Evidence Paper 2 and the analysis of applications and lettings data in other evidence papers. While small numbers were involved and experiences presented are by no means representative of all bidders, insights were provided on how Home Choice is seen to work in practice in local contexts at different stages of the process for various types of applicant.

The Focus Groups were designed to give an indication of the perceptions of choice and fairness of applicants with different experiences. By tracing these experiences from first having heard of Home Choice to bidding, and in some cases to successful rehousing we were able to generate insights into how Home Choice works in practice for service users and the features that users would most like to improve. The original intention was to hold separate focus groups for current bidders and for those who had already been rehoused under Home Choice, but it proved difficult to secure sufficient attendance on the selected dates. In practice two mixed groups of current bidders and those already housed were held in York and in Richmond in April 2012. Some of the differences in ‘feel’ of the two groups may relate to the higher proportion of successful bidders in the latter. The absence of gold banded applicants from either group probably contributed to the down beat feel of the findings.

The Depth Interviews were designed to find out more about the experiences of ‘vulnerable’ applicants, again by charting their experience from first hearing about Home Choice to bidding and in some cases through to securing housing. In these interviews we focused in particular on potential barriers to access, bidding and satisfactory outcomes which may affect ‘vulnerable groups’. This survey was discussed and planned with the Home Choice Equalities Group who had already undertaken an Equalities Impact Assessment and welcomed the opportunity of depth interviews as part of their monitoring of the scheme. To balance the geographical concentration of the focus groups in York and Richmond, it was decided to spread the depth interviews between the other five districts. 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 in agreement with the Equalities Group. Interviews took place over three visits between April and July 2012.

Further details of the focus group and depth interview samples are found in the introduction to the relevant sections of this report. Process notes were produced for the Partnership Board, Equalities Group and partnership staff explaining the purpose and method, contribution to evaluation aims, preparation, design and administration arrangements including recruitment, ethics and recognition payments. Groups and interviewees were then recruited by Partnership staff to meet quotas agreed with the Evaluation team as set out above. Fact sheets explaining the purpose and use of the surveys were provided to potential participants. Consent forms were completed before interviews and group discussions commenced. Interviews were recorded but not transcribed. All participants received £10 gift vouchers on completion of discussions. The evidence presented in each section broadly follows the structure of the topic guides, included in Appendix A. Key findings summaries are included in each section before presenting the more detailed evidence.
The main ways in which these qualitative surveys may be useful to the internal policy review of Home Choice are to highlight the features of Home Choice that users would most like to improve, to identify perceived levels of choice and fairness, to better understand the ‘best’ and ‘worst’ aspects of Home Choice from different perspectives and to help to identify those aspects of the scheme with adverse effects on ‘vulnerable’ users. We are publishing these findings slightly in advance of the evaluation report to provide an opportunity for the Partnership comment on and respond to the findings. A response is requested from the Equalities Group, given its core focus on the issues discussed here. We will use this response alongside the Evidence paper findings in drafting the final Evaluation Report later in the year. This should enable improvements to be made to the scheme by the policy review to better meet users’ expectations and aspirations and avoid disadvantage to vulnerable households.

2. Focus Groups

The two focus groups were held in April 2012. Each group was attended by eight individuals, constituting six applicant households in each case. Whereas three households in the Richmond group had been successfully housed, only one had in the York group. There were other differences between the groups, including in the banding mix (see Table 2.1 below). An underlying difference was higher levels of mistrust and lower levels of apparent understanding of Home Choice in the York group as compared with the Richmond group. These differences affected group dynamics and our ability to cover all of the topics set out in the topic guide (see Appendix A). However in each case the discussion lasted around 90 minutes and covered the following broad topics:

- Basic information about participants’ housing situation and bidding patterns (more detailed profiles of participants were collected in Richmond than in York)
- Engaging with and registering with Home Choice (again better evidence from Richmond than York)
- Finding a property under Home Choice and Bidding Strategies
- Banding and in particular the position of applicants in Bronze Band
- Understanding of Choice and Fairness
- Best and Worst things about Home Choice
- Potential improvements

2.1 Key Point Summary

Before presenting the detailed findings the following text box Figure 2.1 summarises some key points we have drawn from the two groups to give a flavor of the discussions.
Figure 2.1 Summary Key Points from the Two Focus Groups

York – Key Points from Focus Group Discussion

Participants
- Five were currently bidding - two from private rented sector, two living with family (one of whom was expecting to be evicted by his sister) and one was a home owner. One rehoused.
- This group was dominated by people who were not successful despite bidding over months. There was also quite strong anti-council feeling and mistrust in the room.

Engaging with Home Choice
- There appear to be genuine issues over the slowness of administrative processes and lack of feedback in the system which led to frustrations. Failure to update contact details notified by phone was a particular case of this.
- There was little evidence of people finding the IT hard to cope with although one had needed support and had initially had problems getting it. There seem to have been issues around getting the system to update properly when given information about changing circumstances.

Finding a Property - Bidding
- There were problems with the amount of information included in adverts and the inability to search properly and reliably on a geographical basis.
- Mixed views about the IT-based system. It was seen as an advantage to be able to bid from home. However, it was also seen as symptomatic of a general trend towards de-personalisation of services. It had reduced their direct contact with housing staff (key workers) and made applicants feel more isolated and alone.
- One person saw their refusal of a quite unsuitable offer as harming their chances.

Banding
- Strong feeling of dissatisfaction with Bronze band and inability to get out of it. More should go to people who deserve housing. This negates any feeling of increased choice and available information on bids etc. It probably exacerbates rather than reduces the feeling of unfairness and helplessness.

Choice
- Only one participant seemed to see the extension of geographical choice as a merit in their circumstances. By implication several may have seen it as a bad thing since outsiders can bid for properties in York.

Fairness / Best and Worst
- This group was hard pressed to find any ‘bests’ and had a lengthy list of ‘worsts’. This seemed to link to their lack of trust in the fairness of the system.
  - A number of conspiracy theories and scapegoats were raised to account for this: ‘smackheads, foreigners, people who get themselves evicted’. Payments to the council for rehousing drug abusers and outsiders. Even the woman who was housed saw her offer as a lottery and random (possibly because she felt uncomfortable as a success from outside the area – she came from London).

Potential Improvements
- Lower bands should get a fairer share
- Speed up administration and communication
- Scrap it!
- Don’t scrap it but improve it! – but few specific improvements suggested
Richmond - Key Points from Focus Group Discussion

Participants

- 3 had been rehoused and 3 were currently bidding (one from private rented sector and two from Ministry of Defence properties).
- There was no sign of the anti-Council feeling expressed in York. Here officers were seen as well intentioned and very helpful. There was also a view that Councillors were helpful but had been disempowered by the County wide system and stricter rules leading to less Councillor influence on lettings.

Engaging with Home Choice

- The IT side seems OK. People who needed it got help and others obviously coped very well. Delay in acknowledging initial registration surfaced again.

Finding a Property - Bidding

- Information about properties is felt to be inadequate to make informed bids.

Banding

- It can work for people even when not in Gold Band. Similarly the cross-LA aspect can be helpful for some.
- Bronze band and inability to get out of it is a problem while very few offers go to Bronze.
- There is a similar resentment that the way the system works means that you cannot help yourself and prevent homelessness and crisis.

Choice

- Having more choice is never a disadvantage, but this isn’t much of an advantage to people who want to stay living locally. May be irrelevant.

Fairness

- There is a great resentment that people who behave well suffer. There was less resentment of homeless, drug addicts, foreigners etc than in the York focus group, but still a strong feeling that there are other needs which ‘good citizens’ have that are not recognised and should be.
- Fewer conspiracy theories and scapegoats than York focus group and an apparently greater and more accurate understanding of how things work.

Best and Worst

- It is an advantage to get the information on the properties let and who got them. Can also see where they were on the list for properties.
- Banding and banding criteria were seen as the worst thing, especially for non social housing tenants in bronze band who tended to see criteria as ignoring good behaviour.

Potential Improvements

- Rethink the Good Neighbour to favour ‘good citizens’.
- Give greater priority for local residence and waiting time.
- Enable armed forces staff to plan for their 90 day to leave period by enabling active advance bidding with homeless priority status.
- Improve communication in period after registration on Home Choice.
- Enable easier on-line application by allowing details to be saved from log on onwards.
- Adverts should always include pictures of property and area and correct rent details.
2.2 Sample Details and Basic Information about participants

Table 2.1 confirms the differences in profile of the two focus groups in a format that enables direct comparison with the larger scale customer survey samples reported in Evidence Paper 2. It can be seen that the focus group participants generally have experience of current bidding. Gold, Silver and Bronze are the three bands into which Home Choice applicants are classified in descending order of priority.

Table 2.1 – Focus Groups: Basic information about participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>York</th>
<th>Richmond</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Home Choice new tenants</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New tenants rehoused via Home Choice</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Choice customers – not yet rehoused</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronze Band</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver Band</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold Band</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further information was collected on bidding experience of focus group participants at the start of each group discussion. This confirms that the groups’ views were informed by bidding experience:

- The York group were mostly actively bidding, 4 of the 5 not yet rehoused had been putting in two or three bids every week since the start of Home Choice, the other had been bidding twice a week for four months but had recently stopped. All were bidding on-line, most from home, with one using the library or council offices.
- The Richmond group had three current bidders; two were bidding regularly 2-3 bids a week, the other was bidding infrequently only when specific properties came up. The three rehoused had bid for relatively short periods before succeeding maximum three months – 2 had silver and one had bronze banding.

Other information was collected including current housing situation, banding and location:

- Of the York bidders, two were private tenants, one was a home owner, one lived with family and the other with his sister who wanted to sell and get him out. The successfully rehoused group member had been a private tenant from London. 3 of the bidders were bronze banded and 2 were silver, the rehoused participant had been bronze.
- Of the Richmond bidders one was a private tenant and two were in MOD accommodation. Of those rehoused one had been a private tenant, one a social tenant and one a joint home owner with former partner. Of those bidding two were bronze and one was silver. Of those rehoused two were silver and one was bronze. 3 were from rural and 3 from urban areas.

As the discussions made clear these individual circumstances, particularly banding and whether still bidding or already housed, had a significant impact on views of Home Choice. So, it was not always clear whether the discussion was telling us more about the outcomes to date rather than about
Home Choice as a method of letting homes. The differences in tone between the two groups reflect the underlying influence of housing outcomes on perceptions and satisfaction with Home Choice. Nevertheless the discussions were structured to distinguish and get views on specific aspects of the scheme by following the journey from registration to rehousing. Paragraphs 2.2–2.7 amplify on findings on each stage of that journey and end with some overall assessments of the scheme.

2.3 Engaging with and registering with Home Choice

Initial reactions to hearing of the proposed switch to Home Choice were mixed from very positive: ‘Brilliant, great it takes me out of the narrow area’, ‘the old system worked behind closed doors Home Choice has opened things up a bit’ to one of resigned conformance: ‘I got a letter and a form, the reaction was we have to do this’, to concern and opposition ‘Home Choice will be a problem for older people and the homeless, who cannot afford computers’, Home Choice ‘removes the influence of councilors, this is a change for the worse’.

These initial reactions were rapidly followed by the need to engage in practice with Home Choice by registering and receiving a bidding number.

As the summary comments in Figure 2.1 indicate we can distinguish between applicants’ experience of engaging with the Home Choice IT system and with the administrative processes associated with registering, communicating and updating details. In both groups it was the latter that was seen as the more problematic element. Typical of the York discussion were the reactions:

‘why the hell do I have to fill all this in again? A paper form with lots of pages and it took ages. I had to contact them to see if they had received it. They had done so but I was not informed’

‘I had medical evidence on the old system but this wasn’t taken across to Home Choice. The details got lost’.

‘(I) reported a change of circumstances and they were very slow updating details on the system – getting back to me on an old contact number’

A common complaint from Richmond too was the delay in between registration and acknowledgment and provision of the necessary registration number and instructions to proceed with bidding. Stories such as the following from Richmond were so general that we concluded that there must have been genuine issues over the slowness of administrative processes and lack of feedback following registration on the system (during the set up period at any rate).

‘(D) had no difficulty in making the Home Choice application (paper) but then heard nothing for 5-6 months when he rang the office. He then got a letter about the band and bidding but was frustrated that he had missed out on 6 months potential bidding’

Views on engaging with Home Choice IT system were more mixed. This potential barrier was lessened at registration stage by the opportunity that several had taken to register by form rather than on-line, and the availability of staff assistance with on-line registration. People who lacked confidence on IT had generally been able to get support, at least after staff had been trained, while one applicant used to computers had found on-line registration ‘dead easy’.
In the Richmond group, there were differences of view about whether computers really disadvantage older people. Meanwhile in York one participant offered a broader critique that ‘the problem is computers. You are not face to face with anyone. You can’t explain your circumstances, there’s no feedback’.

Nevertheless, in practice all of the York bidders were bidding on-line, five of them from home, suggesting that while IT registration and interaction may be at the expense of contact with staff, it is not an overwhelming barrier to engaging or registering with Home Choice.

Thus our conclusion on engagement and registration with Home Choice is that despite initial apprehension about an on-line system, the lack of speedy response and communication after registering was more or a problem than the actual process of registering on line. One discussant saw Home Choice as a ‘de-personalisation of services, it had reduced direct contact with housing staff and left applicants feeling more isolated and alone’.

It would be interesting to get views from the Partnership on whether this was mainly a set-up period problem when large numbers of new registrations could not be quickly followed up, or one that can be expected to persist because of a mismatch between actual resourcing levels and customer expectations of a more personalised service.

2.4 Finding a property under Home Choice and Bidding Strategies

Finding a property from those advertised and deciding which properties to bid on is quite a new experience for most social housing applicants. This is often depicted as the most transforming aspect of choice based lettings in which home seekers actively search out options rather than passively awaiting an offer. Paper 2 includes quite a bit of survey based evidence on the ways in which bidders used the information provided on the website to inform their bidding. It indicates that while the opportunity to browse available properties was valued, even by unsuccessful bidders, there is considerable scope to improve awareness of how information available from the system can be used in practice to inform bidding behaviour.

If anything, the focus groups indicate even further distance to travel for Home Choice to deliver its full potential in this respect. Most attention in these group discussions was focused on the adequacy of the property details themselves and the facility to select the full range of properties that match applicants’ search criteria rather than the more sophisticated considerations of using prior lettings patterns and numbers of bidders for particular properties to influence future bid strategies.

The York focus group provided little indication of strategic bidding behaviour; albeit from five households who are regularly bidding. Discussion focusing on timing of and limits to number of bids, inadequacy of property details and search facilities rather than using lettings information to target properties that may succeed with:

- One participant had initially been advised that there was an advantage in bidding early so he had bid after midnight.
- ‘you should be able to bid for more than three properties a week. This is limiting choice’. This participant wasn’t aware of the restriction until they tried to bid for 4. ‘It may not improve chances of success but it would increase choice’.
- There was confusion about the rules on what size of accommodation you can bid for.
‘If they ring you and you don’t answer they go to the next person who has bid. This turns it into a lottery.’

One participant had ‘put in a bid for a village and had a phone call saying had no local connection, so 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.

‘nine out of ten times you hear nothing after making a bid. You have to look on line to see if you have been unsuccessful’

‘the adverts give basic details of address and rent but not number and size of rooms. There is too little about the area. The photos are not of the specific property’

‘you have little information before bidding- had offer from a HA – the flat had been absolutely stripped’

‘the search facility is inadequate to accurately select properties in the areas you want...have to go through the general list to make sure you don’t miss anything’

The experience of the Richmond group was different in that three households had bid successfully. Two of these had applied for sheltered housing and been successful very quickly under Home Choice. This included the woman in bronze band who was ‘amazed to be successful because there was no other bidder’. The third had bid strategically and had been able to trade a four bedroom house in a ‘rough area’ of York for a rural property using her silver band status.

Current bidders were less optimistic, partly because of unsuccessful bids and their banding, but were still actively bidding. One couple was putting in bids across a wide geographical area because they wanted to move urgently for medical reasons and because their landlord wanted them to leave. Another active bidder felt it was important to bid regularly so he can say he has done his bit. ‘if you don’t bid you may be taken off the list’, but he was generally pessimistic about receiving an offer before the 90 day notice of leaving MOD accommodation triggered a rebanding of his application to gold homeless status.

The Richmond bidders raised similar points to the York group about the limitations of property details but seemed more willing to supplement this with google earth searches, local knowledge or bus visits to check out the areas. They also made the same point about the accuracy of area based searches, suggesting either that the Home Choice search facility is not fully functional or that applicants do not have sufficient confidence in the technology to trust that the lists generated from such searches are comprehensive. One Richmond rehoused applicant (E) had shown greater awareness of the use of Home Choice information and who got them. She had strategically chosen to bid in areas where she appeared to have a better chance and had been successful.

Discussion of bidding behaviour moved on quite quickly to the constraints of bronze banding (see section 2.4 below). Our conclusion from the focus group discussions on bidding behaviour builds on that arising from the larger scale customer surveys. There appear to be a number of misunderstandings and well established myths about bidding, limitations to the property details and search facilities and very few examples of the kind of strategic bid behaviour informed by lettings patterns exhibited by (E) in Richmond.
This evidence supports the recommendations in Evidence Paper 2 to improve information to facilitate strategic bidding, improve staff training and customer awareness of the scope of the system through ‘my bids’ and ‘bidding results’ facilities.

More fundamentally it suggests the need to check that property details and search facilities are now fully functional, that customers understand how to use them and that better basic customer awareness information is made available to counter myths and explain eligibility restrictions such as for Section 106 schemes better.

2.5 Banding and in particular the position of applicants in Bronze Band

Information on the banding of focus group participants is provided in section 2.1. Thus the focus groups provide a picture of the perceptions of silver and bronze banded applicants. As noted above this has had an impact on the findings.

In both focus groups a key issue arising 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 (see 2.6).

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 5 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.

A sense of futility was apparent amongst some bronze banders. One participant felt that they could do nothing to get greater priority. Nevertheless, all but one of the bronze banders in the focus groups were still actively bidding. 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 reduces the feeling of unfairness and 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.
With 62% of the register in bronze band, but only 13% of lettings going to bronze band there is a clear basis for bronze banders to feel a sense of futility and of being in a holding camp. It may therefore be unsurprising that only 35% of these have made at least one bid (Evidence Paper 1), and in this sense the focus group participants are unrepresentative.

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. The extent to which it will be possible to respond to the aspirations outlined here 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.

2.6 Understanding of Choice and Fairness

The most common understanding of increased choice under Home Choice across the two groups related to the ability to move across local authority boundaries. Evidence Paper 5 shows that choice of cross authority movement has indeed been significantly enhanced in practice by Home Choice. Three participants had exercised this choice personally, interestingly two of them in bronze band moving 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’. This was seen to support the view that ‘It can work for people even when not in Gold Band’ (thereby partly negating some of the rather bleak views presented in 2.5 above).

However, 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 – ‘you have to remember it’s not just people in York who are bidding – may be even people in Leeds etc’. 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’.

Beyond the choice of cross-authority movement, participants in the discussion groups did not appear to have a strong view on other choices that had been increased, or whether this was beneficial.

- There were mixed views in Richmond about the benefits of seeing all available properties and bidding rather than being made offers. While C considered that seeing all the properties as an advantage over the old system, D felt that the theoretical increase in choice and control was negated by the loss of waiting time points. This meant that he would now bid for and accept any suitable property, he would under the old system have chosen to accept or refuse offers from a position of greater strength.
- In York the perception of choice was even more negative ranging across issues of process, priority and the conflicting logics of consumerism and paternalism. ‘It doesn’t feel like more choice- you are limited to three a week’, ‘I had to accept the offer as I’d never get another
being in bronze band’, ‘I had more chance under the old system when I had a case worker fighting for me’. The overriding feeling from this group was that there was a scepticism about the overall direction of change involved in CBL, and that this was probably driven by a greater realization that there was little chance of rehousing for most bronze banded applicants.

If there were divided views about (and definitions of) more choice, there were stronger feelings of unfairness arising from the banding process.

In the York discussion perceived unfairness of banding criteria was expressed as resentment against groups who were felt to being given priority including ‘homeless, drug addicts, foreigners’ and to conspiracy theories about councils receiving extra money to house and rehabilitate drug users, to house people from outside York and outside the country.

In Richmond it was considered that the Home Choice criteria encouraged people to lie and exaggerate their medical conditions, and it was felt that they were advised to do this to maximize their chances – ‘you’ve got to embroider it’. (A) disliked having to reveal very private health matters simply to increase housing priority.

In both discussions there was a feeling that more could be done to encourage good behaviour. For example, the Richmond group felt that the Good Neighbours scheme was too narrowly based, focusing mainly on existing social housing tenants. One participant argued that it should be based on being a good citizen and paying taxes in the UK for 25 years. Conversely there was resentment that ‘those who behave badly and get evicted will get rehoused, while those who behave well will never get housed’.

The findings here are challenging. The main benefit of Home Choice recognized by participants and confirmed in the lettings analysis has been the ability to move across local authority boundaries. But this applies to a minority of applicants and may even be seen to have an adverse affect on the prospects of the remainder. Other increases in choices through transparency, bidding and escape from the dependency on unpredictable ‘take it or leave it’ offer processes is not apparently valued by bronze and silver band applicants because they still have little prospect of moving. A sample based on gold banders would almost certainly have produced different results (as the depth interviews in the Part 3 of this paper confirm). Perceived unfairnesses are similarly rooted in the banding process and the lack of mobility opportunities between bands.
2.7 Best and Worst things about Home Choice

From the two very different focus groups it is difficult to construct a consensual list of best and worst things about Home Choice. In neither case did this specific question itself elicit a clear listing in the way that had been envisaged. The following lists therefore rest heavily on the interpretation of the researchers, while the last word on potential improvements (see section 2.7) is handed to the focus group participants as each group did produce a clearer list of ideas in answer to that question.

Best

- Applicants of whatever age or location had generally managed to register and to bid on Home Choice and received the help needed to do this. IT had not been an obvious barrier to potentially disadvantaged groups such as older people and rural residents (confirmed by Evidence paper 5).
- There has been an increased opportunity to choose to move across local authority boundaries (confirmed by Evidence paper 5), and this is seen as an advantage by a significant minority of applicants.
- More transparent information about properties and lettings is seen as an advantage by some and as either useful or helpful by most, but is probably not yet fully exploited by most bidders in their bidding behavior.

Worst

- Home Choice does not increase the supply of property and the increased transparency it provides can have the effect of exacerbating rather than reducing feelings of unfairness and helplessness of most applicants.
- Applicants in Bronze band feel trapped without meaningful options to improve their housing position. This contributes to their feelings of unfairness of the system.
- Administration and communications are widely seen as slow and unresponsive in comparison to the old systems. This contributes to a view that Home Choice represents a move away from personal service and support leaving applicants feeling more isolated and alone.
### 2.8 Potential improvements

The two focus groups generated a number of suggestions for improvement to Home Choice which deserve to be taken seriously. These suggestions which emerge directly from service users should be considered alongside the recommendations developed from each section by the research team.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>York</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Lower bands should get a fairer share</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Speed up administration and communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Scrap it!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Don’t scrap it but improve it! – but few specific improvements suggested</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Richmond</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Rethink the Good Neighbour to favour ‘good citizens’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Give greater priority for local residence and waiting time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Enable armed forces staff to plan for their 90 day to leave period by enabling active advance bidding with homeless priority status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Improve communication in period after registration on Home Choice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Enable easier on-line application by allowing details to be saved from log on onwards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Adverts should always include pictures of property and area and correct rent details.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3 Depth Interviews

15 interviews were held with individuals identified from the Home Choice database as falling into ‘vulnerable groups’ potentially disadvantaged in using Home Choice as discussed in section 1 above. Types of vulnerability are shown in Table 3.1 below. There were significant difficulties in setting up these interviews, including difficulties in Home Choice partners identifying, making contact with and securing agreement to participate. There were also a number of ‘no shows’ with three separate visits by the two Evaluation team members eventually being made to meet the quota of 15 interviews.

Most of these interviews were held in Home Choice partners’ offices, but participants were given the option of a home interview and this was taken in two cases. Where appropriate participants were invited to bring a support worker to the interview and this was taken up in three cases, two involving social workers/support workers supporting people with learning difficulties, one an accompanied interview with a young homeless woman. Interviews were recorded and generally lasted between 20 and 50 minutes (average around 30 minutes). Interviewees varied considerably in their knowledge and experience of Home Choice. A rather disappointing feature of the achieved sample was the relatively small number of applicants with significant experience of bidding for properties under Home Choice, making these interviews less useful than the focus groups (section 2) in this respect. However, unlike the focus groups this sample did include a significant number of gold banded applicants, reflecting the recognition given to vulnerability in the Home Choice needs assessment criteria and producing a more upbeat assessment of Home Choice (see table 3.1).

Interviews covered a similar set of topics to the group discussions (see appendix B) but were varied to match individual situations and experiences and to focus on barriers associated with particular types of vulnerability. The main areas on which findings are available from these interviews are:

- Basic information about participants’ housing situation and bidding patterns (see table 3.1)
- Engaging with and registering with Home Choice
- Finding a property under Home Choice and Bidding Strategies
- Banding and in particular the position of applicants in Bronze Band
- Understanding of Choice and Fairness
- Types of Barriers experienced by vulnerable groups and effectiveness of action to overcome
- Best and Worst things about Home Choice
- Potential improvements
3.1 Key Point Summary/ Pen Portraits

Before proceeding to present the detailed findings of the depth interviews a key point summary with pen portraits is presented covering each of the ‘vulnerable’ applicant groups included in the survey. While sample sizes are much too small to claim any representativeness of these experiences, it seemed appropriate to report on the groups separately here given the different types of problem likely to be experienced by each group. The abbreviations in brackets for each group are used to relate specific quotes and comments to the relevant groups in latter sections of the report which organize the evidence stage by stage in a similar way to section 2 on the focus groups.

Young People (YP) 7 cases

- The young people came from three local authorities (Craven, Ryedale and Hambleton) and were aged between 17 and 23. There were:
  - three single men, one separated from his partner. The two unattached men had been living in supported housing.
  - two young single mothers, one had been living with her own mum and one in supported housing.
  - two young couples, both about to give birth, both living in supported housing.
- Prior to registering with Home Choice the typical pattern was to have experienced unsettled housing, and periods of homelessness, followed by time in supported housing.
- Supported housing staff were often instrumental in getting the young people registered on Home Choice. Young people generally valued this support.
- Gold band priority was achieved by 6 of the 7 in two main ways, either through priority need as a result of pregnancy or children or through completing supported housing programmes and achieving outcome star ratings of readiness for independent living.
- While the first method would have led to homelessness priority prior to Home Choice, the latter route was a new development achieved by linking supported housing and move-on accommodation through the Home Choice Partnership and was seen as positive.
- Some of the registrations were quite recent and not all were actively bidding, some were not aware of their banding. On-line bidding was not generally seen as a problem once the system had been demonstrated. Supported housing staff were seen as good advisers.
- Local housing supply factors affected bidding outcomes, with for example shortages of two bedroom homes in Malton and Norton, but lack of competition from homeless families for two bed homes in Craven. The young separated man who had been rehoused in a two bed house in Ryedale on silver appeared to have benefited from a section 106 agreement, and an assessment that he would have regular visits from his 2 children.
- While critical of some aspects of the Home Choice functionality, and the quality of property information, and in some cases apparently unaware of some aspects of their status, the young people were generally positive about the Home Choice system, the support they received and optimistic about rehousing outcomes.
- The system was generally seen as fair and offering degree of choice.
- When asked about the barriers that might limit choice and what types of people might be adversely affected, young people were most likely to talk about other groups – older people, people with learning difficulties, people without support workers.
- Home Choice was generally seen to work well for younger people who could access the internet through mobile phones and were used to getting information in this way.
People with Mental Health Needs (MH) – 5 cases

- The people identified as having mental health needs came from three local authorities (Scarborough, Ryedale and Hambleton).
- There were three single men, a single woman and a mother with a 17 year old daughter.
- From the interviews there appeared to be big differences in ability to cope and the level of support needed to engage with Home Choice. They had very different housing histories, but these often involving a lot of moves prior to registration for Home Choice.
- Contact with Home Choice had come about either through mental health support workers, family or through direct application to landlords.
- Two had already been rehoused (one in a housing association flat and one in a sheltered housing scheme), one had only recently registered and two were actively bidding.
- All had secured gold banding, either as a result of their health vulnerability or homelessness.
- The two rehoused were both very satisfied with the process and the outcome. They were capable, used to dealing with computers and appreciative of the support they received.
- The three current applicants appeared to be having less positive experiences for different reasons, but partly relating to their mental health conditions:
  - (B) was a very recent registration, had just received his banding and scheme guide following a grueling homelessness assessment reflecting a complex recent housing history. He ‘seemed oddly passive and helpless’, perhaps as a consequence of his brain injury and had not yet engaged with his support worker to log on and bid.
  - (C) is currently in bed and breakfast, had been in prison for 2 years and is on a drug rehab programme. She has a drug intervention (DI) support worker and various other support. Following her homeless assessment she waited 6-8 weeks for notification, but had not received a Home Choice registration or information on how to bid. Someone is apparently bidding on her behalf, but the DI team has not received training on Home Choice. She seems to have received too little information to enable her to act on her own behalf and she lacks the skills, knowledge and confidence to do so.
  - (P) has epilepsy and had lived with parents all her life, but they are now ill and she needs to get independent accommodation for herself and her daughter. She cannot use a computer as it triggers epileptic fits. She is receiving support from her mother and from temporary accommodation providers but does not fully understand the application process or banding. Her support worker is bidding on her behalf and updates her on this fortnightly. She thinks disabled people have problems with Home Choice as she would herself without the help of her mother and support worker.

These cases highlight the importance of support workers in enabling people with severe mental health problems to engage with Home Choice.
- The Gold banding priority of all five cases and the successful rehousing outcomes of two cases indicate that the barriers to participation can be overcome if such support is provided.
- The mixed pattern of satisfaction with Home Choice in this group seems to relate mainly to individual health and well-being and not to inadequacies in the general level of support available to engage with Home Choice. However, in one case an unmet training need for support workers was apparent.
People with Learning Difficulties (LD) – 2 cases

- 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, to amend the registration to a joint one with his lady friend. He had identified with Housing a specification of the type and location of property they require suitable for sharing, with mobility adaptations and close to the town centre. 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.
- In summary 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 would need 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.
  - The banding position of both cases was a bit of a puzzle.
3.2 Basic information about participants’ housing situation and bidding patterns

It is immediately apparent from Table 3.1 that the ‘vulnerable groups’ sample is very different in character from the focus groups in Table 2.1. The most obvious difference is in the banding profile, with the two thirds of cases here being gold banded. All but one of the five mental health needs cases had gold band priority, presumably as a result of medical assessments and/or homeless priority need criteria. Six of the seven young people interviewed also had gold band status, currently or pending. Here this was because of pregnancy or dependent children in four cases and completion of outcomes star assessments\(^1\) of readiness for independent living following a period of supported housing in two single person cases. In two cases banding had been upgraded following marriage and birth of a child. Thus not only was the sample characterised by much higher overall priority than the focus groups, but it also demonstrated the possibility of mobility between bands in a way that participants in the focus groups clearly aspired to but could see no prospect of.

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\(^1\) Outcomes Star is a collaborative assessment tool used by support workers and their clients to chart progress in the skills and confidence needed for independent living. It is linked to the Home Choice banding assessment process for young people ready to leave supported housing across North Yorkshire.
### Table 3.1 – Depth Interviews: Basic information about participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Young People</th>
<th>Learning Difficulties</th>
<th>Mental Health</th>
<th>Gypsy/Travellers</th>
<th>TOTALS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Home Choice new tenants</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New tenants rehoused via Home Choice</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Choice customers – not yet rehoused</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively Bidding at time of interview</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not yet bidding</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold Band</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver Band</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronze Band</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not yet banded</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the sample had not yet been rehoused and a third or the entire sample were only recently registered and banded and had not yet started bidding. In a couple of cases interviewees were not yet aware of their banding, although our contacts in the local authority partners were! The two learning difficulties cases were at an early stage of registration (although one was in urgent need of accommodation). These LD interviews provided more information about liaison arrangements between adult care and housing than about direct use of Home Choice. The one Gypsy/Traveller household were currently sheltered housing tenants and were seeking a transfer and regular bids were made on their behalf but they were hampered by their bronze band priority and lack of structured eligibility for sheltered housing.

Despite these generally very positive prospects, and consequently more positive perception of Home Choice, these interviews did also reveal some difficult personal circumstances which limited ability to engage with Home Choice. In several cases participants appeared largely unaware of the mechanics of Home Choice. Some did not realise that they enjoyed generally high priority in relation to other applicants. In one case a strong preference was expressed for the previous ‘points and offer system’ over Home Choice.

Sections 3.3 to 3.5 cover the same ground as the focus groups and many of the points emerging from the individual interviews are similar to those reported in sections 2.3 to 2.5 above. Comments in these sections are therefore restricted to any new points emerging from these interviews. This leaves sections 3.6 -3.9 to cover evaluative comments emerging from these interviews in relation to choice and fairness (3.6), best and worst aspects of (3.8), and suggested improvements to Home Choice (3.9), and the key issue for the depth interviews of barriers to vulnerable groups (3.7).
3.3 Engaging with and registering with Home Choice

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 and this highlighted the importance of regular training opportunities for support workers and good working relationships with housing staff.

With the exception of gypsy/travellers out of wi-fi network range, we found little evidence of problems of residents of remote rural areas in registering and using Home Choice. People most frequently used computers at supported housing schemes and libraries or advice centres or relied on support workers. Of course it is possible that the method of selection of these interviews which tended to select people in fairly close contact with Home Choice partners and which excluded altogether people not registered on Home Choice may have led us to underestimate the problem of exclusion through rural remoteness.

3.4 Finding a property under Home Choice and Bidding Strategies

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, 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.

Those who had been successfully rehoused under Home Choice were generally very positive about the process and the outcome.

- (A) had mental health needs but was computer literate and able to look after himself. He had applied on-line with the help of a support worker and once his registration arrived he made weekly visits to the library to scroll and view available properties in his selected small town. Because of his local knowledge he could tell where the property was and what sort of area it was in. He was happy that the adverts provided sufficient information. He bid independently, making 3 or 4 bids in all, He was not put off by unsuccessful bids. His successful bid was in a good, quiet area, and only a few other applicants had bid. ‘It felt like a little win on the lottery – a lovely property in a lovely area’. He reported positive after care and support from the landlord and a beneficial impact of the move on his health. Home Choice information was seen as ‘spot on, it told me all I needed to know and was very useful.’ (MH)
(D) had a very similar story to tell. He also had mild mental health problems and wanted to move near to his mother. He applied online, was gold banded, was used to dealing with computers and received all the information he needed. He looked every week for three months and was very selective about area and would make follow up visits to properties he was interested in before bidding. His mother also searched on his behalf on her computer. His second bid was successful and he viewed the property with his support worker. It is sheltered accommodation and he was initially concerned at the age of the other residents but decided to go ahead and feels secure with the warden service. He was guided but not pressured by staff to accept. (MH)

In contrast to the above, several interviewees were much less confident about using Home Choice or bidding themselves. This seemed to relate primarily to 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:

- The Gypsy/Traveller couple seeking a transfer to a quieter bungalow near to a brother had been introduced to the IT after registration but were regular clients of Horton Housing’s drop in service and had decided that it is ‘better to use D’ (the project worker) than to bid themselves. ‘her coming to the bungalow means it saves time walking to the council office’. Because of their difficulty in reading and writing and lack of familiarity with computers they would have preferred the old system of points and offers as ‘bidding is awkward’, furthermore they had got their current bungalow under the old system and so far had nothing to show from Home Choice. (GT)

There were similar barriers to independent use of Home Choice in the case of the two learning difficulties clients and two of the households with mental health need. This including epilepsy preventing IT use in one case and more general limited ability to act and make choices independently in others. However, where support was working well it was clear that they were able to make real choices about where they wanted to live and what to accept. The three way interview discussion with the client and social worker in one LD case provided a real sense of how the system can be explained and presented to enable real choices to be made and to give control to the individual. So while these clients are only able to use Home Choice with a high level of support and advice this does not negate the principle of moving from offers to choice.

In contrast to this approach we were made aware of the direct offers fall back within Home Choice and the lesser area choices provided to priority homeless applicants:

- (C) a homeless client with mental health needs was told that if she refused an offer where she bid successfully she would then be made a ‘suitable’ direct offer which she would have to accept or lose her homelessness priority gold banding. Some-one is bidding on her behalf as she is not familiar with computers – this person is a volunteer as the paid drug intervention team workers have not been trained in Home Choice. (C) does not feel that she has control over this arrangement and does not feel that the property information is sufficient to enable her to choose. Her health problems mean that any help in bidding needs to be from people with whom she feels comfortable. (MH)

Similar pressure was beginning to be felt by N and C, a young couple in Ryedale who ‘now realise that we may have to live with what we choose – we will have six months to complete bidding or we will be made a compulsory offer- probably some village you’ve never heard of’ (YP).
3.5 *Banding and in particular the position of applicants in Bronze Band*

As table 3.1 shows only 2 interviewees (GT and one LD) are in bronze band. Neither currently experience the sense of futility discussed in section 2.5. This may partly be because both are receiving a high level of support, in the LD case actively seeking out options (one of which is Home Choice) for an urgent move.

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.

Most interviewees, including those with learning difficulties, were able to understand the Gold, Silver and Bronze band system and some of its implications for bidding and bid results.

3.6 *Understanding of Choice and Fairness*

As in the focus groups one of the most common understandings of choice was the ability to bid for property across a wide geographical area. One interviewee (MH) summed up fairly general response that this is good in principle but irrelevant to him individually, or the young couple who were clear ‘we’re going to be gold band but we have to stay in the Ryedale area’.

A second meaning of choice was understood by those who had experience of previous points and offer systems such as the mother of one of the (MH) interviewees who felt that it is very much better to be able to bid for the properties and areas that you want. One of the (YP) interviewees who had been homeless before shared this view – ‘choice and independence you can do something about it – it’s better than last time’.

This meaning was also appreciated by some of the other younger bidders who were attracted by the idea of actively bidding rather than waiting for an offer. However, the converse position was put by the (GT) couple who preferred the old system as ‘bidding is awkward’ and ‘you feel let down when you bid and lose’.

In practice homeless applicants were recognising that they have less choice than other bidders in both respects. Though few were interested in cross-area movement it had been made clear to some that they could only bid within their local authority area. Furthermore they had only six months in which to bid successfully or face a direct let. One (YP) had experienced a direct let made on her behalf of a flat that she considered unsuitable because it was disabled adapted with a walk in shower but no bath. She successfully argued that she needed a bath for her baby and four year old daughter. This experience confirmed her strong preference for choice based lettings over direct lets.

Only a few interviewees discussed the question of fairness, but those who did generally saw Home Choice as being fair. The principle of fairness was seen as important but usually interpreted in relation to people’s own personal situations. ‘banding is fair because not everyone is in the same situation – people leaving care are vulnerable and deserve Gold – that’s fair’ (YP). ‘the banding system is fair- it’s great for people in temporary accommodation to know that they’ve got priority’
So we conclude that most ‘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 offers if bids did not succeed in time. Perceptions of fairness tend 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.

3.7 Types of Barriers experiences by vulnerable groups

A key aim of the depth interviews was to investigate the experience of the scheme on the part of ‘vulnerable’ people, 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.

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).

One potential barrier very young people face is with being old enough to have a tenancy agreement. With an expectation of two year stays in supported housing this means that 16 and 17 year olds will have overcome that threshold by the time their support plans are completed. An added bonus of completing the support plan with progress monitored jointly by the young person and their support worker using the outcomes star tool is that this can lead to gold band priority on Home Choice.

This had worked very well for (L) a 23 year old young man with an unsettled housing history and a difficulty in controlling his temper. ‘outcomes star, it’s not that bad it’s pretty all right. At the end we get put on a gold band I think, but I am not 100% sure. I am about two chapters away from finishing my pre-tenancy’.

In another case of a young mother of 17 the support worker was trying to get her registered on Home Choice but because she was only 17 she needed a sponsor who can legally hold the tenancy
and as above an evidenced support plan. It was anticipated that there would be no problems with this and that she would have gold band priority.

The stories from young interviewees were also positive in relation to the potential further barrier of property availability. One young man of 20, separated from his partner and two children had secured a new two bedroom house in a Section 106 scheme in a village. Not surprisingly he had found Home Choice very useful. Meanwhile in Craven we were told that gold banded homeless young people were benefiting from the small numbers of homeless families and were able to secure two bedroom properties.

However, there were of course still significant barriers, one young man had bid several times for properties in a section 106 scheme in a village that had been on the computer for 5-6 months. While he usually came in the top 3 he was told that he was ineligible despite having lived for four years in another village two miles from the scheme. He was encouraged to keep bidding, presumably pending the widening of local connection if more local takers could not be found.

Of course the young people in this sample were atypical having received or expected to receive gold or silver banding. Moreover as Evidence Paper 5 highlights they were beneficiaries of a trend under Home Choice for lettings to homeless young people to increase while those to other young people were falling.

When asked the barriers that might limit choice and what types of people might be adversely affected, young people were most likely to talk about other groups – older people, people with learning difficulties, people without support workers.

As discussed earlier, 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, and one that had generally been successful for the clients we met was to provision of personal support and advice to register, clarify requirements, bid and make decisions. An excellent example of this is provided by the support received by R. an LD service user. His Social Worker had worked effectively in liaison with Home Choice to enable (R) to register, to amend the registration to a joint one with his lady friend. He had identified with Housing a specification of the type and location of property they require suitable for sharing, with mobility adaptations and close 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.

Such support came from various sources including mental health support workers, drug intervention teams, supported housing workers, social workers, and volunteers as well as from 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.

- They will do the application/registration for clients. Usually on-line unless beyond laptop reach. Sometimes have to advise people on how to put things to explain their needs to maximise their chances. When helping people bid they will access the properties they are eligible for and read out the areas. If they are interested will go into the details and read them out. May short circuit this a bit when she knows someone well and their needs and preferences. Depending what is available people may make three bids or fewer. People usually want to be nearer family, or to get away from harassment.
  - Home Choice is easy to use. Found it complicated at first, but now used to it.
  - Can see where people are in the queues.
  - Can look back and see their bidding and advise them to widen areas etc – this acts as a basis for discussion of bidding strategies.
  - Generally helps to do the job of advising clients and it is an enormous help to have a single system over the wider area.

In some cases it was clear that support workers were less knowledgeable and well connected than the drop in services at Horton Housing. This highlights the need for updated training on how the system works in practice, for new staff and volunteers in support agencies for somewhere to 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 such as the MH client (C) experience.

3.8 Best and Worst things about Home Choice

Discussion of best and worst features of Home Choice worked better in the individual interviews than in the focus groups – perhaps because the 1-2-1 format avoiding ‘group think’ and the generally better prospects of rehousing made these ‘vulnerable’ applicants more able to balance the ‘best’ things with the ‘worst’.

It can be seen that several individuals and advisers had bought into the idea of bidding as an active process in which information was there to be used, new opportunities were coming all the time and you aren’t so dependent on staff making offers and judging your reasons for refusing them. The advantage of the sub-regional spread of the system and a single way of accessing it was particularly valued by advisers. Support workers and advisers were in turn seen as ‘the best thing’ by vulnerable individuals who could not actively engage themselves in the active way seen by others as the ‘best thing’. In this way with good quality IT and responsive support workers there seems to be a potential for Home Choice to deliver the best of all worlds.
BEST

- ‘Gold Band, choice – active bidding not waiting’ (YP)
- Home Choice is easy to access – the properties are well maintained (MH)
- Being able to see what the properties look like (MH)
- Gets away from old system of offers and if reasons for refusal reasonable or not (YP)
- Very good idea to be able to choose and bid for the properties you want – better than waiting for an offer which may be something you don’t want’ (MH)
- Support Workers – ‘they try their best and are very helpful’ (GT)
- Can see what is available each week – have a choice to select from (MH)
- Live updates weekly - always new properties – can do it on-line (YP)
- Like being able to see photos in adverts –it’s like buying cars (LD)
- Clients are involved in the process – can do something rather than wait passively- see what properties are available and what isn’t available’ (YP support worker)
- Can see where people are in queues, can look back at their bidding and advise on bidding strategies (e.g., to widen areas) (GT Adviser)
- Enormous help to have a single system over the wider area – great if Harrogate would join (GT Adviser)

And yet, Home Choice was not entirely successful in enabling active users to meet their own needs in the way they expected. There was still the waiting to get sufficient banding priority (by young people serving time in temporary accommodation to get their outcomes star, by expectant parents waiting for the birth to up their banding, and by anyone waiting for changes of circumstances to be registered). Then there is the problem that what you see is not necessarily what you get (inaccurate or incomplete images and property details), and the IT did not match up to the expectations of IT savvy younger users. More fundamentally, of course, Home Choice can do nothing to reduce scarcity. Transparency is increased but with it frustration and a growing sense of futility unless you are able to upgrade your banding. And then there’s the future, news was trickling through that full housing benefit will no longer be available to ‘under-occupiers’ and bidders were making calculations about how much they much they could afford for that extra bedroom for a growing family. And finally the best of both worlds solution of active users combined with support for the less active was also hitting a few barriers -the ‘palaver’ of getting authorization and (and all important registration number) to support bids.

WORST

- Serving time – doing pre-tenancy work and assessments of readiness for independent living (YP)
- Delays in changing banding priority until child actually born – added stress at late stage of pregnancy of not having a home for baby to go to (YP)
- Properties not all suitable and never know how long before next successful bid (MH)
- No photos, too many people bidding (YP)
- Misleading adverts and frustration when property doesn’t match the picture (YP support worker)
- Disappointment of unsuccessful bids – when you see how many others bid ahead of you but that’s because we were bronze and now we are upgraded to gold (YP)
- Bedroom tax – would like a three bedroom property but realise this will involve paying extra rent – ok if its £10 a week but not more’ (YP)
- Delayed responses when circumstances change – needs to be on the phone to officers all the time (GT Adviser)
- Can be a palaver for clients to authorise bidding on their behalf – need registration number (GT Adviser)

3.9 Potential improvements

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. Not all of the interviewees identified potential improvements and the final suggestion rather mirrored the ‘scrap it’ suggestion in the York focus group; reflecting perceived additional effort and stress for no result. Advisers supporting vulnerable users provided valuable further suggestions about how Home Choice could work better for their clients including better information on adapted accommodation and bidders with matching disabilities and the need for ongoing training of support workers and flexible ways to engage with vulnerable groups.

‘The IT system is ok, but it is not fun to use. It seems a bit outdated. You might keep it in ‘my favourites’ because you need it but you would not spend long looking at it – more colours would help’ (YP)

The web design is old fashioned and in-flexible – service users should be more involved in the design of future systems to get closer to what people need (YP)

Need pictures of the inside of properties – if doing direct lets should make sure it is something like the bidder would choose (YP)

More internal photos – room sizes – ‘so if you like go to buy a house at the estate agents you get photos of every room – it should be more like that to be honest’ (YP)

Improve property information – include photos of the inside of the property (MH)

The search facility does not work properly – you need to scroll through all the properties to see what is available (YP)

Refine search facility to sort on geographical areas (MH)

Improve Home Choice information on adapted properties suitable for people with disabilities and eligibility of applicants for these (GT adviser)
It is important that ongoing training is provided for Social Services and other support workers and that a flexible approach is taken to registration and bidding to meet the needs of people with learning difficulties (LD support worker).

Return to old ‘points and offers’ system as bidding difficult and stressful (GT).

4 Conclusions and recommendations

4.1 Introduction

Two sets of qualitative evidence were used to complement the quantitative household surveys (Evidence Paper 2) to illuminate user experiences of Home Choice. This evidence enables us to draw conclusions about the views of two sub-sets of Home Choice users which proved in practice to draw on very different sets of experiences relating to banding and bidding (see Figures 2.1 and 3.1 for comparison). These conclusions are pulled together below in relation to user experience of a consistent set of stages of engagement with Home Choice (4.3-4.5), that enable comparison with the surveys in Evidence Paper 2, and a set of evaluative views about that experience (4.6-4.9). From this summary of conclusions we draw a set of recommendations for the consideration of the Partnership Board, Operational Board and Equalities Group (4.10) prior to inclusion in the Final Evaluation report.

4.2 Comparing the Samples

Between the two samples feedback is provided from users in every Home Choice partner area, and from those rehoused and current bidders in every band. While the two samples were intended to distinguish between ‘vulnerable’ households and ‘ordinary’ bidders; the most obvious distinction in the findings is between bronze and gold banded applicants. Because their vulnerability is reflected in the Home Choice prioritisation criteria, ‘vulnerable’ applicants were in practice generally more satisfied than most applicants in the focus groups. The small numbers involved mean that the samples are not representative but the depth of the discussions does provide insights into how Home Choice works in practice.

4.3 Engaging with and registering with Home Choice

Focus group findings suggest that applicants experienced greater problems with administrative processes than with the IT system itself. Responsiveness after initial registration and subsequent changes in applicant circumstances does appear to have been slow, and there is a perception of a replacement of personal service with standardised IT based service. There is no evidence that vulnerable applicants have been excluded, but registration was most problematic for those with limited literacy and computer skills or with problems in understanding what is going on.

4.4 Finding a property under Home Choice and Bidding Strategies

Most applicants interviewed appear to have been able to use Home Choice to bid for properties, either themselves or with the help of support worker or family. There is scope for improvement in property information, and the local search facility appears to have been either difficult to use or
malfuctioning. Few applicants were bidding strategically, by which we mean using the system information on numbers of bids and banding of successful bids to maximize the chances of success. There appear to be a number of common misunderstandings and myths about bidding. Nevertheless, there were some good examples of satisfied customers, including some from bronze band. Vulnerable interviewees did not always understand the process but were able to participate successfully with help from support workers and were often boosted by gold banding.

4.5 Banding and in particular the position of applicants in Bronze Band

The position of the 62% of the register in bronze band competing for 13% of the lettings is probably the biggest test for the long term acceptability of Home Choice. While the evidence from the focus groups is that bronze banders are continuing to bid, and some are delighted with success, there is a growing sense of futility and a desire to be able to do something to increase your priority by progressing to a higher band. 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. The ‘vulnerable’ client interviews in many ways provided the flip side of these discussions highlighting the perceptions of applicants with high priority who had in several cases experienced mobility through the bands. Here the banding system had sometimes boosted the confidence and interest of bidders in Home Choice.

4.6 Understanding of Choice and Fairness

Two main understandings of choice stood out from both sets of evidence. First, was the ability to bid for property across a wide geographical area. This had been delivered in practice and some interviewees had benefited from it. However, it was a limited benefit to people wanting only local rehousing and potentially a threat, reducing supply to meet local needs. Second, was the ability to see all available properties, and select and bid rather than waiting for an offer from an unknown pool. This aspect appealed to younger bidders who were attracted by the idea of actively bidding rather than waiting for an offer and to some of those with previous negative experience of ‘take it or leave it’ offers and direct lets. However, it was not universally welcomed and there was a minority who much preferred the old system, for them making choices can be both an effort and demoralising when bids fail and you see how many people are ahead of you. They placed a greater value on face to face contact with case workers and support workers and in some cases councillors rather than individual interaction with an IT system.

Fairness was less widely understood. Perceptions of fairness tend 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.
4.7 Types of Barriers experienced by vulnerable groups and effectiveness of action to overcome

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. Discussion with support workers and with local housing officers indicated that Home Choice had resulted in enhanced opportunities for homeless young people to access to social housing through move-on from supported housing, and this is confirmed in the lettings analysis in Evidence Paper 5. Other vulnerable groups did experience greater barriers to direct personal participation in Home Choice. For example literacy, computer skills, sensory or other health factors that preclude computer use and understanding and ability to make choices were important barriers for some people in the other three groups.

The interviews suggest that these barriers 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 of 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.

4.8 Best and Worst things about Home Choice

Individual interviews provided a more effective method of collecting best and worst perceptions than did the two focus groups. The responses support a vision of a best of both worlds solution of active users working independently with up to date information to find a home, combined with effective support for the less active. However this vision could be let down on a number of fronts by limited IT functionality, slow motion responses, de-personalised support, and inadequate training and resourcing and access to client registration numbers for external support agencies.

4.9 Potential improvements

Participants in both exercises generated really useful lists of suggestions for how Home Choice can be improved. The ideas should be reviewed by the Home Choice policy review.
4.10  Recommendations

4.10.1  **Policy Review** to give consideration to the potential improvements to Home Choice suggested by the focus groups (section 2.1 pages 6 and 7, section 2.8 p. 16) and the depth interviewees (section 3.9 page 31).

4.10.2  **Operational Board** to consider the evidence on delays in following up registrations and changes of circumstances and consider whether this was a set-up period problem only or one which requires continued attention (section 2.3 p. 10).

4.10.3  **Partnership Board** to consider wider question of resourcing levels in relation to customer expectations of a personalised service. How might Home Choice be seen as more responsive to its customers? (section 2.3 p.10).

4.10.4  **Operational Board** to check that property details and search facilities are now fully functional and that users understand how to use them (section 2.4 p.11).

4.10.5  **Operational Board** to ensure that basic customer information is available to counter myths, explain eligibility restrictions and support more strategic bidding (section 2.4 p.12).

4.10.6  **Partnership Board** to consider the scope for Home Choice to offer meaningful options for bronze banders to actively address their needs. Could Home Choice become a one stop route to all rented and affordable housing in North Yorkshire? (section 2.5 p. 13)

4.10.7  **Partnership Board** to consider how real choice can be extended and perceived lack of fairness from perspective of bronze banders can be tackled. What is the potential for recognising ‘good citizenship’ and giving some upgrading possibilities (e.g. enhanced local residence or waiting time priority) to avoid the ‘holding camp’ view of bronze band? (section 2.6 p. 14)

4.10.8  **Equalities Group** to consider the evidence in section 3 that the needs of ‘vulnerable’ groups is generally reflected in Home Choice priorities and that barriers have been tackled effectively by support workers. Is this a reasonable analysis? – is the lack of evidence on ‘rural’ exclusion a true picture of the position? (section 3)

4.10.9  **Equalities Group** to consider the cases involving learning difficulties. How can Home Choice be best fitted to existing liaison with Social Services to provide long term accommodation need of people with learning difficulties? How can it better respond to rare emergencies when new long term accommodation with appropriate support is needed at short notice? (section 3.1 p. 20 and 3.7 p. 28)

4.10.10  **Equalities Group** to consider the important role played by support workers in overcoming the barriers faced by ‘vulnerable’ users. Comparing the examples of mental health needs and Gypsy/Travellers how can appropriate support best be organised on a more consistent basis? (sections 3.4 and 3.7)

4.10.11  **Equalities Group** to consider: How can the essential support role be maintained through ongoing training and support for support workers, especially in agencies outside of the Partnership? (section 3.1 p 19-21)

4.10.12  **Equalities Group** to consider: How will the current public spending reductions affect the ability of external support agencies to continue to provide this service without which vulnerable groups will be less able to participate in Home Choice? (section 4.7 p.33).
APPENDIX A - FOCUS GROUPS TOPIC GUIDE AND FACTSHEET

North Yorkshire CBL Evaluation - Topic Guide for Focus Groups

Purpose

Contributes to Evaluation aims:

- 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 further explore the resulting findings (e.g. asking the ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions) we propose to conduct focus group discussions with both successful and unsuccessful bidders (who will now be in mixed groups)

Introductions

Introduce Research Team - Explain Purpose of Study – ensure people have understood the letter, ask them to sign consent forms, gift vouchers will be given out at end of group discussion.

Topics

About the group

Ask for Show of Hands - Write up on flip chart

- how many people have already been housed actively bidding or not currently bidding
- What type of housing in which area were you living in before applying? (private renting, social housing, living with family, staying with friends, homeless, other)
- How many bids have people made so far
- How did people come to apply for housing through North Yorkshire Home Choice?

Best and Worst

What are the best things about North Yorkshire Home Choice?

- Allow list to emerge
- Probe and discuss
- See how much agreement there is on specific factors
- Ask if there are any more good things no-one has mentioned so far

What are the worst things about North Yorkshire Home Choice?

- Allow list to emerge
- Probe and discuss
• See how much agreement there is on specific factors
• Ask if there are any more bad things no-one has mentioned so far

Engaging with Home Choice North Yorkshire

How did people first hear about Home Choice? What did you think about it?
• Probe and discuss
• See how much agreement there is on specific factors

Finding Property Under Home Choice

How do people find out about properties you might bid for under Home Choice?
Do the adverts give you enough information? (is it accurate?) –

Ask people who have been rehoused
how did actual properties compare to what they expected from the advert)
what advice would you give people who are currently bidding?

Ask people who said they had made a lot of bids
How do you decide what to bid for and where?
What property types/sizes/areas have you bid for?
Do you like being able to pick houses to bid for rather than waiting for an offer?
Do you feel as if you have much choice?

Ask people who said they had made few or no bids
How do you decide what to bid for and where?
What property types/sizes/areas have you bid for?
Do you like being able to pick houses to bid for rather than waiting for an offer?
Do you feel as if you have much choice?

Restrictions

What kinds of restrictions are there on properties you can bid for/get housed in?
Views on banding and whether this is fair
Did you know you could bid for properties any where in North Yorkshire – is this important to you- have you made any bids outside home area (NAME) – why is this?
Did you know you could bid for properties larger than your household's size? Is this important to you—have you bid for any larger properties? Why is this?

Now some general questions

**Would you say you have a real choice with Home Choice?**

Do you feel pressure to accept offers since you have chosen the property yourself?

**What barriers have limited your choice?**

What help/support have you had to overcome these barrier?

What further help would be useful to you?

**Do you think Home Choice is a fair system?**

How could Home Choice be made more fair?

**How could information about Home Choice be improved?**

**What types of people have most problems in using home choice?**

How could barriers to these people using Home Choice be overcome?
North Yorkshire Home Choice
Customer Group Discussion
Fact Sheet

In July 2011 there was a change in the way social housing in North Yorkshire is allocated. The new system is known as Home Choice and we understand that your move into your new home was made under the Home Choice Scheme.

We would like to learn about your views on Home Choice and are inviting you to be part of a group discussion with David Mullins and Pat Niner from the University of Birmingham who are researching the scheme for North Yorkshire Home Choice Partnership funded by Joseph Rowntree Foundation in York.

We are inviting ten new tenants successfully housed in the York area under Home Choice to a discussion with David and Pat on April 16th at 10.30-12.00 AT VENUE. Transport will be provided and each participant will receive a £10 shopping voucher.

The purpose of the discussion, which will be recorded, is to find out more about how Home Choice works in practice and to get your views on how it could be improved. The discussion will be written up by David and Pat summarising the views of the ten new tenants but not identifying any individuals in any way.

This is one of four group discussions across North Yorkshire which form part of the University of Birmingham’s Home Choice evaluation report which will help Home Choice to improve in the future. The evaluation also includes postal surveys, interviews with local organisations and analysis of who has applied and who has been housed under Home Choice. The report will be published in Autumn 2012.

By agreeing to take part you will be able to influence the future of Home Choice, receive a copy of the group discussion report and details of the full evaluation report.

Taking part will not affect your own housing, you will not be named in the report and your personal details will not be passed on to anyone else. All participants will receive a shopping voucher for £10 on attending the discussion and signing a consent form.

I hope that you will be able to join the group discussion at VENUE on April 16th from 10.30-12.00 and look forward to seeing you there.

Best Wishes

David Mullins
University of Birmingham
d.w.mullins@bham.ac.uk
APPENDIX B – DEPTH INTERVIEWS TOPIC GUIDE

North Yorkshire CBL Evaluation - Topic Guide for Depth Interviews with Vulnerable Groups

Purpose - Contributes to Evaluation aims:

• To investigate the experience of the scheme on the part of ‘vulnerable’ people and the effectiveness of procedures established to facilitate their participation

• To gauge the impact of the new system for groups potentially disadvantaged as a result,

Introductions

• Introduce Interviewer - Explain Purpose of Study – ensure people have understood the letter, explain about preference for recording, ask them to sign consent forms, gift vouchers will be given out at end of interview.

Topics

About the applicant

Can you tell us a bit about yourself and how you came to apply for housing through North Yorkshire Home Choice?

What type of housing in which area were you living in before applying?

Check if they have been rehoused, are actively bidding or not currently bidding) if the latter – why is this?)

I understand that you have a learning difficulty/mental health problem/have been referred by Horton Housing’s Gypsy/Traveller Wednesday Drop in Advice/are young and homeless – Can you tell me how this has affected your housing application (if at all)

Engaging with Home Choice North Yorkshire

How did you first hear about Home Choice? What did you think about it?

When you registered under Home Choice was this on-line/paper form/other

How accessible/easy did you find the registration process? – were there any special barriers to registering on Home Choice? (things which made it hard for you)?

Did you receive any special support to register? (how did that work for you?)

Finding Property Under Home Choice

How do you find out about properties you might bid for under Home Choice?

Do the adverts give you enough information? (is it accurate?) – (if people have seen properties of been rehoused check how the actual properties compared to what they expected from the advert)
How many bids have you made so far?

How do you decide what to bid for and where?
What property types/sizes/areas have you bid for?
Do you like being able to pick houses to bid for rather than waiting for an offer?
Do you feel as if you have much choice?
How do you feel when bids are unsuccessful?
Have you received any special support with making bids? (how did that work for you?)

What kinds of restrictions are there on properties you can bid for/get housed in?

General restrictions?
Views on banding and whether this is fair
Did you know you could bid for properties anywhere in North Yorkshire – is this important to you. Have you made any bids outside home area (NAME) – why is this?
Did you know you could bid for properties larger than your households size? is this important to you-have you bid for any larger properties ? why is this?

Now some general questions

What are the best and worst things about Home Choice?

• For those who have been housed only - how satisfied are you with their new home and area?

Would you say you have a real choice with Home Choice?

Do you feel pressure to accept offers since you have chosen the property yourself?

What barriers - (things which made it hard for you) have limited your choice?

What help/support have you had to overcome these barriers?

What further help would be useful to you?

Do you think Home Choice is a fair system?

How could Home Choice be made more fair?

How could information about Home Choice be improved?

What types of people have most problems in using home choice?

How could it all be made easier for them?