



Leicester
City Council

Housing System Replacement and Housing Channel Shift

Housing Scrutiny Commission: 18th September 2017

Councillor Connelly Briefing: 4th September 2017

Lead Officer: Charlotte McGraw/Kevin Wheeler

Lead Director: Chris Burgin

Useful information

- Ward(s) affected: All
- Report author: Charlotte McGraw/ Kevin Wheeler
- Author contact details: 0116 454 5167
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1. Purpose of report

This report provides an overview and update of the Housing System Replacement Programme and Housing Channel Shift.

2. Briefing

2.1 Background

In 2016 the new Housing System Replacement for Housing provided by Northgate went live. Northgate replaced Open Housing which had become costly to support, was unreliable and would not meet the future needs of the business.

The initial phase of Northgate put in place the systems to collect rents, manage repairs and manage tenant accounts. The new system brought a variety of benefits including increased productivity and efficiencies and increased reliability and stability which has reduced downtime and lost working hours.

The second phase of delivery included additional modules such as the Property Purchase (Right to Buy) module and other functionality improvements. This phase has now been completed.

The current phase of the delivery of the Housing System Replacement programme is focusing on the development and delivery of channel shift for Rents, Repairs and Housing Options, which are all high volume call areas for the Councils' Customer Service Centre.

3.1 Channel Shift

Channel shift is the process by which the Council can encourage customers to access or interact with services via more effective methods. For most organisations, including Leicester City Council, this is to encourage customers to access services online rather than face to face or by telephone.

The key drivers for this are;

- to reduce costs which are being incurred through the provision of services that a customer could potentially do themselves given on-line access. This enables more appropriate use of Council resources;
- to improve customer service by enabling customers to access services online and 24 hours a day

The highest cost to the Customer Service Centre (CSC) relates to the number of Housing calls managed. On-line transactions are far cheaper than telephone or face to face transactions so to reduce costs the intention for the authority and many other organisations is to “Channel shift” (move) services on-line so a customer can carry out these functions themselves. Hence, reducing the number of Housing related calls is key to driving down the CSC total costs and therefore the charge to the Housing Revenue Account. Housing related enquiries (excluding Housing management enquiries) account for over 30% of all contact offered to the Customer Service Line. In 2016/17 the Customer Service Centre answered 700,000 calls, 22% of which were relating to rents and repairs enquiries.

Channel Shift will also allow us to communicate with customers via email more effectively as we will have up to date email addresses for customers. This will allow us to send communication via email instead of physical letters where appropriate. This will allow us to send communications quicker and save money from printing and postage costs.

Channel shift is achieved through the use of technology by implementing software that will enable a customer to log onto a secure web portal 24x7 providing them with the benefit of accessing services at their convenience. Once logged into their account the customer will have access to carry out tasks such as report a repair and select an appointment, view their Rent Account, make a payment, access Rent Statement history, etc. The system is secure with access provided to only those who complete the registration process. A similar example is the use of On-line banking which is now very common.

It is widely accepted that “Self-Serve” is not a “one size fits all” solution and shouldn’t be used as such. Not all customers will use a self-serve solution so the authority will still need to keep a range of service channels open for certain profiles of customer - this could include elderly and vulnerable customers.

It is worth noting that the Council have already successfully implemented a number of large scale channel shifts within Housing including Choice Based Lettings and Housing Applications, these are currently provided by the Northgate Self-Serve portal.

In July 2017 the Channel Shift Board approved the use of Northgate, the existing IT supplier for Housing to enable channel shift for rents and repairs. The licences for channel shift have already been purchased which will reduce the time for implementation and enable tenants to access their key housing services online.

3.2 Rents Channel Shift

Channel Shift for Housing will provide access to the following services for tenants;

- Make an on-line payment
- Setup a DD or regular payment arrangement
- View Account/Debt/Arrears history
- View or Print a Rent Statement
- Enable tenants to see when a letter has been sent to them

Common calls from customers are to make a payment, check their account balance or request a Rent Statement so by providing these services on-line the customer should be able to meet these requirements immediately or when convenient to them.

Currently it is planned that Rents Self-Serve services will be available for customers to use in early 2018.

3.3 Repairs Channel Shift

Currently Repairs calls amount to the highest element of transactional and cost at the CSC so there is a real drive to reduce the number of calls and subsequently costs.

Repairs Self-Serve would include the following services;

- Access to the secure Repairs on-line portal
- Ability to report a repair
- Ability to diagnose the issue using a Graphical Repair finder tool
- View the appointment (once made)
- View Historic Repair History
- Allow the customer to select a convenient appointment date & time
- Automatically log the job in Northgate Repairs
- Confirm the appointment with the customer

Currently it is planned that a full end to end repairs service will be available from the end of 2018.

3.4 Mobile Working Solution

To enable a full end to end repairs service (from reporting a repair, to booking an appointment and the repairs being completed) to be provided to our customers the Council needs to update the mobile working solution. The current system in place is GRASP which is outdated, slow and does not meet the needs of the business. Housing are currently working with procurement to purchase a new mobile working solution with a timescale of delivery for Summer 2018. The Mobile Working Solution will sit alongside the Repairs Channel Shift to include the following:

- The ability to assign a qualified operative and materials to the job automatically
- Manage the resources schedule / diaries for all operatives
- Deliver the job information to the relevant operatives tablet device

- Allow details to be sent back to Northgate Repairs by the operative
- Allow jobs to be completed or re-scheduled by the operative

3.5 Housing Options Channel Shift

In summer 2017 a report was approved by Channel Shift Board recommending stopping the Tier 1 service for Housing Options and redirecting it online. The types of calls that are offered to officers can be categorised into two types of enquiry.

- Simple requests for advice or information, this information is simple and can easily be garnered through an e-form. Examples include customers calling to ask, 'Are they eligible for housing in Leicester?' 'How do they apply for housing in Leicester?' 'How do you bid for properties?'
- Enquiries that require an action from the allocated Housing Options Officer. These calls are triaged by the CSL officers, who then send referral e-mails to the allocated Housing Officer or the duty officer. Examples include customers calling to ask:

'What is happening with a housing application?' or 'What outstanding proofs are needed?'

All Tier 1 calls were channel shifted on 9th August 2017.

3.6 E-Communication

As part of Leicester City Council's Channel Shift Strategy, Housing are also introducing SMS (text) Messaging and Email Functionality. This will mean we can send emails and / or texts to customers automatically. For example

- Sending text reminders if a customer has missed a rent payment.
- Sending emails to housing applicants who have requested an adapted property when an adapted property becomes available.

Electronic communication allows organisations to save money on printing and postage costs while also communicating with customers quicker and more effectively.

4. Financial implications

The Housing Capital Programme for 2017/18 includes a budget of £1.5m for the implementation of the Northgate system, with a further £0.4m for Mobile Working.

As the report makes clear, channel shift supports efforts to reduce costs across the Council. The Housing Revenue Account currently makes a contribution of £0.7m towards the cost of the Customer Service Centre.

The roll-out of Universal Credit will mean that more regular communication with some tenants will be required, including prompts for the payment of rent. The use of email and text messages will facilitate this at minimal cost.

Stuart McAvoy – Principal Accountant (37 4004)

5. Legal implications

None

6. Equalities implications

The following groups of people may struggle to use online forms:

- People with a disability
- Elderly people
- People who do not speak English as a first language
- People who do not own IT equipment and / or have internet access
- People with other vulnerabilities

The following mitigating actions can be taken:

- All forms will be designed as simple and user-friendly as possible
- Suitable IT equipment is available in a range of locations (libraries, customer service centre etc.)
- Staff in the customer service centre (and other locations such as libraries) will be able to assist customers to use the online provisions

For the remainder of customers, they will still be able to use a range of service channels open for certain profiles of customer.