

People Select Committee

Scrutiny Review of Choice Based Lettings



Final Report

September 2015

People Select Committee
Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
Municipal Buildings
Church Road
Stockton-on-Tees
TS18 1LD

Select Committee membership

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Acknowledgements

The Committee would like to thank the following people for contributing to its work:

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Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report outlines the findings and recommendations following the People Select Committee's review of Choice Based Lettings (CBL). CBL is designed to give greater choice and transparency in the process of accessing social housing, by enabling applicants to 'bid' for advertised properties to which they are suitably matched. It has been in operation in Stockton Borough since 2009, as part of a Tees Valley-wide scheme called 'Compass'.
- 1.2 There has been considerable change to the housing market and policy situation since CBL's introduction. Registered Housing Providers are experiencing varying demand for their housing stock at the same time as demand for private rented options is rising significantly. Varying demand is affecting the number of times a void property is offered to new tenants and the void-to-re-let timescales.
- 1.3 The Tees Valley partnership is reviewing the scheme and the Committee's work will inform Stockton Council's response to this wider review following Cabinet consideration. The review is focussing on the operation of the bidding system and marketing aspects of CBL and not the Common Allocations Policy.
- 1.4 The Committee has considered the proposals to improve the bidding system and has reviewed the wider issues facing the sector. The Committee feels that overall there is a need to improve the approach to promoting social housing. This would help to ensure best use of the housing stock and assist the local authority in meeting its housing duties.
- 1.5 The Council will need to continue to monitor the fair application of the Common Allocations Policy for which it retains responsibility, and ensure the wider CBL scheme remains effective should the housing market develop further.
- 1.6 The Committee recommends:
 1. **a) that the changes to the bidding process be supported (outlined at 4.32)**
 - b) that enhanced auto-bidding be rolled out as soon as possible to ensure that those people without internet access are not disadvantaged**
 2. **that the Compass Partnership Steering Group should continually review the website and marketing of the Compass scheme, and in particular:**
 - a) to improve the range of information provided with each property advert (for example, floor plans and greater use of photographs)**
 - b) to ensure potential applicants are aware of the availability of social housing, and also the ability to 'under-occupy' (subject to housing needs of other applicants and individual financial assessment).**
 - c) to ensure the bidding system remains user friendly and in line with customer needs and expectations**
 3. **that Thirteen Group as a key housing partner, continue to work to improve the attractiveness of the social housing offer. This should involve ensuring potential**

customers are aware of possible packages of support prior to bidding (for example, furniture or decoration incentives)

- 4. that to continue to ensure an effective and transparent allocations process, the planned assurance work by SBC Housing Services be supported, and that People Committee receives a progress report within six months of the implementation of the new bidding process.**

Introduction

- 2.1 This report outlines the findings and recommendations following the People Select Committee's review of Choice Based Lettings (CBL).
- 2.2 CBL is designed to give greater choice and transparency in the process of accessing social housing. It has been in operation in Stockton Borough since 2009, as part of a Tees Valley-wide scheme called 'Compass'.
- 2.3 There has been considerable change to the housing market and policy situation since CBL's introduction. Registered Housing Providers are experiencing varying demand for their housing stock at the same time as demand for private rented options is rising significantly. Varying demand is affecting the number of times a void property is offered to new tenants and the void-to-re-let timescales.
- 2.4 The Tees Valley partnership is reviewing the scheme and the Committee's work will inform Stockton Council's response to this wider review following Cabinet consideration.
- 2.4 The joint review – and the Committee's work - is not proposing changes to the sub-regional Common Allocations Policy (this informs how applicants are prioritised within CBL according to their housing need). The review is focussing on the operation of the bidding system and marketing aspects of the scheme.

Background

- 3.1 Historically, social housing was allocated via a points-based system. Applicants were awarded points according to their level of need, and then individual allocations were made by officers taking into account where clients were on the list.
- 3.2 This method was widely seen as being bureaucratic and did not lend itself to transparency. This led to the development of choice based lettings schemes.
- 3.3 By contrast to the traditional methods, one of the main principles of CBL systems is that there should be a presumption towards openness. CBL schemes give people more choice in where they want to live by allowing people to apply (or 'bid') for advertised social housing vacancies. Applicants are allowed to see the full range of available properties and can apply for any to which they are suitably matched. Information on each property and the results of bidding cycles should be provided to all applicants.
- 3.4 Housing authorities are still required to ensure that reasonable preference is extended to certain categories of applicants, for instance those who are homeless or who have medical need. Existing CBL schemes generally provide for this by placing applicants into priority 'bands'.

- 3.5 The theory underpinning CBL is that it creates more stable communities by giving people a choice and a stake in where they want to live. In turn this will lead to higher numbers of satisfied tenants who pay their rent, stay longer and look after their homes.
- 3.6 Property labels can be attached in order to make best use of housing stock; for example, only families may be entitled to bid for 3-bedroom houses. Property labels can also be used to give effect to local lettings plans. These plans can be implemented, after due consultation, in order to attract people of a particular description into a certain area and to encourage balanced and sustainable communities; for example, to lower the proportion of older children/young adults on an estate.
- 3.7 In 2002 the Government set out its targets for all authorities to offer Choice Based Lettings by 2010. In 2006-7, the Housing and Community Safety Select Committee examined the options for introducing choice based lettings as the new method of allocating the majority of social housing.
- 3.8 The Committee noted that although CBL had the potential to encourage the participation of a wider range of housing providers, through the involvement of private landlords for instance, it was made clear that on its own CBL should not be seen as a solution to the lack of social housing provision that was apparent at the time.
- 3.9 The Committee at the time found that the benefits of CBL could be summarised as follows:
- simplicity and increased transparency. The existing system was cumbersome and driven by officer decisions
 - opportunities for efficiency savings
 - potential for reductions in void times and consequent loss of rent
 - potential for reductions in tenancy turnover
 - promoting empowerment as the process was driven by homeseekers themselves
 - CBL can be packaged as part of a wider housing options programme
 - creating a better understanding of where people want to live than is allowed for under the previous system
- 3.10 The Committee recommended that the Council should adopt CBL, and to take it forward as part of a Tees Valley-wide scheme supported by the development of a joint Common Allocations Policy. This enabled a greater choice of property and a simplified method of moving between areas for applicants and existing tenants.
- 3.11 In 2008 Cabinet agreed to use CBL and enter a Tees Valley Sub-regional scheme.
- 3.12 Local authorities have a statutory responsibility to develop and maintain an allocations policy that Registered Providers must adhere to when managing and allocating their social housing stock. This is because local authorities have the statutory duty to meet housing need in their area and therefore must ensure that those persons as defined within statute are given reasonable preference in the allocation of social housing (Housing Act 1996 part VI).
- 3.13 Whilst local authorities maintain the Policy, the operation of the CBL scheme is in the main delivered by the Registered Providers, using a common IT system.
- 3.14 The main partners include:

- All five Tees Valley Local Authorities;
- Thirteen Group (including Tristar Homes, Housing Hartlepool, Erimus, Tees Valley Housing);
- Accent, Coast and Country, Endeavour, and Home Group.

Findings and Recommendations

- 4.1 Following its introduction, Choice Based Lettings has introduced greater transparency to the allocation of housing across the Tees Valley area.
- 4.2 The joint scheme is marketed as 'Compass' and has a single website to enable property adverts and bids to be placed. Access to computers and support to bid is available from varying locations including housing offices. Residents on the scheme can access options for social rent, mutual exchanges, low cost home ownership, and also accredited private rented property.
- 4.3 It is an achievement not always matched elsewhere that the Tees Valley has been able to work together to develop and sustain a sub-regional Common Allocation Policy.
- 4.4 Other regional choice based lettings schemes involve separate allocations policies in each local authority area which can increase the complexity for clients seeking housing across boundaries.
- 4.5 As of Quarter 1 2015-16, there were 19,821 applications on the system, ie. the number of people able to bid at any one time. The breakdown by Borough was as follows:

	Darlington	Hartlepool	Middlesbrough	Redcar	Stockton
Live Applications per area	1632	3390	6810	2939	5050

- 4.6 The main method of bidding is by using the website, although other methods are available:

Method of Bid	Quarter 1 (2014/15)	Quarter 2 (2014/15)	Quarter 3 (2014/15)	Quarter 4 (2014/15)	This Quarter
Autobid	3835	3349	3185	3277	2846
Call Centre	3889	3784	4438	3847	3594
Web	23033	21420	20225	24628	21920
Digi TV	78	78	34	24	32
CTI	6	(nb. no longer available)	-	-	-
Total	30841	28631	27882	31776	28391

- 4.7 The CBL system is based on a four band priority system with people in Band 1 having the most housing need, and Band 4 the least. The majority of housing lets were now being made to Band 4 customers (ie. no identified 'need').

4.8 Homelessness was increasingly being tackled by using a preventative approach, however if someone was statutorily homeless they would receive a Band 1 priority. Band 1+ was the highest possible priority and was allocated to people decanting from regeneration schemes. Band 1+ was only allocated at the time of the planned move from the current housing scheme.

4.9 The latest figures from Q1 2015-16 showing a breakdown of applicants by band is as follows:

Active Applications	Darlington	Hartlepool	Middlesbrough	Redcar and Cleveland	Stockton-on-Tees	Total
All bands	1632	3390	6810	2939	5050	19821
Band 1	193	321	427	301	421	1663
Band 2	315	594	605	568	501	2573
Total Reasonable Preference	508	915	1032	859	922	4236
% Reasonable Preference	31%	27%	15%	29%	18%	
Band 3	127	118	205	180	130	760
Applicants with a priority (Bands 1,2, 3)	635	1033	1237	1039	1052	4996
Band 4	997	2357	5566	1900	3996	14816

Challenges facing the local social housing sector / Compass

4.10 Since the introduction of Choice Based Lettings in the Tees Valley area, there has been significant change in the housing market and within housing policy, and this prompted the review. Issues include:

a) Welfare Reform

4.11 Registered Providers and local authorities have experienced low demand for certain types of accommodation in specific locations.

- 4.12 The under-occupation charge relating to housing benefit has impacted on the ability of people to afford homes with 'additional' bedrooms relative to the number of occupants, and so larger properties have become difficult to let.
- 4.13 There was a perceived misunderstanding amongst some clients that due to the under-occupation charge, they would not be eligible to apply at all for properties with extra bedrooms. Clients may still make applications for any number of bedrooms; however they would not receive financial support for any rooms deemed additional to the need of the household. The ability to proceed with a bid in these circumstances could be better promoted.
- 4.14 It should be noted that, irrespective of an applicant's ability to afford a larger property, if there is a household seeking the property that needs the number of bedrooms, they will always be given preference. Following the bidding process, if the property was still available the client willing to under-occupy would undergo a financial affordability test

b) Increasing competition from private rented sector

- 4.15 People accessing private rented accommodation are still able to draw housing benefit via the Local Housing Allowance scheme. Recipients of Local Housing Allowance are eligible to receive a certain amount of money towards housing costs; this is based on a fixed amount for a type of property in a given area and the size of the household.
- 4.16 The Private Rented Sector represents an increasingly attractive housing option. There has been a significant increase in local residents choosing to privately rent.
- 4.17 Although it is recognised that there is a minority of landlords who are either unaware of their legal responsibilities or a small minority of unscrupulous landlords who exploit vulnerable people, the majority are good landlords and the sector is increasingly attractive to many seeking housing, when compared to social housing. Private rented options can be more flexible and responsive to customer demand in terms of the rent being charged and bond requirements, and now often include furnishings not always included in a social housing package.
- 4.18 In Mandale and Victoria, Norton South, Parkfield and Oxbridge and Stockton Town centre the sector now accounts for in excess of 20% of properties. Recent changes in types of tenure are shown in the following table:

Area Name	Tenure - Private Rented (%)	Tenure - Private Rented (%)	Tenure - Private Rented (%)	Tenure - Rented from LA/HA (%)	Tenure - Rented from LA/HA (%)	Tenure - Rented from LA/HA (%)	Tenure - Owner-Occupied (%)	Tenure - Owner-Occupied (%)	Tenure - Owner-Occupied (%)
	2001	2011	2013	2001	2011	2013	2001	2011	2013
Hartlepool	8.3	18.2		18.1	15.5		71.7	65.3	
Darlington	7.4	14.8		26.6	23.5		63.0	60.3	
Middlesbrough	7.1	16.6		28.2	23.9		61.4	57.8	
Redcar & Cleveland	5.5	12.4		22.9	19.4		69.6	67.0	
Stockton	5.2	13.1		21.5	17.2		71.6	68.8	
Tees Valley	6.1	13.7		24.3	19.6		67.3	64.4	
North East	-			-			-		
National	8.8	16.7	18.0	19.3	17.6	17.0	68.7	64.3	65.0

- 4.19 The private rental market in Stockton is quite diversified. The market ranges from a number of 'accidental' landlords through to those with substantial portfolios.

c) Customer experience / advertising and bidding system

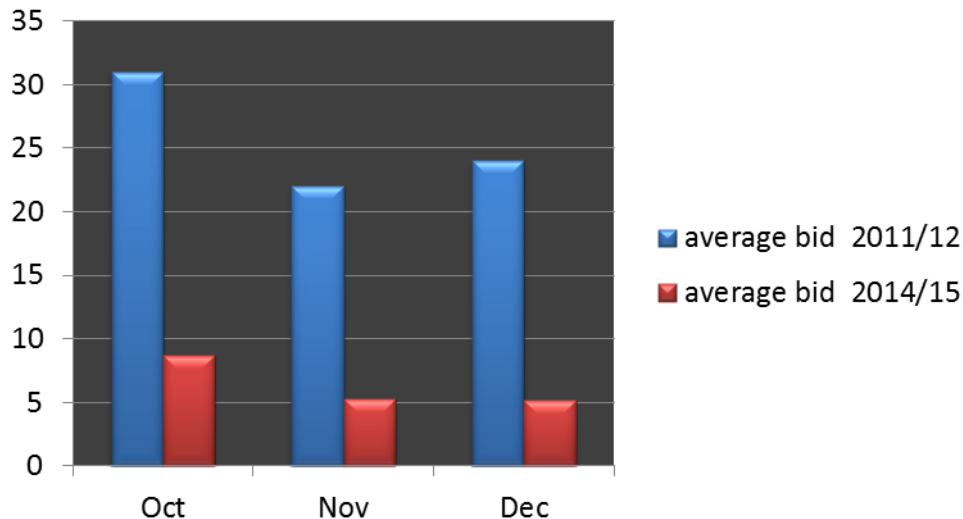
- 4.20 The website is the main portal through which applicants can view properties and make decisions over what properties to bid for. Compass has improved the website since the start of the review and this is detailed below. A key issue for the review is the amount of information given on each property and ensuring this is in line with best lettings practice and to ensure that clients have all the information they need to make an informed and realistic choice of property.
- 4.21 Before being able to bid, clients must complete an application form. Thirteen Group representatives reported that this process could be made more user friendly and that they would be seeking to address this.
- 4.22 Properties are added to the system on a weekly basis. Clients are currently allowed up to three bids per weekly cycle (they can withdraw bids if necessary during a cycle). 'Auto-bidding' on a client's behalf is currently an option only to assist customers who have difficulty accessing the system and are seeking very specific property.
- 4.23 For most clients, there is a need for them to proactively review the available properties on a weekly basis and manually make a bid.
- 4.24 The website shows applicants where their bids stand in comparison to other bids and this gives them an indication of how likely they are to be successful. However their ranking may change between the time of their bid and the closure of the bidding cycle as other applicants place or remove bids.

d) Increasing void rates and re-let times are affecting Registered Provider Business Planning

- 4.25 The Committee noted that the social housing sector was coming under increasing pressure. Difficult-to-let homes lead to greater void (or empty) periods when no rent is being paid.
- 4.26 In addition, the business plans of Registered Providers would be affected by the 2015 Budget. The Budget contained a 1% reduction in rent rates for Providers, whereas the Providers business plans had been based on an assumption of a 1% increase in rental rates.
- 4.27 Thirteen Group are the largest housing provider in Stockton Borough, and provided Members with information on how these issues were affecting them. In summary this was as follows:
- reduced demand overall but with local variations
 - increased number of larger homes that are not seen as affordable
 - an evolving customer base and need to target new groups
 - a need to consider the price in some areas
 - continued development of new homes.

4.28 Changes in the usage of the Compass system clearly demonstrate the issues outlined at a) to d). As of December 2014, 3% of registered customers were not bidding for properties, and the total number of bids made on the system per quarter had reduced by 42% between the high point of 2010 compared to 2014.

4.29 In 2012 there was an average of 20 – 30 bids per 3-bed property and this has reduced to between 5 – 9 bids in 2014:



4.30 Thirteen Group's Tenant Scrutiny Panel has reviewed the operation of the CBL scheme from the customer's point of view, as part of an in-depth report into the accessibility and marketing of Thirteen Group's services. The conclusions are in line with the Committee's review and the Tenant Panel made a series of recommendations:

- marketing of Thirteen Group and its other services
- promoting our housing options and empty properties
- improving the customer outlets
- promoting what Thirteen do to young people
- communication with customers
- improving our website offer
- improving our social media offer

Bidding Process

4.31 In order to begin to address these challenges the Compass partnership has reviewed the bidding process to make it more responsive. Work has also taken place to improve the website and marketing and these were considered by the Committee.

4.32 Relating to the bidding process, Compass proposed the following changes:

1. Enable a property to be added to the Compass scheme any day of the week. This will reduce delays in waiting to advertise a property that becomes available and should lead to quicker re-let times, therefore reducing rent loss.
2. To advertise properties for one week or longer (if no one has bid) until a bid has been received.

3. After a week's advertising cycle the landlord has the facility to end and allocate the property if there is a customer interested for an immediate offer of accommodation, meeting the policy and property criteria.
4. Allow customers to make unlimited bids for available properties to maximise their chance of qualifying for a property. This will remove the current three bid restriction (nb. following the consultation it is now being proposed to cap bids at ten per client).
5. Take details of customers' areas of choice to enable an auto bid function for any properties not being advertised for a full week to ensure no one waiting on this area or property type will miss out on an offer. The current areas that applicants can choose from will be reviewed where necessary and larger areas will be divided up to allow applicants more choice. In addition applicants will be able to choose more than three areas of choice when making their housing application, although they will still be able to specify their first, second and third preferred areas. Applicants will also still be able to bid on properties that they are not directly matched to.
6. In specific circumstances, some immediately available properties may be advertised on the system allowing for an immediate allocation by triggering an auto bid facility. This means that everyone registered on the system requesting this area and property type will be put forward for the property within a priority order without having to make a bid themselves. The text on the property advert will clearly state any properties that may be advertised for less than a week's bidding cycle.

It should be noted that:

- a) any decision about an unreasonable refusal will only apply to manual bidders and not for automated bid matching.
- b) Efficiencies will derive from the new way of working and improved information and advice will be offered to applicants. Advice and assistance will be available at the front end of the process to avoid confusion with applicants.
- c) Applicants will, however, need to be advised to check the Compass website more often to see when new properties are added during the week. However, the majority of properties will be continue to be advertised on the traditional bidding cycle (currently Thursday to Tuesday).

- 4.33 The Compass Partnership undertook consultation on these proposals to change the bidding process during July/August 2015.
- 4.34 The results are outlined at **Appendix 1** and show broad approval for all the proposals. The Partnerships has subsequently proposed to limit the number of bids to ten per clients thereby ensuring more choice whilst ensuring the scheme is manageable to administer (particularly in relation to auto-bids).
- 4.35 The enhanced auto bidding would be piloted initially and rolled out following the completed updating of the records of all those in housing need. The Committee was reassured by Thirteen Group that the appropriate resources would be allocated to this task, and the ongoing issue of administering the new system.
- 4.36 Compass Partner organisations will contact all existing applicants to gather more information on client preferences to enable the extended auto-bid function outlined above. Clients will be able to request particular estates, with other appropriate detail

being added to the system. This information will also provide Partners with a better overview of the demand for types and location for housing.

Marketing and Promotion

- 4.37 As part of work to refresh the CBL system, the website interface has been revamped. The Committee were able to compare it with the previous version. The revised Compass website homepage is as follows:


- 4.38 The site has an improved property search facility and Thirteen representatives state that this has been positively received.
- 4.39 On the Compass site, each property advert has space for photographs of the outside of the property and some from inside where applicable (nb. photographs are not universally used), facilities in the property and cost. There are links to: local NHS services, schools, children’s centres, volunteering opportunities, and the Local Housing Allowance Rates for that area for comparison.
- 4.40 An extract from a sample advert is shown below (photos not shown). There remains an opportunity to improve these further.

Social Housing

Tristar Homes

Closing date: 25/08/2015

Added: 20/08/2015



P **FT**

Main details

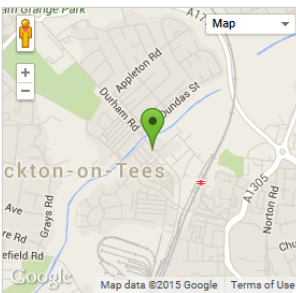
Void Reference: 00053659

Property Reference: 93968

Area: Primrose Hill

Accommodation type: 2 Bed

Property type: House



Cost

Rent: £97.68

Payment: Weekly (52 weeks)

Total cost: £97.68

Facilities

Pets Permitted: Yes

Garden type: Rear Yard

Parking facilities: On street parking

Bathroom facilities: Bathroom with shower over bath

Heating type: Gas radiator heating

Eligibility details

Family Type: Yes

Accommodation: 2

Min Bed: 2

Minimum household member age: 0

Max Bed: 3

- 4.41 The website has been refreshed and is more user friendly but more can always be done. Other lettings operations now commonly use floor plans for example, and more extensive, consistent use of images.
- 4.42 Mutual exchange is the process whereby tenants can advertise their property as being available to swap with another tenant on the scheme. This is more efficient than two existing tenants applying for properties in the preferred locations via the standard bidding process, and potentially creating a void period in the process.
- 4.43 The search facility clearly indicates which properties are available under this function, and allows tenants to highlight the key points and also what type of property they are looking to exchange into. Efforts to continue to promote mutual exchanges are therefore encouraged.
- 4.44 Some properties available through the Compass scheme are now also advertised on Rightmove. This brings the property to a wider audience and is particularly used to advertise larger properties.
- 4.45 The use of Rightmove has been as part of a package to increase awareness of availability in some areas; for example community open days have taken place. Although some areas of the Borough, for example parts of Thornaby, continue to have high demand for types of social housing, the changes in demand towards smaller properties and other competition does now mean that providers have housing available where this would not previously have been the case, and which may now be available

to people without a reasonable housing need (ie. Band 4 applicants).

- 4.46 As noted above, it is possible for people to bid on properties that they would be 'under-occupying' subject to affordability, and Members understand there remains a belief that residents must be on some form of welfare before they are eligible for social housing.
- 4.47 The Committee believes that some form of 'mythbusting' promotional work should be undertaken to tackle these issues and ensure that residents already on the scheme are aware of the full range of choice open to them, and to make more people not on the Compass scheme aware of social housing as a viable housing option.

Incentivising the uptake of social housing

- 4.48 One of the key issues facing prospective tenants is affordability; this is not only in terms of rent but the costs relating to setting up a home. This includes decoration, white good and furniture requirements.
- 4.49 Aside from the possible inconvenience of undertaking significant work to a new home if decoration is needed, the Committee recognises that these can present real challenges to local people. The inability to pay for white goods up front can often lead to the use of rent-to-own or pay day loan companies, and paying the associated high costs. This can lead to real issues relating to financial exclusion and debt; these were explored in depth in the previous review of Welfare Reform and Financial Inclusion (see <http://www.egenda.stockton.gov.uk/aksstockton/images/att22857.pdf> for full report).
- 4.50 Prospective tenants may find alternative provision in the private rented sector a more attractive option, meaning a less expensive and smoother transfer into a new tenancy.
- 4.51 There are therefore potential gains to be made by improving the attractiveness of individual properties, particularly but not limited to hard-to-let areas. Thirteen Group do offer incentives for some clients, however these are generally discussed with local housing Patch Officers, after the completion of the bidding process. There appears to be scope to promote the possibility of incentives in a better way, whilst ensuring a personalised approach continues.
- 4.52 This could involve directly providing support to access furniture and white goods, improved decoration packages, or help to access support packages provided by other organisations including the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE).

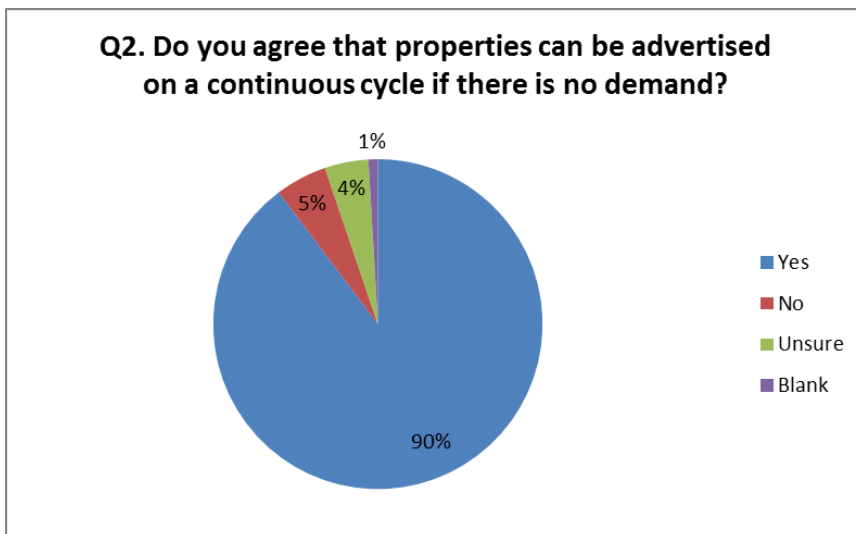
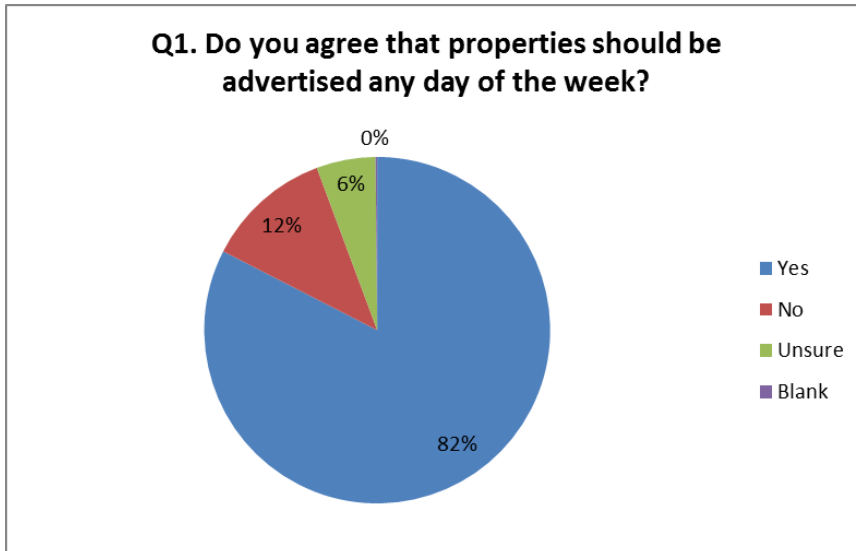
Conclusions

- 4.53 Choice Based Lettings has introduced welcome transparency to the allocation of social housing. The Tees Valley scheme is a model of good joint working practice and provides a consistent method of accessing housing across the sub-region.
- 4.54 Various factors have combined to affect demand for social housing, and it has become necessary to review the main method of advertising and allocating properties. The Committee has considered the proposals to improve the bidding system and has reviewed the main issues facing the sector.

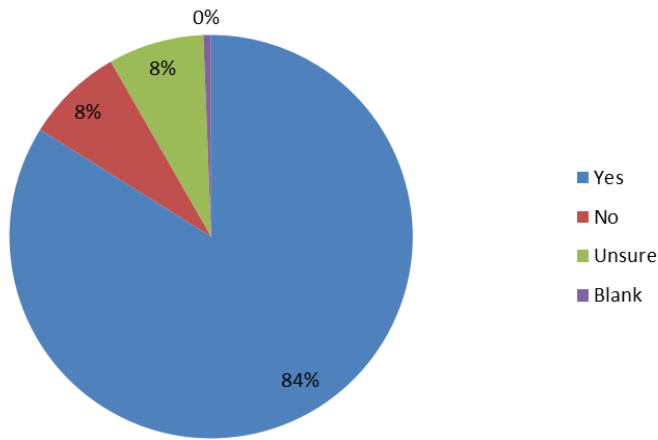
- 4.55 The Committee feels that overall there is a need to improve the approach to promoting social housing. This would help to ensure best use of the housing stock and assist the local authority in meeting its housing duties.
- 4.56 The amendments to the system will see an increase in automatic bidding on behalf of tenants and greater involvement for the operational teams. The Council will need to continue to monitor the fair application of the Common Allocations Policy for which it retains responsibility.
- 4.57 In addition, the potential for housing market and interest rate changes, particularly those that may affect the availability of private rented accommodation, could impact on demand for social housing and the system must be able to adapt to changing circumstances.
- 4.58 Therefore Members request a report back from the Compass partnership following the implementation of the changes, and support the assurance work planned by the Housing Options Team.

Appendix 1 Consultation Results

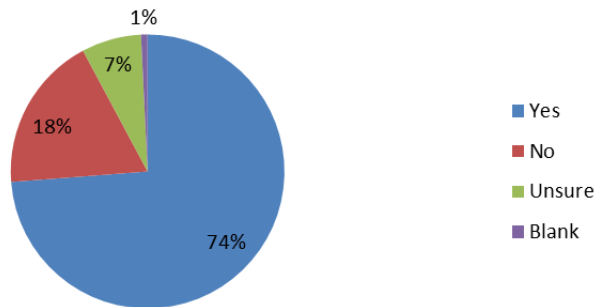
There were 652 respondents to the questionnaire promoted through the main Compass website.



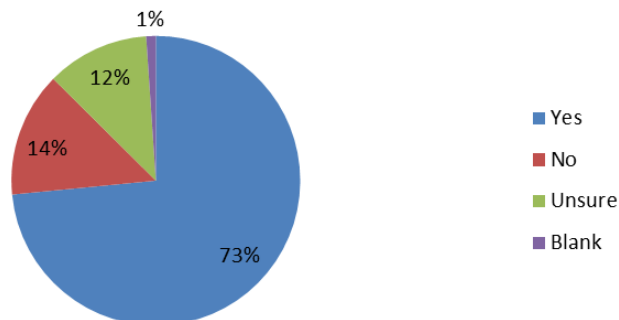
Q3. Do you agree that when a property has been advertised for a week and there have been no bids that landlords can allocate to the next customer who meets the criteria?



Q4. Do you agree that the restriction on the number of bids you can place (currently 3) should be removed so customers can bid on as many available properties as they wish?



Q5. Do you agree that customers should be asked to provide more detail on all their areas of choice and property requirements so that an automatic bid can be triggered and therefore ensuring that they do not miss out on an offer of accommodation?



Q6. Do you agree if a property is immediately available to let that the landlord can make an immediate allocation by creating a shortlist directly from Compass using the automatic bid facility as described in question 5

