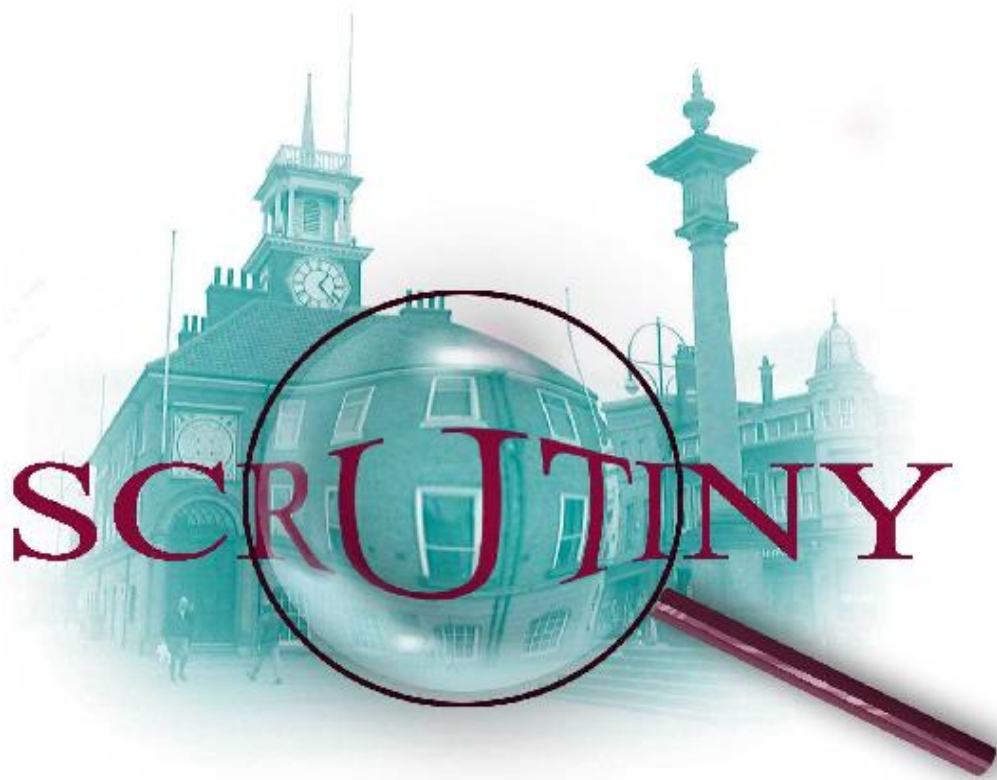


**Housing and Community Safety
Select Committee**

**The Development of Choice Based
Lettings**



March 2007

Housing and Community Safety Select Committee
Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
Municipal Buildings
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HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY SELECT COMMITTEE – MEMBERSHIP

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Councillor Mrs Roberts (Vice-Chair)

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- Tim Monkhouse, Housing Services Manager, Tristar Homes Ltd
- Eileen Fletcher, Allocation and Initiatives Manager, Tristar Homes Ltd
- Julia Kett, Tees Valley Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings Co-ordinator
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- John Urwin, Manager, Your Choice Homes, Your Homes Newcastle
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Foreword

The Government White Paper “Strong and Prosperous Communities” sets a target for all local authorities to offer a Choice Based Letting Scheme by 2010. Much of the detail of such a scheme is enshrined in legislation but there are some areas where authorities have discretion in their policies and these have been the subject of much debate within the committee. This report presents our recommendations.

It is our sincere hope that the work carried out will contribute to greater and improved choice for our residents seeking social housing in the future.

We are very grateful for the advice and assistance given by Erimus Homes and Your Homes Newcastle who invited us to visit them and showed us how their schemes operate.

We thank the committee members who gave so much time and commitment to this review. Also Judith Trainer and Peter Mennear from the Scrutiny Team who gave so much support and carried out a lot of research on our behalf.



Councillor Alison Trainer
Chair



Councillor Julia Roberts
Vice-Chair

Original Brief

1. Which of our strategic corporate objectives does this topic address?

Liveability:

Housing SIP Objectives

1. Determine the current and future housing needs of the Borough.
5. Meet the housing needs of those that are vulnerable or have special needs.

2. What are the main issues?

To respond to the national agenda for Choice Based Lettings and to look at the options for delivering such a policy in Stockton-on-Tees.

3. The Thematic Select Committee's overall AIM in doing this work is:

To assist with the development of a choice based lettings Policy in the Borough as part of the development of a sub-regional CBL Scheme.

4. The main OBJECTIVES are:

To examine the opportunities offered by CBL and how they might apply locally.

5. The possible OUTPUTS (changes in service delivery) are:

A new CBL Policy to replace the existing Allocations system, and the mechanisms needed to implement and finance such a policy.

6. The desirable OUTCOMES (benefits to the community) are:

Increased choice and transparency in the lettings process.

7. What specific value can scrutiny add to this topic?

Detailed consideration of issues and recommendations on a local approach.

8. Who will the panel be trying to influence as part of their work?

Cabinet

1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 Choice-based lettings (CBL) is a new method of allocating social housing. 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. 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'.
- 1.2 The recent Local Government White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, re-stated the Government's target for all local authorities to offer choice-based lettings schemes. The Government aims to "[meet] our target for all local authorities to offer choice-based letting schemes to their tenants by 2010, and finding ways to extend the scheme to cover all social housing, shared ownership, low cost homes and private rented accommodation. Our long term aim is to widen the area from which people can choose housing so that it extends beyond the boundaries of their local authority, reflecting the fact that housing markets operate on a sub-regional or regional level."
- 1.3 The Housing and Community Safety Select Committee examined the subject over a 6-month period in order to determine how Stockton Borough Council should respond to the national agenda.
- 1.4 During the review the Committee noted that Stockton Borough Council's Housing Services and Tristar Homes supported the concept of CBL. The Committee undertook site visits to existing schemes in the region to gather evidence of best practice, and examined in detail the proposals for a Tees Valley sub-regional scheme. As the choice based lettings agenda is developing constantly, the Committee was able to take into account the latest Government research papers, including the proposed Code of Guidance for Choice Based Lettings.
- 1.5 The Committee concluded that choice-based lettings had advantages over the current method of allocating social housing in Stockton Borough and has the potential to deliver real benefits to residents; it represents a shift towards a much more customer focussed approach.
- 1.6 The Committee found that in relation to existing schemes in the North-East, considerable amounts of preparation had been undertaken in order to prepare for the introduction of choice based lettings. This included widespread consultation with key stakeholders and customers; a key element of this was to make sure that vulnerable groups were provided for. This was a key finding of the Committee and should be taken into consideration during work on delivering a scheme in Stockton.
- 1.7 During the course of the review, it became clear that due to the timescales of the Tees Valley sub-regional project, Stockton Borough Council's Cabinet would be required to make a decision in March 2007 on whether to give approval for Stockton's commitment to membership of the sub-regional scheme. The Committee recognise the additional benefits likely to be achieved through membership of a Tees Valley sub-regional scheme, and conclude that Stockton should give full commitment to the project.

- 1.8 The Committee has had the opportunity to set out the elements it wants to see in a CBL policy. Erimus' policy has in the main been adopted, with due reference to the recently proposed Code of Guidance. If all sub-regional partners agree to implement a common policy it is recognised that a process of consultation and negotiation will need to take place.
- 1.9 The Committee recognise the consensus opinion between partners that the delivery of the scheme should remain the responsibility of the individual authorities. During the course of the review, the Committee has examined best practice from existing schemes and believe the preferred option for Stockton Borough would be the creation of a one-stop shop approach. However, it is further recognised that a detailed study of all the options needs to be undertaken, and that this should include all financial implications and have due regard to the current and future shape of Council service provision, including the Access to Services Strategy.
- 1.10 During deliberations on the content of a CBL Policy, the Committee considered the wider implications of housing allocations. Unacceptable behaviour can result in an applicant being 'suspended' from CBL schemes for a defined period. However, the Committee believe that it is important to maintain tenancies wherever possible and therefore supported the view of Housing Services that a separate piece of work be undertaken in order to enable problematic households to modify their behaviour and successfully integrate into the community.
- 1.11 The Committee recommends that subject to detailed consideration of the financial and delivery options:**
- 1. in principle Stockton Council adopts a Choice Based Lettings scheme for allocating its property.**
 - 2. the Stockton Choice Based Lettings scheme is developed further in the context of the Tees Valley Sub-regional scheme; and that the necessary IT system is procured through the appropriate joint tendering exercise.**
 - 3. the sub-regional scheme is developed on the basis of a common overarching policy and the development of a Common Housing Register; and that the common policy be developed to reflect the features as set out in Appendix 1.**
 - 4. a detailed feasibility study be undertaken by Tristar Homes on the preferred option of a one-stop shop approach to deliver choice based lettings in Stockton Borough, taking full account of necessary expenditure, the qualitative and quantitative cost-benefits that will accrue, and with due regard to existing and proposed Council service provision; and that this should be examined by the Committee at the first meeting of municipal year 2007-08.**
 - 5. the Suspensions Policy in relation to the Choice Based Lettings scheme be based on the approach adopted by Erimus Housing, as set out in Appendix 2.**

- 6. other Housing providers in the Borough and sub-region be encouraged to participate in the Choice Based Lettings scheme.**
- 7. the possibility of introducing a sub-regional Disabled Persons' Housing Service be further investigated by the Tees Valley CBL partnership.**
- 8. a comprehensive consultation process is undertaken by Tristar Homes in order to provide both customers and staff with an understanding of the new scheme and to ensure ease of access for all once it is implemented.**

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 This report presents Cabinet with the findings of the review of Choice Based Lettings undertaken by the Housing and Community Safety Select Committee between September 2006 and February 2007. The topic was identified owing to the need for Stockton Borough to respond to the national housing agenda.
- 2.2 Choice-based lettings (CBL) is a new method of allocating social housing. 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.
- 2.3 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'.
- 2.4 The theory underpinning CBL is that it will create 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.
- 2.5 Traditional, points-based methods of allocating Council housing are now widely seen as being bureaucratic and they do not lend themselves to transparency. This can lead to suspicion surrounding the allocation of public housing; for some, there is still a perception that access to council housing depends on 'who you know'. By contrast, one of the main principles of CBL systems is that there should be a presumption towards openness; in practice this means social housing market data, information on each property and the results of bidding cycles should be provided to all applicants.
- 2.6 It is a Government target for all local authorities to operate CBL schemes by 2010, and for these schemes to include housing associations and the private rented sector. The Government also wishes to see CBL schemes developing at the sub-regional and regional level.
- 2.7 The Housing and Community Safety Select Committee decided to examine the issue in order to assist with the development of a choice-based lettings scheme in the Borough and to see how the Borough could respond to the development of a sub-regional Choice-based lettings scheme. An awareness of the importance of the impact of housing allocations upon settled communities was implicit throughout the review.
- 2.8 As the choice based lettings agenda is a relatively new policy area, it is constantly developing. The Committee were able to take into consideration the latest government research as the review progressed. This culminated in the Committee being able to examine the DCLG's recently published Choice Based Lettings' Code of Guidance. Similarly, it became apparent during the review that the Sub-regional agenda was progressing with a view to implementation in 2008; this meant that the Committee were able to examine this progress as it developed alongside the Committee's work.

3.0 Background

National Context

- 3.1 The concept of Choice based lettings was first developed in the Netherlands where it was known as the 'Delft Model'. The first scheme to start operation in the United Kingdom was launched by Harborough District Council in early 2000 and was known as Harborough Home Search.
- 3.2 Government CBL policy has its origins in the Housing Green Paper, *Quality and Choice – A Decent Home For All*, published in April 2000. Funding was provided for 27 pilot schemes.
- 3.3 Housing legislation has since been amended in order to make it more conducive to the introduction of CBL. Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002) requires authorities to include a statement in their allocation scheme about their position on offering choice to applicants; it also includes a provision allowing for the introduction of 'advertising schemes'. The accompanying Code of Guidance makes it clear that the Government is looking for policies to extend choice wherever possible. The requirement to provide for housing need remains, and therefore to extend reasonable preference to certain categories of people.
- 3.4 In 2002 the Government published targets for CBL:
- 25% of local authorities were required to have CBL in place by the end of 2005
 - 100% of local authorities are required to have systems in place by 2010
- 3.5 In January 2005, the former Office of Deputy Prime Minister published *Sustainable Communities: Homes for All*. This re-iterated Government commitment to choice-based lettings and extended existing targets to include the involvement of all social rented housing and the private rented sector, and for schemes to operate on the sub-regional/regional level. This was followed up in July 2005 by the announcement that £4 million would be made available to fund new sub-regional and regional schemes.
- 3.6 The recent Local Government White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, re-stated the Government's target for all local authorities to offer choice-based lettings schemes. The Government aims to " [meet] our target for all local authorities to offer choice-based letting schemes to their tenants by 2010, and finding ways to extend the scheme to cover all social housing, shared ownership, low cost homes and private rented accommodation. Our long term aim is to widen the area from which people can choose housing so that it extends beyond the boundaries of their local authority, reflecting the fact that housing markets operate on a sub-regional or regional level."
- 3.7 The Government sees several advantages to CBL:
- the empowerment of people to make decisions over where they want to live
 - a help towards creating sustainable communities
 - a more effective use of limited housing stock

- 3.8 The Government believes that sub-regional/regional schemes allow for further benefits to be realised as:
- they bring together larger pools of available housing, so easing localised problems of high demand through giving people a greater choice
 - they recognise existing housing and labour markets
 - they reduce the costs and complexities for Registered Social Landlords
 - authorities working together on one scheme can achieve economies of scale.

Local Context

- 3.9 Currently there is a points-based allocations system in operation in Stockton Borough. This system means that applicants for council housing are given a certain number of points according to their circumstances. Points are awarded to applicants in order to reflect their level of housing need, medical and social situation, and for the number of years spent on the register. When a suitable property becomes available, the applicant on the housing register with the most points is contacted by an allocations officer and offered the property.
- 3.10 Stockton Council determine the content of the Allocations Policy; staff from Tristar Homes interpret the policy and allocate properties accordingly. Demand for council housing remains high; currently there are 4879 applicants on the waiting list, with 739 applications received since January.
- 3.11 On behalf of its Tees Valley partners, Middlesbrough Council submitted a bid for a share of the sub-regional funding announced in July 2005. £105,000 was awarded in order to fund the development of a Tees Valley CBL scheme. Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council has been an active participant in the Tees Valley partnership since its inception. The Sub-Regional Partnership meets every 3 weeks and has appointed a Co-ordinator to work on behalf of partners in order to progress the agenda.
- 3.12 Erimus Housing is a key member of the partnership as it operates the Homechoice scheme in Middlesbrough; this is the only CBL scheme currently in operation in the Tees Valley.
- 3.13 On a wider regional scale, Newcastle City Council operates a CBL scheme which is managed on its behalf by Your Homes Newcastle (YHN). YHN is the Arms Length Management Organisation created in order to manage its Council housing stock. This set-up is therefore similar to the situation in Stockton Borough, where Stockton Council and Tristar Homes share responsibility for housing.

4.0 Evidence / Findings

Methodology

4.1 The Committee developed the scope and project plan in conjunction with a presentation from Caroline Wood (Housing Options Manager, SBC) and Tim Monkhouse (Housing Services Manager, Tristar Homes). This is detailed from paragraph 4.9 onwards.

4.2 Following receipt of this information, the project plan was agreed and incorporated the following key areas of work:

- Provision of background documents
- Site visits to schemes already in operation, namely Erimus Homechoice in Middlesbrough, and Your Choice Homes in Newcastle; and an examination of best practice and customer feedback from these schemes
- Written and oral evidence from Julia Kett, Tees Valley Sub-regional CBL Co-ordinator in order to examine the work of the sub-regional partnership
- Initial consultation with Council tenants and staff, led by Tristar Homes
- Attendance at meetings by representatives of SBC Housing Services and Tristar Homes in order to facilitate discussion on how Stockton could respond to issues raised as the review progressed

Written Material

4.3 A summary of the key documents considered by the Committee is as follows:

- Factsheet for Members: Allocation of Council Housing, SBC Housing Options
- *Sustainable Communities: Homes for All – A Strategy for Choice Based Lettings*, Office of Deputy Prime Minister
- *How to Choose Choice: Lessons from the first year of the ODPM's CBL Pilot Schemes*, ODPM
- *Implementing and Developing Choice-Based Lettings: A guide to key issues*, ODPM
- Briefing Papers produced by the Housing Quality Network
- Minutes of meetings and newsletter from Tees Valley Sub-regional Partnership
- *Monitoring the Longer-Term Impact of Choice-Based Lettings*, Department for Communities and Local Government
- *Tees Valley Sub Regional Choice Based Lettings Scheme: Feasibility Study*
- *Allocation of Accommodation: Choice Based Lettings – Code of Guidance*, DCLG. Consultation paper – however, the Committee was advised that it would be unlikely for there to be any substantive changes to the content.

4.4 Reference was also made to Erimus Housing current and draft amended CBL policies, and the lettings policy of Your Choice Homes.

4.5 At the mid-point of the review it was agreed that two pieces of work would be produced for the Committee's consideration.

4.6 The Housing Options Manager in conjunction with the scrutiny team produced a document demonstrating the options that were available to the Committee in terms of a CBL policy for Stockton. This document set out:

- The discretionary areas of policy
- Relevant extracts from Stockton's current allocations policy
- Evidence from Erimus Homechoice
- Evidence from Your Choice Homes
- Recommendations from Housing Options Manager (in line with the relevant extracts from the DCLG's proposed Code of Guidance)

4.7 Alongside this, Tristar Homes produced a document outlining the options available in terms of implementing a CBL policy. This set out various options for delivery with associated costs.

4.8 These two documents were then used to formulate the recommendations of the Committee.

Evidence received from Caroline Wood (Housing Options Manager – SBC) and Tim Monkhouse (Housing Services Manager – Tristar Homes)

4.9 This consisted of a presentation and discussion to set the subject into context and to inform decisions made relating to the scope and project plan.

4.10 The Committee were informed that by late 2006, 90 local authorities were operating CBL schemes, and that this equated to 20% of all housing authority lettings.

4.11 There are a number of key principles common to all CBL schemes and these include:

- The advertising of properties
- The provision of housing market and property information in order to enable customers to make informed choices. This includes labelling a property
- The initiative being taken by the customer through the process of making a 'bid' for homes (ie. expressing a preference)
- The ranking of bids according to published and transparent policies
- The provision of feedback and 'prospects' on demand to ensure that customers can see that the system is fair and transparent
- No penalties to be applied for refusal of properties

4.12 Notwithstanding the existence of Government targets, it was the view of both Housing Services and Tristar Homes that the choice-based lettings agenda offers numerous advantages for both tenants and applicants for social housing. These potential benefits are summarised as follows:

- Simplicity and increased transparency. Current system is cumbersome and driven by officer decisions
- Efficiency savings
- Reductions in void times and consequent loss of rent

- Reductions in tenancy turnover
 - CBL promotes empowerment as process is driven by homeseekers themselves
 - CBL can be packaged as a wider housing options programme
 - A better understanding of where people want to live than is allowed for under the current system
- 4.13 The Committee noted that there is still an element of control within a CBL system. Local lettings plans can be introduced in order to attract customers of a particular description; for example, property adverts can be labelled in order to specify who is entitled to bid for a property.
- 4.14 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.
- 4.15 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.

Evidence recieved from Chris Joynes (Assistant Director - Erimus Housing)

- 4.16 The Committee undertook the planned site visit to Erimus Housing in October, and combined this with speaking to Chris Joynes, Assistant Director. Members were able to take the opportunity to witness the operation of a CBL property shop in operation, and also to observe the work of the team of staff who were located in the back office area. Members were provided with copies of marketing material, including customer information packs; the Homechoice website was demonstrated by staff from Erimus, and Members were able to gain an understanding of how customers bid for property.
- 4.17 'Homechoice' is the brand name for the CBL scheme in Middlesbrough. At the time of the Committee's visit, the scheme had been in operation for 10 months. Allocations have been centralised using a 'one-stop shop' approach. A Property Shop has been established and is situated in central Middlesbrough near the main shopping precinct.

4.18 Erimus Homechoice Property Shop, Middlesbrough



4.19 The Homechoice property shop has the appearance of an estate agent, with adverts placed in the window and a bright, airy appearance. It took a considerable amount of time to first find a suitable town-centre location, and then to refurbish the premises. The CBL team are based alongside the homeless and housing options teams.

4.20 The CBL team consists of 6 full-time members of staff working at an operational level, including one member of staff that specialises in vulnerable applicants accessing the scheme.

4.21 The Committee found that Homechoice used various marketing methods. Adverts are placed in the Evening Gazette property section, the Homechoice website and in the Homechoice property shop. A list of empty properties is available on request from Homechoice and the area housing offices. This list is also posted to vulnerable customers every fortnight e.g. people that are elderly and/or housebound. The properties are advertised alongside local information that help customers form an informed opinion; for example, information on local schools and amenities.

4.22 Adverts in Homechoice Property Shop window



- 4.23 Applicants are encouraged to consider properties across the whole of Middlesbrough. Bids can be placed through the website or by a bidding coupon. Once received, the number of bids and their ranking is displayed in 'real time' on the Homechoice website and so people can see exactly where their bid is placed at any time. When first developing the website, Erimus listened to customer feedback when producing the electronic system.
- 4.24 Erimus Homechoice operates a banding system in order to differentiate between customers with different housing needs. Further details of this and the bidding process are set out in the policy details in Appendix 4.
- 4.25 Erimus' web-based ICT system is supplied by Comino, who also supply Erimus Housing's housing management system, Saffron. The initial cost to set up the system amounted to £20,000. After a workable system was developed, it was then presented to residents to gain their approval, as part of a consultation exercise.
- 4.26 The Committee found that Homechoice was also advertising 50% of other available RSL properties eg Endeavour, Accent are advertised through the CBL scheme. There are also moves to involve the private sector. This brings the benefits of a wider choice of housing for customers, and landlords gain from a wider client base and verification checks on applicants. A sub regional seminar with private landlords was arranged for early 2007.
- 4.27 Middlesbrough Council contracted out its homeless and housing advice function to Erimus in 2004. They provide funding for 5 homelessness officers. Plans exist to merge the homeless and CBL teams. The aim is to prevent homelessness by presenting people with a range of options and for one staff member to deal with a problem from the beginning to resolution. There is an emphasis on prevention and now each homelessness officer is dealing with 18 cases.
- 4.28 Shelter and the Housing Corporation approve of Erimus' work and hold it as an example of best practice. Erimus also work alongside the Shield Project in Middlesbrough. This project aims to reduce anti-social behaviour in the private rented sector and so help to stem the re-housing cycle.
- 4.29 The registration process is designed to flag up any potentially vulnerable customers. On both the paper-based and web-based versions of the registration form there are 'trigger questions' that allow the team to highlight potential issues. Support agencies have been trained to use CBL in order to help support people when they make bids.
- 4.30 The Committee noted that Erimus run a Disabled Person's Housing Service (DPHS) alongside the general CBL scheme. Applicants indicating special needs are directed for assessment by the DPHS; they are then either given support before being allowed to bid on the CBL scheme, or are directly matched to suitable supported accommodation or adapted properties.
- 4.31 The aim is to provide a one-stop shop for those with special needs. (Other support exists for people with drug induced problems, however there is an

officer within the CBL team who is trained and able to provide signposting in this respect.) The team at Homechoice is able to look at a range of options and pin point the best accommodation available, including the provision of supported housing.

- 4.32 When developing CBL, staff from Erimus gathered extensive evidence of best practice from elsewhere. Although modelled heavily on Bradford's version, it is a bespoke system for Middlesbrough. The development stage took around 12 months and involved 5 officers. This stage in the process was very resource intensive.
- 4.33 The Committee noted the consultation process that Erimus Housing had undertaken before Homechoice became operational. In the lead up to the launch of the scheme, all related agencies were contacted in order to alert customers about the new system. It was also acknowledged that Erimus has had to make significant efforts in changing the culture of the organisation away from the 'old', office-led method of operating, towards a more customer-focussed approach.
- 4.34 The Committee found that Erimus Housing had carried out a data cleansing exercise of the Housing Register a couple of months prior to the implementation of CBL. This involved sending letters to people on the Register to decide whether or not they would like to be part of the new CBL scheme. As a result of this exercise, the number of people registered reduced to 4,500 but this figure has now increased to 11,500. Homechoice engaged in significant marketing activity in order to raise awareness of the scheme and this helps explain the rise in the numbers of people applying to join the scheme, e.g. development of a web based system to reach a wider audience. However, it should also be borne in mind that the recent rise in inflation and interest rates could have resulted in more customers turning to social housing as they cannot afford to purchase or rent a property in the private sector. Approximately 9000 members are 'active' and bidding for properties.
- 4.35 The Committee noted that Homechoice conduct monthly customer satisfaction surveys. At the time of the Committee visit, the latest results showed 81% rating the scheme and the service they have received from staff as being 'very good' or 'excellent'.
- 4.36 On the old system of allocation there was no intelligence on 'dormant' clients, but now it is possible to see how often customers are taking advantage of the CBL system to bid for a house. Erimus were able to conduct a survey of non-active members. Reasons given for not 'bidding' included the lack of suitable properties but also 36% of respondents, mainly elderly, stated that they were unsure of the system. Although the system is web based, there is a provision for people to contact the office in person or by telephone to submit a bid on a property they are interested in. Using the results of the survey, Homechoice approached Age Concern to raise awareness of the scheme and to identify other routes to carry out training sessions with elderly people on how to access the scheme and the methods they can use to bid on available properties.
- 4.37 The Committee found that, so far, Erimus have not had any reported problems in terms of CBL allocations. The team works closely with the estate officers in order to highlight potential problems. If void properties are identified as being a potential source of anti-social behaviour (ASB), there is an option not to

advertise it through the CBL scheme, and to use direct letting management to provide tenants. For example, if there were a mainly private street with an empty 'Erimus' house and the possibility of a problem tenant, Erimus would listen to the estate information and make a judgement call on whether to advertise the property by CBL.

- 4.38 The Committee noted that Erimus Housing is a Registered Social Landlord and was created following the Large Scale Voluntary Transfer of Middlesbrough's council housing. It was acknowledged that Erimus would therefore have access to a wider range of funding streams than those available to Tristar Homes, and that this needed to be factored into the decision-making when looking at the delivery of a scheme in Stockton.

Evidence from John Urwin (Manager - Your Choices Homes) and Barbara Healy (Your Choice Homes Co-ordinator - Your Homes Newcastle)

- 4.39 The Committee visited the CBL scheme in operation in Newcastle, Your Choice Homes (YCH), in November. YCH operate a property shop situated in the city centre. Members were provided with copies of information for customers and were afforded the opportunity to look around the premises.
- 4.40 The Committee found Your Homes Newcastle administers the CBL scheme on behalf of Newcastle Council and the partner landlords. The Council control the allocations policy. Your Choice Homes was set up during a period of falling demand for council housing and with many voids. At present Your Homes Newcastle manage 32000 properties, the 10 year projection stands at 28000.
- 4.41 YCH decided to opt for a 'property shop' in a city-centre location. This involved moving the central office in the Civic Centre to the new location, and this helps to offset some of the cost. Once located, the premises were refurbished at a cost of £100,000, and there is a yearly rent of £60,000. It was acknowledged that Board members and officers needed convincing that these amounts of money (plus the potential marketing expenditure) were worth spending, and that longer term savings were likely. As there were not many pilot schemes at the time, it was necessary to make assumptions about the potential of choice based lettings. Ongoing marketing costs work out at approximately £3/4 per property advert.
- 4.42 These assumptions were justified within the first year of operation. Although initially re-let times increased as empty properties came back into circulation, this has since stabilised, and rent arrears fell by £1million. Other benefits that have since become apparent include an increased number of lettings, less voids and increased length of tenancies. The decrease in rent arrears has been ascribed to the improved verification of customers; this all helps to increase confidence in the system.
- 4.43 YCH initiated a two year consultation effort (including a 6-month pilot scheme) in the lead up to the launch of the scheme. This involved all stakeholders. An advisory group was set up to fulfil a dual role – consultation with existing and potential tenants. Your Homes Newcastle wrote out to all customers as part of this, and staff at housing offices etc were instructed to 'spread the message'.

- 4.44 All potential sources of information for the public were informed of the implications of CBL. For instance, doctors were brought into the process in order for them to be able to explain to people that applying for a low-level medical condition in order to 'get points' would not help them under the new system and to re-direct them to a housing office. It was necessary to make sure that everyone was providing the same type of information. A consultation strategy was produced in which each role was clarified.
- 4.45 Interaction with customers has continued since the scheme started; people are asked to fill out a survey every time they register and when they make a house move. YCH are looking at ways to reduce under-occupancy. An incentive scheme is being formulated to persuade people to move eg money towards moving costs, added preference under the scheme. There is a commitment to visit all tenants at least once a year; YCH aim to broach the subject during such visits to gauge reaction.
- 4.46 The property shop acts as the main marketing tool for YCH. Advertising of properties also takes place through the Evening Chronicle, local housing offices, partner RSL offices and voluntary sector organisations. The scheme is also web-based, information can be accessed and bids placed at the various kiosks dotted around the city (maintained by the Council) and all public access computers eg in libraries, as well as at home.
- 4.47 YCH decided to create a new brand in order to help create the image of a lettings agency rather than of a method of council house allocation. The City Council logo was not used in order to give equal weighting for all partners.
- 4.48 YCH Property Shop, Newcastle City Centre



- 4.49 The Committee found that when it first opened, the Property Shop attracted interest from all types of customer groups. People who would normally not necessarily have shown any interest in council housing were attracted to the scheme thinking it was any other lettings agency and were not put off when informed it was council housing. Customer behaviour is very similar to that expected in an estate agent, with the interest firmly on the properties available.
- 4.50 YCH received 3000 calls in their first week alone. Properties in high demand areas can attract up to 500 bids. To cope with demand, staff increased from 6 to 13. YCH regularly deal with 700 customers a week and aim to provide the same level of service at all locations: property shop, local housing office, partner landlords. Face to face and telephone contact is available as YCH feel

that a fully automated (ie. Internet-based) system does not provide for all customer needs. However, the website is the main point of contact for most people.

- 4.51 As part of the registration process, YCH carry out a verification check for personal identification, history of previous tenancies, and personal background, including crime and anti-social behaviour. There is a second stage of verification at the point of offer. Even if an ASBO etc turns up on a person's record, evidence of improving behaviour is acceptable. A code of guidance is used against which people's records are checked.
- 4.52 The Committee found that YCH operate a weekly bidding cycle and in order to provide for those in housing need, YCH apply time limited 'priority status' upon those in urgent need. Details of YCH policy can be found at Appendix 4, where they are included alongside the equivalent details from Erimus.
- 4.53 YCH operates a weekly bidding cycle. They feel that due to the amount of accommodation that they have, the weekly cycle makes sense in terms of re-let times. YCH have the view that moving to a daily cycle would depend very much on the advertising medium. Although it would be possible with a purely web-based system, any attempt to continue to advertise in the local paper for example would lead to a large increase in marketing costs. Also, a web-only system could lead to excluding certain sections of the community, without IT access and/or confidence with computers.
- 4.54 During registration process, YCH assess whether customers need a sponsor to help them through the process. The aim is to create strong links with the voluntary/community sector and to draw them into the process.
- 4.55 Although YCH are pleased that some properties can attract up to 500 bids, this does leave the possibility of 499 disappointed customers who still need housing. YCH believe that a housing options approach needs to be in place in order to step in at this point in order to prevent people from going down the homeless route. At present, the Council run a nearby housing advice centre; discussions have taken place regarding a one-stop shop approach but no decision has been taken as yet. Demand for social housing has risen and in particular there is a shortage of family accommodation. YCH regularly receive 400 bids for one 3 bedroom house.
- 4.56 The Committee found that Your Choice Homes are responding positively to the need to include partner housing providers. YCH involves the properties of 10 Registered Social Landlords and work is ongoing to ensure that 100% of RSL properties are advertised within the CBL scheme.
- 4.57 An accreditation scheme is in place for Private Landlords already and now a Private Landlord Forum has been incorporated into the process. There is a recognised need to get empty properties back into circulation. YCH are to provide investment in order to do this, and then YCH will act as their letting agent.
- 4.58 It is recognised that due to the nature of the housing market, landlords increasingly see their properties as a capital investment; therefore, they need reassurance that any investment will be protected before they join any CBL scheme. YCH aim to provide such assurance, for example re. anti-social

behaviour, by providing an effective verification check on the backgrounds of potential tenants.

- 4.59 Councils and housing providers are in the position to be able to provide information on sustainable areas in order for landlords to make an informed choice on where to invest in, and then rent out, properties. Wider involvement of private landlords would provide another element towards a fully comprehensive housing options approach. Private landlords have shown a willingness to provide 2-year tenancies if they can gain the reassurance they need. YCH are looking at rent guarantee schemes to help facilitate the process if it comes to fruition.
- 4.60 The Committee noted that YCH are also examining the possibility of entering into a sub-regional scheme; their potential partners are Sunderland, North Tyneside, South Tyneside and Gateshead. Talks are centred on making a bid in 2007 for money from the Government's development fund. A fully-inclusive housing options approach may emanate from this.

Evidence from Julia Kett (Tees Valley Choice-Based Lettings Co-ordinator - Tees Valley Sub-regional Partnership)

- 4.61 The Committee heard that the sub-regional partnership was created following a bid for central government grant funding in 2005. The ODPM made available £105,000 for the development of a sub-regional scheme in the Tees Valley with a view to implementation in 2008. Each partner made further, individual contributions totalling £45,000.
- 4.62 The Committee were informed that the following organisations made up the partnership:
- Middlesbrough Borough Council
 - Erimus Housing
 - Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
 - Tristar Homes
 - Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council
 - Hartlepool Borough Council
 - Housing Hartlepool
 - Coast and Country Housing
 - Darlington Borough Council
- 4.63 A steering group was set up and included representatives from the traditional RSL sector. In April 2006, Julia Kett was appointed as Sub-Regional Co-ordinator to work on behalf of the Tees Valley CBL Partnership.
- 4.64 Discussions had been ongoing throughout the year and the process had reached the stage of reviewing the potential for further progress. A comprehensive Feasibility Study had been produced to fulfil this purpose and had been distributed for consultation.
- 4.65 Members were informed that in the original bid submission to the Government it was stated that the Tees Valley scheme would proceed with a view to developing a common housing register and allocations policy. It was also noted

that if partners withdrew from the scheme, it is possible that the Government may withdraw some of the funding originally allocated.

- 4.66 It is possible to develop a common housing register and over-arching policy through consultation with each of the partners. It follows that if a common lettings policy was adopted, there must also be a common policy for 'suspending' applicants from the general CBL scheme for serious unacceptable behaviour. Local circumstances could be catered for through the development of local lettings plans; these shape the pattern of lettings within a specific, neighbourhood level area.
- 4.67 It would be possible to develop a sub-regional scheme purely on the base of shared IT procurement and with each authority operating individual policies. However, this would increase barriers to easy understanding of the scheme and would add considerable cost to the IT system.
- 4.68 The Committee were informed that with a sub-regional scheme would involve the procurement of an IT system. The likely central host for the system would be Erimus Homechoice as it is the only scheme currently in operation. However, it would be accessible by all partners, who would have the ability to upload property adverts and apply local criteria as and when required. It was possible to develop a system that would contain an over-arching policy but would have the facility to give effect to local lettings plans.
- 4.69 The Committee found that the projected cost of this IT system was £120,000. The Partnership had planned to investigate joint procurement with the Durham sub-regional partnership; the Northern Housing Consortium (NHC) had been in contact with a view to acting as a procurement conduit for both schemes. However, the Durham scheme needed to progress their scheme in January and Mrs Kett advised that the Tees Valley would therefore proceed alone if approval was forthcoming. It is still possible the NHC would act as the conduit for the Tees Valley alone.
- 4.70 A breakdown of the Sub-Regional financial situation can be found at Appendix 3. The Committee were informed that if approval was given for the sub-regional scheme, the estimated shortfall of £23,152 has already been built into the Housing Revenue Account for 2007-08. This would cover the projected cost of the necessary IT system.
- 4.71 The Committee had noted the operation of Erimus Housing's Disabled Person's Housing Service when the site visit to Erimus Homechoice took place. Further detail was forthcoming as part of the Feasibility Study and it was stated that the sub-regional partnership is exploring the possibility of developing this service through the sub-regional agenda. It was noted that Erimus' scheme is accredited by the National Disabled Persons' Housing Service.
- 4.72 The Committee heard that the sub-regional agenda was progressing at a rapid pace and it was probable that the governing bodies (Boards/Cabinets) of the partner authorities would be asked to give approval for full commitment to membership of a sub-regional scheme early in 2007.
- 4.73 The Committee were informed that when developing a CBL scheme it was important to refer to key documents. In particular, a recently published research paper produced by the DCLG, *Monitoring the Longer-term Impact of Choice*

Based Lettings. This document had been previously distributed for Members' attention and the main findings from this are summarised as follows:

- In general, applicants prefer CBL to the traditional approach
- Most lettings go to those with high needs
- Demand has risen, including demand for less popular areas
- BME lets have increased and more dispersed patterns of lettings
- Statutory homeless households have improved housing prospects
- Improvements in performance / more cost effective
- Improvements in tenancy sustainment
- Improvements in relet times – although 'already efficient' landlords are less likely to see any improvements
- Decline in refusal rates
- CBL costs more to administer, though mainly attributable to set up costs, which can be offset by savings accrued from improved housing management performance
- More work needs to be carried out with voluntary groups to ensure potentially disadvantaged groups are safeguarded

4.74 Since the Committee met with Julia Kett, the partners had had chance to discuss the contents of the Feasibility Study. The process is now at the point of awaiting approval from the various Boards/Cabinets for full commitment to the sub-regional scheme; if approval is forthcoming, procurement of an appropriate IT system can commence.

4.75 It became apparent that consensus opinion within the partnership was for each authority to retain individual control over front and back office functions ie. staffing and delivery of scheme in their area.

4.76 In January 2007, the Code of Guidance for Choice Based Lettings was issued for consultation by the Government.

4.77 The proposed Code of Guidance re-iterates the Government's desire to see CBL schemes operate on a sub-regional and regional level. It makes clear that there should be flexibility for regional partners to decide on the type of scheme they want; authorities may wish to retain their own individual allocation policy within a wider framework of operational support, or a single sub-regional scheme may be adopted. If individual policies are retained, it is strongly recommended that cross-boundary moves are facilitated.

4.78 Notwithstanding this, authorities are encouraged to look at the option of having a common policy across the sub-region in order to provide greater efficiencies, transparency and choice. If this option was taken the same allocation criteria must be applied across the sub-region, and if someone applies to the scheme they should be treated as applying to all the partner authorities.

Respect Agenda

4.79 During deliberations on the content of a CBL Policy, the Committee considered the wider implications of housing allocations. Unacceptable behaviour can

result in an applicant being 'suspended' from CBL schemes for a defined period.

- 4.80 As with any allocations policy, a CBL scheme has to comply with Part 6 of the 1996 Housing Act as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002. This removed the power for housing authorities to implement blanket exclusions of certain categories of applicants. In its place, authorities have the power to decide on whether individual applicants are unsuitable to be tenants as a result of serious unacceptable behaviour.
- 4.81 During the course of discussions on the content of Erimus' Suspension Policy (Appendix 2), it became clear that Housing Services were considering a response to the Respect Agenda; specifically, the need to enable problematic households to modify their behaviour. The Committee found that Housing Options service believed that it was important to work in conjunction with partnering agencies and service providers to tackle issues in the 'round' to make sure that tenancies can be maintained.
- 4.82 The Committee supported the intention of Housing Services to outline how Stockton will respond to the Respect Agenda with regard to assisting and enabling problematic households to modify behaviour and successfully integrate into the community who may otherwise have been prevented from accessing accommodation.

Consultation

4.83 Tristar Homes have undertaken the following consultation activities:

- Discussion with the Customer Liaison Group

The concept of CBL has been discussed at two meetings of this group. Erimus Housing have been represented at these meetings in order to give the operational perspective.

- Discussions with the Allocations Focus Group

Detailed discussions around the implementation of a scheme centred on the need to have a more efficient transparent way of running the allocations service.

Tristar report that initial views of customers are broadly positive and participants understood the difference between the current and proposed systems. Members of the Customer Liaison Group commented on how the lettings system seemed much fairer than the current method of allocations.

- Staff consultation

All allocations and voids staff have had 3 training sessions on the principles of choice-based lettings. Visits to existing schemes have taken place and it is intended that staff should be fully briefed if it is the intention to move to CBL, in order to provide answers to the questions that will inevitably arise from customers

- 4.84 Tristar plan to work with all stakeholders throughout the implementation stage if approval for the scheme is received.
- 4.85 The Committee noted that further events are planned for the near future. In particular, it is intended to hold 3 customer information events in April 2007; Stockton, Thornaby and Billingham are the proposed venues.

5.0 Conclusions

- 5.1 The Committee found that choice-based lettings was rapidly becoming the accepted method of allocating council housing nationwide. Government targets state that all authorities should have schemes in place by 2010. National research has shown that CBL has the capacity to deliver real benefits such as improved tenancy sustainment; however, housing authorities must work to ensure vulnerable groups are not excluded from the process.
- 5.2 The schemes already in operation in our region show high levels of customer satisfaction; by using a new, customer focused approach to lettings these schemes have stimulated renewed interest in social housing. Where problems arise, for instance through the lack of understanding surrounding the bidding process, it has been shown that it is possible to resolve these issues
- 5.3 The Committee concluded that choice-based lettings had advantages over the current method of allocating social housing in Stockton Borough and has the potential to deliver real benefits to residents; it represents a shift towards a much more customer focussed approach.
- 5.4 The Committee found that existing schemes in the North-East had undertaken considerable amounts of preparation in order to prepare for the introduction of choice based lettings. This included widespread consultation with key stakeholders; a key element of this was to make sure that vulnerable groups were provided for. This was a key finding of the Committee and should be referred to during work on delivering a scheme in Stockton.
- 5.5 It became clear that choice-based lettings is significantly different from the current officer-led allocations method. Existing schemes have had to make substantial efforts to maximise customer-awareness of the new way of working. The Committee found that a comprehensive consultation process would need to be in place during the period leading up to and actual delivery of any CBL scheme.
- 5.6 During the course of the review, it became clear that due to the timescales of the Tees Valley Sub-regional project, Cabinet would be required to make a decision in March 2007 on whether to give approval for Stockton's full commitment to membership of the sub-regional scheme. The Committee recognise the additional benefits likely to be achieved through membership of a Tees Valley sub-regional scheme, and conclude that Stockton should give full commitment to the project.
- 5.7 The Committee recognised that the Tees Valley partnership had looked at all the options for implementing a sub-regional scheme; however the Committee agrees with the original bid submission and that a sub-regional scheme should be developed on the basis of a common housing register and a common allocations policy. This would aid the drive towards simplicity and ease of use, and enable customers to access a wider range of housing, but would also have financial benefits by ensuring complexity in the IT system is kept to a minimum.
- 5.8 The Committee has had the opportunity to set out the elements it wants to see in a CBL policy. Erimus' policy has in the main been adopted, with due reference to the recently proposed Code of Guidance. If all sub-regional

partners agree to implement a common policy it is recognised that a process of consultation and negotiation will need to take place if all partners agree to implement a common policy.

- 5.9 It was found that it was advantageous to include other housing providers in CBL schemes, including private landlords and other registered social landlords, and that this can be achieved through membership of the sub-regional scheme.
- 5.10 The Committee recognise the consensus opinion between partners that the delivery of the scheme should remain the responsibility of the individual authorities. During the course of the review, the Committee has examined best practice from existing schemes and believe the preferred option for Stockton Borough would be the creation of a one-stop shop approach. However, it is further recognised that a detailed study of the available options needs to be undertaken, and that this should include all financial implications and have due regard to the current and future shape of Council service provision, including the Access to Services Strategy.
- 5.11 The Committee supported the intention of Housing Services to outline how Stockton will respond to the Respect Agenda with regard to assisting and enabling problematic households to modify their behaviour and successfully integrate into the community who may otherwise have been prevented from accessing accommodation.

6.0 Recommendations

The Committee recommends that subject to detailed consideration of the financial and delivery options:

1. in principle Stockton Council adopts a Choice Based Lettings scheme for allocating its property.
2. the Stockton Choice Based Lettings scheme is developed further in the context of the Tees Valley Sub-regional scheme; and that the necessary IT system is procured through the appropriate joint tendering exercise.
3. the sub-regional scheme is developed on the basis of a common overarching policy and the development of a Common Housing Register; and that the common policy be developed to reflect the features as set out in Appendix 1.
4. a detailed feasibility study be undertaken by Tristar Homes on the preferred option of a one-stop shop approach to deliver choice based lettings in Stockton Borough, taking full account of necessary expenditure, the qualitative and quantitative cost-benefits that will accrue, and with due regard to existing and proposed Council service provision; and that this should be examined by the Committee at the first meeting of municipal year 2007-08.
5. the Suspensions Policy in relation to the Choice Based Lettings scheme be based on the approach adopted by Erimus Housing, as set out in Appendix 2.
6. other Housing providers in the Borough and sub-region be encouraged to participate in the Choice Based Lettings scheme.
7. the possibility of introducing a sub-regional Disabled Persons' Housing Service be further investigated by the Tees Valley CBL partnership.
8. a comprehensive consultation process is undertaken by Tristar Homes in order to provide both customers and staff with an understanding of the new scheme and to ensure ease of access for all once it is implemented.

Appendix 1

Policy area	Policy recommendations
<p>1. Eligibility</p>	<p>Committee recommend people over the age of 16 should be able to join the scheme.</p> <p>However, any person/s under the age of 18 years should have a full housing need assessment completed to identify their support needs in conjunction with other agencies.</p>
<p>2. Verification and reference checks</p> <p>Committee believe this information should be collected upon application. This remains the same as current SBC policy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • proof of identification for everyone on the application to be housed • proof of address for everyone over the age of 16 years on the application • copy of current tenancy agreement if a private tenant • immigration status • previous/current rent arrears – all tenures • previous/current property damage –all tenures • Applicants or a member of the household to be accommodated with the applicant are subject of a current Acceptable Behaviour Contract for anti-social behaviour against other residents. • Applicants who since being accepted onto the Register, have themselves, or a member of the household to be accommodated with the applicant, been guilty of unacceptable behaviour, which is serious enough to make them unsuitable to be a tenant of the authority and would entitle the authority to a possession order, will have their registration cancelled. • relationship to any members of staff or board members
<p>3. Unsatisfactorily referenced applicants</p> <p>(See Suspension policy also)</p>	<p>If the verification checks are not satisfactory, the applicant may not be offered the property. In certain circumstances, the applicant may be offered the property, subject to specific conditions determined at the discretion of Tristar Homes Ltd (THL). THL may take into account the behaviour in question in determining priorities between applicants, rather than classing an applicant as ineligible after applying the 'Unacceptable Behaviour Test' as described in the Code of Guidance. This means that where more than one applicant has bid for a property and each have the same level of priority, the behaviour of the applicants may be used to choose between which one of them receives the offer of accommodation. THL will refer to the Suspension Policy in deciding whether to apply a suspension period, if the applicant is not offered the property on the grounds of their unacceptable behaviour. If an applicant is overlooked on the grounds of their previous unacceptable behaviour, s/he will be notified of the reasons in writing, together with an explanation of what action needs to be taken to remedy the situation.</p>

Policy area	Policy recommendations
<p>4. Prioritisation of applicants</p>	<p>Each person applying to become a member of the CBL scheme will have his or her housing needs and requirements assessed at the point of registration and will be placed in one of 4 bands, according to their level of housing need. Section 167(2A) of the Act allows allocation schemes to make provision for determining priorities in relation to applicant's who fall within the reasonable preference categories and any additional preference categories. The Code of Guidance published by the former ODPM outlines how allocation schemes should be framed to take into account reasonable preference categories. Since these categories can be cumulative, this scheme has been developed to account for multiple housing needs. Bands 1 – 2 have been split into (a) and (b) to account for multiple needs within the defined categories.</p> <p>Band 1 a) and b) – Applicants with homes subject to demolition through regeneration schemes. No time limit for this band Band 2 a) and b)– All other priority members of the scheme such as those who are homeless, living in unsatisfactory conditions, have medical need. Band 3 – Those with no urgent housing need. Includes those from broken relationships, intentionally homeless and non-priority homeless; these placed in band 3a). All others in 3b). Band 4 – Applicants from out of area with no urgent requirements; owner occupiers.</p> <p>Homeless applicants are given Band 2 status for initial period of 2 months. If no suitable property becomes available then this may be extended. If no bids have been made for available suitable properties, homeless officer will bid on applicant's behalf. The first successful bid will be offered to applicant and will count as the discharging of the statutory duty. If properties are refused for no good reason then priority status can be removed. Applicant moved to Band 3.</p>
<p>5. Reasonable preference ie. through placement in priority band 2.</p> <p>-extension of this to cover those with young family living in flats/maisonettes?</p>	<p>Committee recommend that Stockton should maintain individual choice and only extend reasonable preference to those who request it.</p> <p>Council's position to be finalised following discussion at sub-regional level.</p>
<p>6. Reasonable preference ie. through placement in priority band 2</p> <p>- extension of this to those with unborn children</p>	<p>Committee recommend that Stockton's policy of taking into account pregnancies from the 28 week stage should be retained.</p> <p>Committee recommend that Stockton's policy of including within the assessment shared parenting when the child resides there for 3 nights or more, be retained.</p> <p>Council's position to be finalised following discussion at sub-</p>

Policy area	Policy recommendations
- children with shared parentage	regional level.
7. Reasonable preference ie. through placement in priority band 2 – age of children sharing bedrooms	Stockton currently states that children over the age of 8 should not be expected to share bedrooms with anybody of the opposite sex. Council's position to be finalised following discussion at sub-regional level.
8. Advertising of properties	Stockton should adopt a weekly bidding cycle. This means properties would be advertised and open for bidding within a one week period.
9. Number of bids per applicant	Committee believe that there should be 3 bids per applicant per bidding cycle. Council's position to be finalised following discussion at sub-regional level.
10. Deciding between bids for the same property	Where more than one applicant in the same band has successfully bid on the same property, the applicant with the earliest priority date should be ranked first. However if the priority date is the same, the applicant with the earliest date of registration will be ranked first.
11. High interest properties	If there are more than 160 bids placed on a property, when the bidding cycle has closed and providing there is no interest from applicants in Band 1, priority status will be invalid and the applicant with the earliest registration date in Bands 2 and 3 will be ranked first. This will be subject to regular review to ensure that the reasonable preference categories are not disadvantaged.
12. Acceptances	An applicant of the scheme may be successful in bidding for more than one property. In which case, the applicant can choose which property to accept, once the verification checks are completed. The rejected property will be allocated in turn to the next qualifying applicant on the scheme. If the applicant is a homeless priority, the homeless officer dealing with the case will contact the applicant to confirm the 'one offer' of accommodation.
13. Issue of refusals/Void bids (continuous refusals)	If an applicant consistently makes successful false bids, e.g. successfully bids for a property but then does not reply to any correspondence and this happens on more than 3 occasions, the applicant will be contacted for an explanation. However if the applicant fails to respond to any further correspondence the membership may be suspended. The same will apply to those

Policy area	Policy recommendations
	<p>applicants who fail to keep appointments for accompanied viewings.</p> <p>The applicant's reasons for refusal, failure to respond to correspondence or inability to keep an appointment will be assessed individually and discretion will be used before a final decision is reached in applying a suspension period. It will be the responsibility of a senior member of staff in the CBL Team for making a decision on whether to reactivate a suspended applicant.</p>
14. Provision for vulnerable clients and those with special needs	<p>The Committee believe that provision should be made for those with special needs, however there should not be a specific list of qualifying groups and cases should be handled on a case by case basis.</p>
15. Owner occupiers	<p>Committee believe that Stockton should retain current policy of allowing owner occupiers to access housing regardless of their financial status.</p> <p>Council's position to be finalised following discussion at sub-regional level.</p>
16. Transfer applicants	<p>Existing tenants of Tristar can apply to become members of the scheme and will have their applications considered on the same basis as new applicants. Starter Tenants will generally not be eligible to move within the first year of their tenancy, unless there is an urgent need for rehousing, but they can join the scheme and accumulate valuable waiting time. Existing tenants of Tristar applying to transfer within the scheme will be placed in the relevant category within Band 3, unless there is an urgent need for housing, in which case the applicant will be placed in the relevant priority banding</p>
17. Notice of termination period	<p>Current policy should be retained namely that current Council tenants should take up their new property on Monday following viewing. However, flexibility should be maintained in special circumstances.</p>
18. Direct Housing Management Lets	<p>In certain circumstances, some applicants registered on the CBL scheme will be directly matched to vacant properties, which will <u>not</u> be advertised on the scheme. Applicants in the following categories require urgent rehousing on exceptional grounds because they are at risk if they remain in their own home or because they are part of rehabilitation programme supported by other statutory / voluntary agencies or a supporting people programme. Tristar will also make best use of housing stock by</p>

Policy area	Policy recommendations
	<p>directly matching tenants that are under occupying their current accommodation to a property suitable to their household size and needs, subject to their agreement as members of the CBL scheme.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergency rehousing (flood / fire damage) • Other management lettings & special circumstances • Witnesses of crime, or victims of crime, who would be at risk of intimidation amounting to violence or threats of violence if they remained in their current accommodation • Victims of racial harassment amounting to violence or threats of violence • Same sex couples who are victims of harassment amounting to violence or threats of violence • Serious offenders subject to MAPPA arrangements eg sex offenders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Supported housing project leavers including young people leaving care • Foster carers • Tenants occupying accommodation with 2 or more bedrooms surplus to their requirements • Tristar employees leaving tied accommodation
<p>19. Local Lettings Policies</p>	<p>In creating balanced, mixed and sustainable communities and to make best use of housing stock, Tristar may introduce local lettings policies on some estates, in consultation with Stockton Borough Council's Cabinet Member for Housing. Within the legal framework, local lettings policies will allow specific criteria to be applied in advertising properties in order to attract certain groups of people, if for example there have been particular issues concerning sustainability, high void turnover or low demand. Tristar will work with local residents in developing local lettings initiatives and will take into account the views of residents groups and the wider community to ensure that these initiatives are flexible and sensitive to their needs, in consultation with ward councillors.</p>
<p>20. Property advertising criteria</p>	<p>To ensure a fair and consistent policy for all applicants Tristar Homes will be responsible for determining the property labelling criteria for each property advertised under the scheme. A property labelling criteria is for the purpose of:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assisting customers in making informed choices when considering available properties • Ensuring best use of stock matching the needs of tenants to suitable properties reducing the levels of over crowding and under occupying. • Helping to develop balanced and sustainable communities • Making new customers aware of local lettings initiatives which are in operation in specific areas to ensure sustainability.

Policy area	Policy recommendations
	<p>The criteria can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -No children -Age -Minimum family size i.e. number in household -Or advertised as: family; single; couple; elderly; large family; disabled accommodation <p>-Preference to customer requiring care or support due to age</p> <p>-Preference to persons with mobility difficulties/ wheelchair users</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -No dogs -Community lettings initiatives
21. Low Demand Property	<p>If a property has been formerly advertised with a descriptive property labelling criteria for 1 cycle and no suitable applicants are identified, the property will be re- advertised as “Property of the week” with suitable incentives to encourage applicants on the scheme to bid for it. The property will be offered to the first suitable applicant who has made a bid on the property of the scheme, providing the applicant meets the eligibility criteria and satisfactory verification checks are completed.</p>
22. Applications from staff and board members	<p>All offers of accommodation to Staff Members, Board Members, Ward Councillors and/or their close relatives will authorised by the Head of Housing (SBC) and Housing Director (THL)</p>
23. Deliberate worsening of circumstances	<p>If an applicant deliberately worsens their housing circumstances in order to receive more preference within the scheme and improve their chances of being rehoused, e.g. terminated a tenancy for no apparent reason and moves into a household causing overcrowding, a Senior Officer in the CBL Team will review the application and decide if the application is to be suspended. The application may be suspended for a minimum period of 12 months.</p>
24. Reviews and Appeals	<p>Committee recommend that current policy is reflected in the new scheme; namely that all applicants for housing should be able to appeal against a decision made regarding their application in the first instance to Tristar homes, but there will also be the facility to appeal to SBC against any decision made by Tristar in their interpretation of the CBL scheme.</p>
25. Review of scheme membership	<p>An annual review will be completed on the CBL scheme. Applicants will be asked to confirm if they wish to remain registered, by either telephoning the office, returning the return notification slip from the letter or visiting a Tristar office. If there is no further contact from the applicant, a reminder letter will be sent and contact will be made with any agency involved, prior to cancelling him/her from the scheme.</p>

Appendix 2

Erimus' proposed Suspension Policy – (This policy has been derived following consultation with ODPM, SHELTER and Erimus Housing Legal Services)

'Suspension' refers to being suspended from the general CBL scheme.

1. Introduction

1.1 The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to officers in the assessment of rehousing applications to ensure the widest possible access to social housing from applicants wishing to join Erimus Housing's Homechoice lettings scheme. This will be achieved by removing blanket exclusions of certain categories of people, ensuring that each case is assessed individually and where necessary, introducing mutually agreed programmes of support with relevant organisations. To ensure that blanket exclusions are not applied, Erimus Housing has introduced stringent monitoring arrangements, to ensure that applications are discussed in detail at Senior Officer level prior to deeming an applicant ineligible for accommodation.

2.0 Eligibility

2.1 Erimus Housing will generally consider all applicants over the age of 16 as eligible for accommodation; however anybody under the age of 18 years will have their support needs fully assessed prior to any offer of a property being made.

2.2 People subject to immigration control, who apply direct to Erimus Housing will be classed as eligible for housing, providing they have the financial means to maintain rent charges. Erimus Housing in its role as the Council's Agent will apply section 160A eligibility criteria under Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996 in selecting a person to be a tenant of one of its properties pursuant to nomination arrangements with the Local Authority.

2.3 The Secretary of State has prescribed the classes of persons who are subject to Immigration control, but are nonetheless eligible to be allocated accommodation. The main categories of persons who are eligible for social housing as defined in the ODPM code of guidance, are as follows:

- Existing tenants
- British nationals
- EEA nationals
- Persons subject to immigration control who have been granted refugee status or exceptional leave to remain provided there is no condition that they shall not be a charge on public funds, or indefinite leave to remain under certain conditions.
- Persons subject to immigration control who are nationals of a country that has ratified the European Convention on Social and Medical Assistance or the European Social Charter

- 2.3 Persons subject to immigration control who are classed as ineligible for an allocation of housing as defined in ODPM code of guidance will be denied access to the choice based lettings scheme. Those persons are as follows:
- Asylum seekers
 - Visitors (including overseas students) who have limited leave to enter or remain in the UK granted on the basis that they do not have recourse to public funds
 - A person who has a valid leave to enter or remain in the UK which carries no limitation or condition and who is not habitually resident in the Common Travel Area
 - A sponsored person who has been in this country less than 5 years (from date of entry or date of sponsorship, whichever is the later) and whose sponsor(s) is still alive
 - A person who is a national of a non-European Economic Area country that is a signatory to the European Convention on Social and Medical Assistance and/or the Europe Social Charter but has ratified neither
 - A person who is a national of a non-European Economic Area country that has ratified the European Convention on Social and Medical Assistance and/or the Europe Social Charter but is not lawfully present in the UK. (i.e. does not have leave to enter or remain or is an asylum seeker with temporary admission) and/or is not habitually resident in the Common Travel Area.
 - A person who is in the United Kingdom illegally, or who has overstayed his/her leave
- 2.4 Any person subject to immigration control applying to join the choice based lettings scheme will be asked to provide documented evidence of their immigration status and a proof of income to enable Erimus Housing to make a decision on eligibility.
- 2.5 Examples of evidence, which will be requested, could include the applicant's passport, documentation provided by the Home Office's Immigration and Nationality Directorate, proof of benefit entitlement and/or wage slip.
- 2.6 Any person classed as ineligible by virtue of their immigration status, will be informed in writing and will be given the opportunity to appeal against the decision made by the Company.
- 3.0 **SUSPENSION POLICY**
- 3.1 In developing this policy, Erimus Housing has observed the Housing Corporations Regulatory Guidance and ODPM Code of Guidance (allocation of accommodation).
- 3.2 Part 6 of the 1996 Housing Act has been amended by the introduction of the Homelessness Act 2002. One of the main policy objectives is to ensure the widest possible access to social housing for applicants, this includes removing the power for housing authorities to implement blanket exclusions of certain categories of applicants. In its place they have the power to decide that individual applicants are unsuitable to be tenants as a result of serious unacceptable behaviour.
- 3.3 The Housing Corporation requires that:

Applicants are excluded from consideration for housing only when their unacceptable behaviour is serious enough to make them unsuitable to be a tenant and only in circumstances that are not unlawfully discriminating.

3.4 The ODPM code of guidance states:

The test is whether the behaviour would have entitled the housing authority to a possession order if, whether actually or notionally, the applicant had been a secure tenant.

3.5 The Housing Corporation defines 'suspension' as a registered applicant who is ruled ineligible for a tenancy offer pending some change in their circumstances or the expiry of a specified time period.

3.6 Applicants will not be suspended automatically from Erimus Housing's choice based lettings scheme if their circumstances 'fit' a defined category. Every case will be judged on its merits and efforts made to resolve any possible ineligibility. In reaching a decision on whether or not to suspend an applicant on the grounds of unacceptable behaviour, Erimus Housing will take into account the circumstances, which are relevant, including whether the behaviour could have been due to physical, mental, or learning disability.

3.7 Erimus Housing recognises that whilst it wishes to protect its neighbourhoods from the social and economic decline, denial of access to social housing might result in broader social exclusion for the households involved.

3.8 Erimus Housing wants to ensure that its policies are both fair and effective and gives applicants an opportunity to demonstrate they are capable of fulfilling the terms and conditions of their tenancy agreement.

3.9 This policy applies to existing tenants applying to transfer and to new applicants joining the choice based lettings scheme.

3.10 Erimus Housing's suspension policy aims to ensure that::

- We comply with any appropriate legislation and our legal duty to homeless people
- Each application is assessed on an individual basis and any extenuating circumstances are taken into account.
- We continue to apply the ODPM guidelines in relation to unacceptable behaviour
- Applicants who are considered ineligible for accommodation are given a written explanation as to why the decision has been made and what they can do to remedy the situation
- There are clear guidelines for applicants on the review process

3.11 The following are listed examples of the types of unacceptable behaviour that Erimus Housing might consider in determining whether a person applying to join the scheme is ineligible for accommodation.

In these circumstances, applicants who have become members of Erimus Housing's choice based lettings scheme, may be classed as ineligible for rehousing if it can be evidenced they have a history of unacceptable behaviour. At the point at which the applicant applies to the Company, certain checks will be carried out eg any breaches of current or previous tenancy conditions, any relevant unspent convictions, history of anti social behaviour.

In any event, the test is whether the behaviour at the time would have entitled the Company to a possession order, if actually or notionally; the applicant had been a secure tenant of a Local Authority.

4.0 CONVICTIONS FOR ARRESTABLE OFFENCES THAT THREATEN THE STABILITY OF THE COMMUNITY

4.1 Applicants who have relevant 'unspent' convictions for serious criminal offences or offences that threaten the stability of the local community will have their housing needs assessed and all factors will be taken into account, including what efforts have been made to resolve any ineligibility, before any decisions are made.

4.2 In deciding whether an applicant is ineligible on the grounds of a criminal conviction or an offence that threatens the stability of the community, Erimus Housing will consider at the time of the application, whether the conviction or offence in question is serious enough to make the scheme member unsuitable to be a tenant of the Company and that it is satisfied that an outright possession order would be granted and not suspended by the court. The following list gives examples of what the Company constitutes serious criminal offences that threatens the stability of the community, this list is not exhaustive:-

- Murder or attempted murder
- Indecent assault
- Use of firearms
- Serious offences against children including sex and violence
- Rape
- Wounding / GBH with intent (Section 18)
- Wounding / GBH without intent (Section 20)
- False imprisonment
- Arson and criminal damage endangering life
- Robbery
- Aggravated burglary
- Two or more offences of burglary
- Being concerned in the supply, or intending to supply any controlled drug
- Three or more serious motor vehicle crimes, including taking without consent and criminal damage to vehicles
- Aggravated vehicle taking
- Any racially motivated offence
- Breach of an anti social behaviour order

4.3 A person who in the past has been classed as ineligible on the basis of a criminal conviction or an offence that threatens the stability of the community can request that the suspension period should be lifted if there has been a change in circumstances or behaviour and the person feels the conviction should no longer be held against him. The onus will be on the individual to demonstrate the behaviour in question has been modified, this could be with the support of other agencies or organisations.

4.4 Erimus Housing will consult with relevant agencies, including social services, health professionals and probation services and will consider all relevant factors, including the housing need of individuals and the impact on the

community in determining whether an applicant with a relevant conviction is eligible for rehousing.

4.0 ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

5.1 The Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003 describes anti-social behaviour (ASB) for the purpose of seeking an injunction as “conduct which is capable of causing nuisance or annoyance to any person and which directly or indirectly relates to or affects the housing management functions of a relevant landlord”. For the purpose of this policy, anti-social behaviour is defined as “conduct by the applicant or a member of his / her household which is capable of causing nuisance or annoyance to any person not of the same household”.

5.2 Examples include neighbour harassment, racial harassment, noise nuisance, drug dealing, gang nuisance.

5.3 Erimus Housing will ensure that ineligibility for housing on the grounds of anti-social behaviour perpetrated by the applicant or a member of the household, will be based on the evidence of the behaviour, providing it is no longer than 2 years prior to their application. Such evidence might include:

- Notice of seeking possession
- Suspended possession order
- Previous eviction of an applicant for anti-social behaviour
- Acceptable behaviour contract
- Previous injunction
- Anti-social behaviour order (ASBO)
- Information held on housefile (home visits, diary sheets, case notes)
- Public information (court hearings, media reports)
- Information from other organisations (probation services, social services, other housing providers)
- Witness statements
- Information provided under the Crime & Disorder Act from Cleveland Police through the information sharing protocol. (This information must only be requested under the joint protocol by a nominated officer and the information must be held in a confidential and secure area, and/or disposed of as confidential waste if the information is not relevant or is not to be acted upon - Data Protection Act 1998)

Where anti social behaviour has been committed by a person who was, but is no longer, a member of the applicant’s household, the behaviour will be disregarded in considering whether the applicant is unsuitable to be a tenant, providing the applicant is not guilty of unacceptable behaviour which will make him unsuitable to be a tenant.

5.4 It is not necessary for the applicant to have been a tenant of Erimus Housing when the ‘unacceptable behaviour’ occurred. The test is whether the behaviour would have entitled the Company to an outright possession order, whether actually or notionally; the applicant had been a secure tenant of a Local Authority.

5.5 A number of factors must be taken into account prior to deciding that it is reasonable to expect that the court would have granted an outright possession order, including:

- The circumstances of the applicant and the household e.g. their health, any dependants.
 - Whether the court would have been likely to grant a suspended order
 - How long ago the behaviour took place
 - Whether the behaviour has been repeated
 - Changes in circumstances
 - The nature of the behaviour in question
 - The safety of the applicant and the community
- 5.6 If the applicant is to be suspended from the Homechoice lettings scheme, the reasons will be clearly defined in writing, including what the applicant can do to remedy the situation.
- 5.7 Providing there has been no repetition of unacceptable behaviour and the applicant can demonstrate that any future tenancy can be conducted satisfactorily, the applicant will become eligible for rehousing.
- 6.0 BREACHES OF TENANCY CONDITIONS
- 6.1 The following gives listed examples of behaviour, which constitutes a breach of tenancy conditions that could lead to a period of suspension for the applicant, if a change in circumstances or behaviour cannot be demonstrated. Erimus Housing will consider at the time of the application, whether the tenancy breach in question is serious enough to make the scheme member unsuitable to be a tenant of the Company and that is satisfied that an outright possession order would be granted and not suspended by the court. This list is not necessarily exhaustive.
- Existing tenants and former tenants owing monies to Erimus Housing or any other landlord will be assessed individually on their own merits, before a period of suspension is considered. This also applies to applicants who have been previously evicted by Erimus Housing or any other landlord. Non related housing debts will not be considered.

In the event an applicant has been previously evicted from an Erimus Housing property or any other landlord due to breaches in tenancy conditions, including rent arrears, the date of the eviction must be considered. If the applicant can demonstrate they have held a series of privately rented properties since, with no further issues, it needs to be considered whether it is reasonable to deny the applicant access to the choice based lettings scheme.

All factors will be taken into account in the event there are more pressing needs or reasons as to why the applicant has been unable to maintain payments including:

- when the rent arrears occurred
- the financial situation of the applicant
- any benefits which the applicant is entitled to but has not yet received
- whether the applicant has made and kept to an arrangement to pay

Erimus Housing will not take into account any debts arising from arrears of non-housing payments eg council tax. Non-housing debts have no bearing on whether an applicant is eligible for accommodation.

- Abandonment / Rechargeable Repairs Due to Wilful Damage

Any applicant who has left a tenancy of Erimus Housing or any other landlord without providing advance notice of their intention to vacate and left rechargeable repairs due to wilful damage will have to demonstrate good reason for abandoning the property and / or causing the damage. e.g. applicant has abandoned a property as a result of violence or threats of violence likely to be carried out and who as a result requires urgent rehousing.

Consideration must be given to the circumstances surrounding any wilful damage and abandonment and whether the applicant has provided evidence to suggest a change in behaviour e.g. reference from a previous landlord or has entered into a repayment schedule to pay for any associated debts.

In making a decision on ineligibility, Officers will consider all available documented evidence, including dated photographs, orders for lock changes and boarding or screening, inventories and reports detailing rechargeable repairs.

The 'unacceptable behaviour' test must be applied in deciding whether the abandonment and / or the extent of the wilful damage will result in a period of ineligibility. The Company may take into account the behaviour in question in determining priorities between applicants, rather than classing an applicant as ineligible if it is not satisfied that the court would have granted an Outright Possession Order. This means that where more than one applicant has bid for a property and both have the same level of priority, the behaviour of the applicants may be used to choose between the two. This will also apply to any person who has deliberately worsened his or her own circumstances in order to obtain more preference within the scheme.

7.0 PERIOD OF SUSPENSION

7.1 As a general rule, the suspension period will depend on what measures the applicant has put in place to demonstrate a change in behaviour. If, however there is no attempt to modify the behaviour or remedy the breach during the period of suspension, the scheme member will be ineligible for housing until he or she can demonstrate the behaviour in question has been modified. Alternatively, if the applicant is able to demonstrate the behaviour has modified and is capable of complying with the terms and conditions of an Erimus Housing tenancy agreement, the scheme member's application will be reactivated.

7.2 It is the responsibility of the applicant to demonstrate they have either modified their behaviour, or have appropriate mechanisms in place to help them sustain a tenancy. Evidence of a change in behaviour could be provided by rent records, references from another landlord or employer, a letter from a health professional or Probation Officer.

- 7.3 Senior Officers in the Homechoice Lettings Team will review the information and make a decision regarding whether a suspension period is to be applied, having first gathered all the relevant facts. Details will be recorded on the relevant pro-forma and signed off by all parties.
- 7.4 All information will be clearly recorded on the I.T. systems and clear notes will be appended to the applicant's file.
- 8.0 ADVISING THE APPLICANT OF THE DECISION
- 8.1 Any applicant who is considered to be ineligible will be advised of the decision in writing and will be given the details of any action they need to take to make them eligible for housing. Applicants will also be advised of the review procedure and measures will be taken to ensure that the adjudicators were not involved in the original decision to suspend the application.

Appendix 3

SUB REGIONAL CBL FINANCIAL BREAKDOWN

Initial Income

Partner contributions £45,000
DCLG Grant £105,000

Total £150,000

Expenditure

April – December 2006 £36,136
(1 month £36,136/9 = £4,015)

Projected spend January 2007 - March 2008

£4,015 X 15 = £60,225

Estimated additional expenditure

- costs associated with the private sector event £2,000
- additional admin. Costs £5,000
- potential procurement costs £1000

Total £68,225

Projected implementation costs

- ICT estimate from feasibility study one off payment £120,000
- ICT estimated running costs £54,000
- set up costs (scheme guide, application forms welcome folders etc) £80,000

Total £254,000

Current available income

(£150,000 - £36,136) = £113,864 minus projected spend £68,225 = £45,639

£254,000 - £45,639 = £208,361

Estimated shortfall per partner £208,361/9 = £23,152

Appendix 4

Choice-based Lettings Policy area	Evidence received from: Erimus Homechoice (Middlesbrough) Including reference to Erimus' current and draft future policies	Evidence received from: Your Choice Homes (Newcastle)
<p>Eligibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age of applicants 	<p>People over the age of 16 are able to join the scheme. Subject to...</p> <p>4.7 Any vulnerable household or person/s under the age of 18 years will have a full housing need assessment completed to identify their support needs in conjunction with other agencies.</p>	<p>Applicants can join the general scheme when they are 18. However, they are allowed to count their length of current tenure from the age of 16. (Those between 16 and 18 can be helped through a Housing Management let if they are in priority need.)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verification and reference checks - Type of information required from applicants 	<p>4.8 At the point of registration and before a firm offer of accommodation is made to an applicant who has successfully bid against a property, verification and reference checks will be carried out to determine eligibility, these checks will include one or more of the following: -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • proof of identification • immigration status • previous/current rent arrears • previous /current property damage • previous legal action - anti-social behaviour/harassment • history of offending • relationship to any members of staff or board members • confirmation that the eligibility criteria for the property has been met • adequate equity to meet current housing need 	<p>YCH require: Standard proof of ID. Details of current circumstances similar to Erimus, but also the names of 2 referees. These are generally ex-landlords.</p> <p>YCH require proof of length of current tenure. The scheme uses this to decide between more than one applicant to the same property.</p> <p>It is made clear that verification checks may be carried out at any point during the process.</p> <p>YCH make clear that onus is on customer to provide required information.</p>

Choice-based Lettings Policy area	Evidence received from: Erimus Homechoice (Middlesbrough) Including reference to Erimus' current and draft future policies	Evidence received from: Your Choice Homes (Newcastle)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unsatisfactorily referenced applicants 	<p>4.10 If the verification checks are not satisfactory, the applicant may not be offered the property. In certain circumstances, the applicant may be offered the property, subject to specific conditions determined at the discretion of Erimus. Erimus may take into account the behaviour in question in determining priorities between applicants, rather than classing an applicant as ineligible after applying the 'Unacceptable Behaviour Test' as described in the Code of Guidance. This means that where more than one applicant has bid for a property and each have the same level of priority, the behaviour of the applicants may be used to choose between which one of them receives the offer of accommodation. Erimus will refer to the Suspension Policy in deciding whether to apply a suspension period, if the applicant is not offered the property on the grounds of their unacceptable behaviour. If an applicant is overlooked on the grounds of their previous unacceptable behaviour, s/he will be notified of the reasons in writing, together with an explanation of what action needs to be taken to remedy the situation.</p>	<p>YCH provide guidance to applicants if they fail to meet the eligibility criteria. Applicants are provided with an explanation of why they have been excluded, and steps needed to rectify their situation.</p> <p>Applicants may be originally eligible, but will not be offered properties if they have since displayed behaviour that would render them ineligible.</p> <p>In exceptional cases, offers of properties may be made, but will be subject to conditions such as Acceptable Behaviour Contracts. Normally such offers would be outside the general scheme, through a direct Housing Management Let.</p>

Choice-based Lettings Policy area	Evidence received from: Erimus Homechoice (Middlesbrough) Including reference to Erimus' current and draft future policies	Evidence received from: Your Choice Homes (Newcastle)
Advertising of properties	<p>Vacant properties are currently advertised on a 2 weekly bidding cycle. The first week allows customers to bid; the second allows for shortlisting, verification checks and arrangement of viewings.</p> <p>However, the proposals are to introduce weekly bidding cycles as the 2 weekly cycle had a negative impact on relet times and lost rental income.</p>	<p>YCH normally operate a weekly bidding cycle. Belief that a daily cycle would only be possible on a web-based system, but concerns over exclusion of some customers.</p> <p>Two-weekly cycle during periods of low demand such as bank holidays, school holidays.</p>
Local Lettings Policy	<p>6.0 In creating balanced, mixed and sustainable communities and to make best use of housing stock, Erimus may introduce local lettings policies on some estates. Local lettings policies will allow specific criteria to be applied in advertising properties in order to attract certain groups of people, if for example there have been particular issues concerning sustainability, high void turnover or low demand. Erimus will work with local residents in developing local lettings initiatives and will take into account the views of residents groups and the wider community to ensure that these initiatives are flexible and sensitive to their needs.</p> <p>Proposed policy.</p>	<p>This is a potential future development area for YCH. Centres on Area Boards looking at types of tenancies and tenants, then attaching conditions on properties that become available.</p> <p>Foreseen that in any case: 'the majority of lettings will be made from the general lettings category rather than direct Housing Management lettings or Local Lettings plans. Even in exceptional cases these special lettings will not exceed more than 50% of available properties in each neighbourhood.'</p>
<p>Prioritisation of applicants</p> <p>This refers to the general method of</p>	<p>Current Erimus policy is for the use of four bands (ie. no a and b). New policy reflects need to reflect extra priority need for those with multiple needs. Proposal follows consultation with their legal section and SHELTER.</p>	<p>Applicants are placed within the general scheme when they are first accepted. If applicants consider themselves to have an immediate and urgent housing need, they can apply for priority status by indicating their circumstances on the registration form, or at any</p>

Choice-based Lettings Policy area	Evidence received from: Erimus Homechoice (Middlesbrough) Including reference to Erimus' current and draft future policies	Evidence received from: Your Choice Homes (Newcastle)
<p>prioritisation; whether banding, points system, priority cards, or a combination of these.</p>	<p>8.1 Each person applying to become a member of the CBL scheme will have his or her housing needs and requirements assessed at the point of registration and will be placed in one of 4 bands, according to their level of housing need. Section 167(2A) of the Act allows allocation schemes to make provision for determining priorities in relation to applicant's who fall within the reasonable preference categories and any additional preference categories. The Code of Guidance published by the former ODPM outlines how allocation schemes should be framed to take into account reasonable preference categories. Erimus Housing's CBL scheme has been framed to prioritise people in these defined categories. Since these categories can be cumulative, this scheme has been developed to account for multiple housing needs. Bands 1 – 2 have been split into (a) and (b) to account for multiple needs within the defined categories.</p> <p>Band 1 a) and b) – Applicants with homes subject to demolition. No time limit for this band Band 2 a) and b)– All other priority members of the scheme such as those who are homeless, living in unsatisfactory conditions, have medical need. Band 3 – Those with no urgent housing need. Includes those from broke relationships, intentionally homeless and non-priority homeless; these placed in band 3a). All others in 3b).</p>	<p>time afterwards.</p> <p>If approved applicants (such as homeless, severe disability, overcrowding) are given a time-limited priority status, normally valid for 3-months, and are able to bid for properties which they match the criteria for.</p> <p>If more than one person with the same priority status express and interest for the same property, the date priority was awarded is taken into account. If someone has qualified for priority status by having multiple needs and falling across more than one priority category.</p> <p>Applicants automatically lose their status after 3-months, but are allowed to remain on the general scheme. Special circumstances do apply, for instance, priority may be extended if someone has been unable to find the specially adapted property that they require.</p> <p>Homeless applicants: if a successful bid is made, this counts as the offer with which YCH discharge their duty. If this is refused, then priority status may be withdrawn but applicant can remain on general</p>

Choice-based Lettings Policy area	Evidence received from: Erimus Homechoice (Middlesbrough) Including reference to Erimus' current and draft future policies	Evidence received from: Your Choice Homes (Newcastle)
	<p>Band 4 – Applicants from out of area with no urgent requirements; owner occupiers.</p> <p>Homeless applicants are given Band 2 status for initial period of 2 months. If no suitable property becomes available then this may be extended. If no bids have been made for available suitable properties, homeless officer will bid on applicant's behalf. The first successful bid will be offered to applicant and will count as the discharging of Erimus' statutory duty. If properties are refused for no good reason then priority status can be removed. Applicant moved to Band 3.</p>	<p>scheme.</p> <p>Homeless applicants may ask YCH to make an offer as soon as a property arises eg without having to bid. However, refusal will lead to loss of priority status. Those intentionally homeless will be given preference by being given a direct offer of property</p>
<p>-Reasonable preference (eg. Erimus include in Band 2)– extension of this to cover those with young family living in flats/maisonettes?</p>	<p>8.3 Families with children aged 14 years or under or expecting a child, living in a flat or maisonette above ground floor level</p>	<p>No additional preference is given to those living in this situation.</p>
<p>- Reasonable preference (eg. Erimus include in Band 2) – unborn children and children with</p>	<p>8.3 People living in severely overcrowded housing conditions i.e. 2 bedrooms or more short under current criteria, refers to the whole household that has naturally increased over a number of years. If someone in the household is expecting a child, the number of rooms will be calculated as if the child has already been born.</p>	<p>Children under 1 year old are not brought into the equation.</p> <p>A child will normally be treated as a member of the household of an adult who is responsible for the day to</p>

Choice-based Lettings Policy area	Evidence received from: Erimus Homechoice (Middlesbrough) Including reference to Erimus' current and draft future policies	Evidence received from: Your Choice Homes (Newcastle)
shared parentage	Children from current or former relationships will only be counted as part of the household if they live with the family for more than 50% of the time. Applicants who have brought about overcrowding by deliberately worsening their own circumstances will not be awarded priority status.	day care of the child including situations involving equal joint care but not where the child visits only at weekends and holidays.
Reasonable preference (eg. Erimus include in Band 2) – age of children sharing bedrooms	8.3 Children over the age of 10 years should not be expected to share a bedroom with anybody of the opposite sex.	Newcastle state 10 years.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deciding between bids for the same property 	8.4 Where more than one applicant in the same band has successfully bid on the same property, the applicant with the earliest priority date will be ranked first. However if the priority date is the same, the applicant with the earliest date of registration will be ranked first.	YCH uses the length of time spent at current home to decide between bidders; this extends across all types of tenure. If length of tenure is identical, date of registration is then taken into account. Only CBL scheme to do this. Aim is to stimulate commitment to homes, and encourages people to sign up only when they want to move rather. Analysis of lettings so far suggests no-one has been unfairly treated through this.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High interest properties 	8.5 If there are more than 160 bids placed on a property, when the bidding cycle has closed and providing there is no interest from applicants in Band 1, priority status will be invalid and the applicant with the earliest registration date	No special conditions are brought in if this situation arises.

Choice-based Lettings Policy area	Evidence received from: Erimus Homechoice (Middlesbrough) Including reference to Erimus' current and draft future policies	Evidence received from: Your Choice Homes (Newcastle)
	<p>in Bands 2 and 3 will be ranked first. This will be subject to regular review to ensure that the reasonable preference categories are not disadvantaged.</p>	
<p>Number of bids per applicant</p>	<p>8.9 Applicants placed in Bands 1 and 2 can place up to 4 bids per cycle, as opposed to applicants who are not in priority need in Bands 3 and 4 who can bid for up to 3 properties per cycle</p>	<p>3 bids allowed per applicant per cycle, regardless of status.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Issue of refusals/Void bids (continuous refusals) 	<p>21.2 If an applicant consistently makes successful false bids, e.g. successfully bids for a property but then does not reply to any correspondence and this happens on more than 3 occasions, the applicant will be contacted for an explanation. However if the applicant fails to respond to any further correspondence the membership may be suspended. The same will apply to those applicants who fail to keep appointments for accompanied viewings.</p> <p>The applicant's reasons for refusal, failure to respond to correspondence or inability to keep an appointment will be assessed individually and discretion will be used before a final decision is reached in applying a suspension period. It will be the responsibility of a senior member of staff in the Homechoice Team for making a decision on whether to reactivate a suspended applicant.</p> <p>The number of refusals has been consistently dropping at</p>	<p>No penalties are brought in for continuous refusals. This only affects those given priority status.</p>

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	<p>Erimus. At Erimus, the refusal rate for properties that have been bid for is currently at 42%, down from 56%. (Current refusal rates at Tristar are similar to Erimus. Sometimes they are down to their 15th offer before a home is accepted.)</p> <p>To reduce the rate further, Erimus are using the idea of having multiple viewings for hard to let properties/those in areas of low demand. The top-5 qualifying applicants for a property will be invited to view it on the same day, and it is likely that at least one of them will accept the offer on the day.</p>	
<p>Provision for vulnerable clients and those with special needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definition of special needs 	<p>10.2 Special needs applicants are categorised as applicants with housing needs that fall into one or more of the following groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Medical / disability related needs ➤ Older people requesting sheltered housing ➤ Hospital leavers ➤ Carers and those requiring care ➤ Applicants with mental health needs ➤ Applicants with learning disabilities <p>Those indicating special needs are flagged in order to alert the Disabled People's Housing Service.</p>	<p>No strict definition of special needs.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy for vulnerable clients 	<p>10.9 All applicants who are supported will be individually case managed by named officers in the Disabled People's Housing Service and can actively bid for properties of their</p>	<p>During the registration stage, YCH assess whether customers need a sponsor to help them through the process.</p>

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	choice advertised on the scheme. A bid shall however only be deemed successful if the property bid against meets the applicant's assessed needs and requirements.	Questions on the form determine whether customers understand the process of bidding and whether anyone is available to bid on their behalf if necessary.
Owner occupiers	13. Erimus Housing will accept owner-occupiers who wish to join the scheme where they do not have sufficient equity to meet their current housing need. Generally applicants in this group will receive an offer of accommodation, only if there is no interest from members on the scheme in Bands 1 – 3. Owner-occupiers will generally be placed in Band 4. However if an owner occupier is assessed as being in unsuitable accommodation and falls within the reasonable preference categories, s/he will be placed in Band 2(a) if there are additional multiple needs or Band 2(b) if there are no additional multiple needs.	Anyone over 18 can join the scheme regardless of current housing circumstances. Length of tenure is still counted in the normal way.
Transfer applicants	14.1 Existing tenants of Erimus Housing can apply to become members of the scheme and will have their applications considered on the same basis as new applicants. Starter Tenants will generally not be eligible to move within the first year of their tenancy, unless there is an urgent need for rehousing, but they can join the scheme and accumulate valuable waiting time. Existing tenants of Erimus Housing applying to transfer within the scheme will be placed in the relevant category within Band 3, unless there is an urgent need for housing, in which case the applicant will be placed in the relevant priority banding	Existing Council tenants are encouraged to consider direct exchanges with both other Council tenants and tenants of other landlords.

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notice of termination period 	<p>14.3 If an Erimus Housing tenant is successful in bidding for a property the notice of termination for the previous tenancy will in most instances be one week.</p>	<p>Notice of termination is 1 week.</p>
<p>Direct Housing Management Lets</p>	<p>15.1 In certain circumstances, some applicants registered on the CBL scheme will be directly matched to vacant properties, which will <u>not</u> be advertised on the scheme. Applicants in the following categories require urgent rehousing on exceptional grounds because they are at risk if they remain in their own home or because they are part of rehabilitation programme supported by other statutory / voluntary agencies or a supporting people programme. Erimus will also make best use of housing stock by directly matching tenants that are under occupying their current accommodation to a property suitable to their household size and needs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergency rehousing (flood / fire damage) • Other management lettings & special circumstances • Witnesses of crime, or victims of crime, who would be at risk of intimidation amounting to violence or threats of violence if they remained in their current accommodation • Victims of racial harassment amounting to violence or threats of violence • Same sex couples who are victims of harassment amounting to violence or threats of violence 	<p>Similar to Erimus. Circumstances exist where YCH can use Housing Management Lets: one reasonable offer of accommodation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People having to move from areas affected by major repairs or demolition. • Asylum seekers/national priorities • Fire/flood/major incident victims • Witness protection schemes • Homeless cases where the victim is ineligible/there is need to move people rapidly from temporary accommodation to avoid use of B&Bs/priority status has expired and Council has a duty to provide accommodation • Witness Protection Scheme • Other exceptional housing management reasons

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serious offenders subject to MAPPA arrangements eg sex offenders ▪ Supported housing project leavers including young people leaving care • Foster carers • Erimus tenants occupying accommodation with 2 or more bedrooms surplus to their requirements • Erimus Housing employees leaving tied accommodation 	
Review of scheme membership	17.1 An annual review will be completed on the CBL scheme. Applicants will be asked to confirm if they wish to remain registered, by either telephoning the office, returning the return notification slip from the letter or visiting an Erimus office. If there is no further contact from the applicant, a reminder letter will be sent and contact will be made with any agency involved, prior to cancelling him/her from the scheme.	There is a yearly review of scheme membership.
Property advertising criteria	18.1 To ensure a fair and consistent policy for all applicants Erimus Housing will be responsible for determining the property labelling criteria for each property advertised under the scheme. A property labelling criteria is for the purpose of:- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assisting customers in making informed choices when considering available properties • Ensuring best use of stock matching the needs of 	Used in Newcastle as with Middlesbrough. This is to ensure the best use of available stock; consequently it is normal for every property advertised to have a minimum/maximum size of household condition attached. In addition local housing managers may attach criteria to properties, in order to fulfil any local lettings plan in operation or for reasons specific to a particular property.

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	<p>tenants to suitable properties reducing the levels of over crowding and under occupying.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping to develop balanced and sustainable communities • Making new customers aware of local lettings initiatives which are in operation in specific areas to ensure sustainability. <p>The criteria can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -No children -Age -Minimum family size i.e. number in household -Or advertised as: family; single; couple; elderly; large family; disabled accommodation -Preference to customer requiring care or support due to age -Preference to persons with mobility difficulties/ wheelchair users -No dogs -Community lettings initiatives 	<p>Same criteria as Erimus</p>
Low Demand Property	<p>19.1 If a property has been formerly advertised with a descriptive property labelling criteria for 1 cycle and no suitable applicants are identified, the property will be re-advertised as "Property of the week" with suitable incentives to encourage applicants on the scheme to bid</p>	<p>If properties have been formally advertised <u>twice</u> without a successful let, Housing Manager can decide to market the property as an 'open market property'. These are available to the first suitable customer. This is placed at the discretion of local managers and can</p>

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	for it. The property will be offered to the first suitable applicant who has made a bid on the property of the scheme, providing the applicant meets the eligibility criteria and satisfactory verification checks are completed.	potentially include those who have been deemed ineligible if deemed appropriate.
Applications from staff and board members	20.2 Erimus Board Members, Erimus staff or their close relatives are entitled to join the scheme and can register in the normal way. They will also, where applicable, be given priority in the normal way. However if they are successful in their bid, prior to a formal offer of accommodation being made authorisation from senior officers within Erimus and Middlesbrough Council must be sought.	All such applications are screened by the Manager of Your Choice Homes.
Acceptances	21.1 Occasionally an applicant of the scheme may be successful in bidding for more than one property. In which case, the applicant can choose which property to accept, once the verification checks are completed. The rejected property will be allocated in turn to the next qualifying applicant on the scheme. If the applicant is a homeless priority, the homeless officer dealing with the case will contact the applicant to confirm the 'one offer' of accommodation.	Applicants are considered for both properties.
Deliberate worsening of circumstances	22. If an applicant deliberately worsens their housing circumstances in order to receive more preference within the scheme and improve their chances of being rehoused,	No penalty is imposed. Applicants are re-assessed on against their new situation.

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	<p>e.g. terminated a tenancy for no apparent reason and moves into a household causing overcrowding, a Senior Officer in the Homechoice Team will review the application and decide if the application is to be suspended. The application may be suspended for a minimum period of 12 months.</p>	
Reviews and appeals	<p>24.1 All applicants of the scheme can request a review of a decision provided they do so within a period of 21 days from the date of the decision. Whilst the initial request may be verbal they should be advised to make a written representation detailing the full reasons why they think the decision is wrong, and to supply any additional information that they feel may help their case will be required. Any person with literacy difficulties will be provided with assistance upon request.</p>	<p>Appeals procedures are clearly defined; appeals can be made against eligibility decisions, length of customer's current tenure, denial of priority status and reasonableness of offer made through priority status or a housing management let</p> <p>Appeals valid if received within 21 days of original decision.</p>

