

Scrutiny Review of Consolidation of Thirteen Housing Group

Can you explain the rationale / key factors behind Thirteen's decision to withdraw from the Tees Valley Choice-Based Lettings Scheme?

The withdrawal from CBL is part of a wider review by Thirteen into how we deliver our key front line services to customers. Feedback from various surveys and consultations has demonstrated that customers have not always found us easy to contact or communicate with and our on-line service offer is very limited at present. Whilst we have addressed many of our internal systems to improve the customer experience, we know that CBL (Compass) remains challenging for applicants and in our view, requires radical change.

Choice Based Lettings is not a popular system for customers for many reasons including:

- The customer facing website is old fashioned and difficult to navigate.
- The application process is a long (between 17-19 pages),onerous and time consuming process resulting in customers making in-complete applications and/or abandoning the system
- The back office is time consuming for staff to complete the short listing process
- The system does not effectively interact with management systems even with an interface functionality.
- The website is not easily located within the search engine for customers looking for available housing,
- It simply cannot compete with other platforms such as Right Move that offer easy access, quicker feedback and good quality advertising and marketing.
- It is confusing for applicants as their status changes according to who is registered and it therefore leads to frustrations when their priority changes.
- It categorises customers and does not enable them to see a full range of housing options that are and could be available to them throughout their life cycle as a customer of Thirteen. For example shared ownership, sales and other rented products.

As a member of the CBL partnership which includes the five Tees Valley local authorities as well as other housing associations, Thirteen has expressed concern about the system and approach for some time. Indeed other partners within the Steering Group have raised similar problems and issues, but only relatively minor improvements have been made over the years. CBL is no longer delivering for customers or Thirteen, the biggest reason for tenants leaving Thirteen is to go to the private rented sector and more than half of those registered on the system are not in priority need for rehousing. This is leading to a situation where we are not able to capture possible customers with the offer that we have.

Following discussions with Stockton Borough Council (SBC) around 18 months ago as part of the Delivery Board meetings, Thirteen and SBC agreed to work together to

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try to influence the wider Steering Group to look at more fundamental changes to allocations across the Tees Valley. Stockton BC took the lead on this and Thirteen organised and hosted an event in November last year with partners to identify the key issues and develop an improvement action plan. This event highlighted a number of areas of concern with the current system such as:

- The application process to apply for housing is unwieldy
- There has been a significant reduction in customer demand for advertised properties
- Customers report being confused with the CBL process
- Partners are applying processes differently i.e. notice periods, differences in one offer policy
- Thirteen and other housing providers are also using alternative platforms (such as Right move etc.) to advertise housing to try to generate more demand for properties.

Whilst this exercise was useful and there was a lot of consensus around the issues, the Steering Group decided to appoint a co-ordinator that would work with the group to develop a shorter housing application form and make some minor improvements to the back office. This was disappointing for Thirteen as we felt that it would not address the fundamental issues with CBL or improve customer satisfaction with the system and the overall experience of securing a home from Thirteen. However, Thirteen did agree to contribute to the costs of the co-ordinator for a year. The post has now been filled but no changes have yet been introduced. Thirteen is committed to working with the co-ordinator as part of the Steering Group until it leaves the scheme.. We remain committed to supporting partners and the people of Teesside in meeting their housing needs and raising their aspirations. When we launch our new system local authorities will have nomination arrangements with Thirteen (as they currently do with other Housing associations) that will ensure housing needs in each local authority area are addressed. We are working with the CBL Steering Group to draft up these agreements so they are in place for the future.

When was this decision made and how was this communicated to relevant partners?

The decision to leave the CBL scheme is part of the wider service transformation programme which was agreed as part of the Thirteen Strategic Plan developed in 2017. This set out the intention to:

‘Prepare an options appraisal to evaluate the best way of lettings e.g., use of choice based lettings and exploring the viability of other approaches’

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Members of the Steering Group were aware that Thirteen was carrying out an option appraisal and that various options were to be presented to the Thirteen Board for consideration. Clearly the outcome of this could not be communicated to the Partnership until the approval was given by the Thirteen Board. This was concluded on 12 September 2018 and this decision was communicated to the Chief Executives of the five local authorities by email on 26 September. A letter to the Chair of the CBL Steering Group was also sent on the 26 September by email to formally advise the Partnership of the decision. We did give 6 months' notice of this intention which is double the 3 month requirement in the partnership. Since that time, we have attended a number of meetings with the Steering Group, the Operational Group and individual local authorities and Registered Providers to discuss the implications of the decision and to share more of the details of our plan. The Partnership is a voluntary arrangement and members can leave (as did Accent Group), but we will expect to continue to work closely with local authorities once our new system is in place and we remain committed to this.

What are Thirteens proposals to replace the current Choice Based Lettings scheme?

The Choice Based Lettings scheme can continue to operate when Thirteen leaves and this is very much the decision of the remaining partners.

As part of our wider digital transformation programme, Thirteen has procured an ICT developer who is working with us to develop bespoke systems for our front line services. The first priority is to provide an easy to access digital lettings platform for customers along with customer access points and telephone advice/ applications. This improved process will enable Thirteen to react promptly and efficiently for customers requiring housing and showcase all of our available homes in one place irrespective of their tenure.

Details and an overview of the ICT system have been shared with the Compass Partnership Steering and Operation Groups. The ICT provider (Saadian) has also met with Local Authority partners to provide an overview for the platform and offer solutions for how they can link in with Thirteen's digital offer with regards to nomination requirements. We understand that these meetings have been very positive and the local authority representatives can see the potential of the system for their purposes. Again, we are committed to supporting our colleagues in this process.

Thirteen will continuing to work with Local Authority partners to put an effective process in place to offer nominations for households in housing need and the discussions with Saadian are available as the local authorities and partners wish.

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When will this be operational?

The Digital Lettings Platform will be available from April 2019. We have considered a request from the CBL Partnership to extend this timescale by a further three months to give more time for the group to deliver the necessary actions from their side. We are writing separately to the Partnership to agree this extension but we are clear that we cannot go beyond this additional timescale.

How is this being communicated to relevant partners and prospective tenants?

Thirteen is attending fortnightly operational meetings with partners to provide regular updates, answer queries and communicate progress. Thirteen will also continue to be an active member within the Steering and operational group meetings to facilitate this approach and enable a smooth transition.

There is a corporate communication plan that covers a wider remit than the Digital Lettings platform. The action plan has key milestones for media announcements; drop in sessions to promote the new system and customer/ stakeholder testing opportunities. It was previously agreed with Local Authorities that a joint approach for media announcements would be preferred. This is planned to commence in the New Year and further dialogue will be undertaken as we move past Christmas

Will a copy of this communication plan be shared with relevant stakeholders?

We have agreed that the plan will be shared with the Partnership. We now need to review this in light of the three month extension but it will be circulated once the dates are firmed up.

How can Members be satisfied that the new arrangements will serve the people of the Borough as well as, if not better, than the current Choice Based Lettings scheme?

The new system has been developed from a customer perspective to provide an accessible digital system that provides a range of services in addition to the Lettings platform. Customers will be involved in the testing of the Digital platform and feedback on improvements will be considered throughout this process. Thirteen is acting on previous feedback from customers that have highlighted that the current system is complex, difficult to understand and has a lengthy registration process. The new system will be more automated and therefore requires the applicant to do less. They will be directed to the most relevant housing product for their circumstances and preferences. This will include our full range of products such as shared ownership and more bespoke lettings such as live/work. It will truly be a 'one stop shop' for anyone wanting to access our accommodation in the Tees Valley.

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We will be capturing feedback through the testing and live running phases to ensure that we remain responsive to and aware of customer demands. Thirteen has invested heavily in developing a flexible data structure and experience platform that will best serve customers in all aspects of the housing market. We will be happy to share these findings and present them back to Members in due course.

*Thirteen Housing Group
December 2018*