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Reports that have been submitted to Council can be downloaded from [www.birmingham.gov.uk/scrutiny](http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/scrutiny).



# Preface

**By Councillor Susan Barnett**

Chair Health and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee

In March 2012 the former Housing and Urban Renewal Overview and Scrutiny Committee completed its investigation into choice based lettings and older people. I am pleased to be able to now present the report and recommendations to Council.

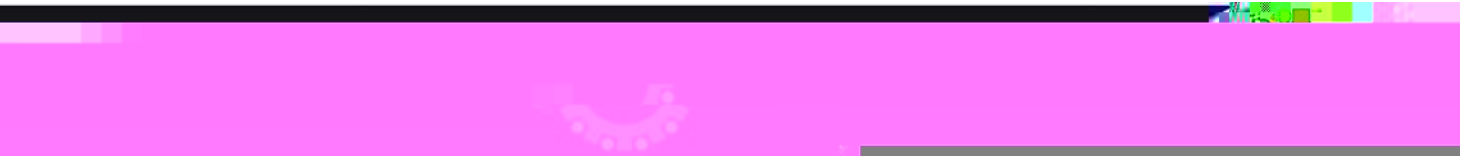
Members embarked on this piece of work following a re





## Summary of Recommendations

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R01	That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing develops a more proactive approach to dealing with older people in the high priority bands A and B who have not participated in Birmingham Home Choice in the previous six months.	Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing	December 2012
R02	That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing explores what additional support could be made available to older people on the housing register to encourage a move within Birmingham Home Choice (building on the good practice existing within the Directorate of the Clearance and Wise Move teams) and the resource implications of this.	Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing	December 2012
R03	That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing consults with the over 60s on the housing register regarding their reasons for being on the register, satisfaction with the process and, if applicable, reasons for non-participation.	Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing	December 2012
R04	That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing		



	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R05	That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing explores whether more needs to be done to ensure all older people have access to the Birmingham Home Choice property news		



	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R11	That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing ensures access to housing for older people is as transparent as possible by exploring: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The opportunities for ensuring that all social</li></ul>		



# 1 The Aim of the Report

- 1.1 This work commenced after a report to the former Housing and Urban Renewal Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2011. Members were concerned as there appeared to be evidence that participation rates by older people in Birmingham Home Choice is lower than other age groups. They wanted to investigate this and to determine, if it is a systematic problem, and if so, what should be put in place to address it.
- 1.2 That report indicated that older people participate in the system significantly less than the under 50s. Our focus was on applicants in the Band B priority group (those with severe but less urgent housing needs) as those are people who should have a good opportunity of obtaining a property.
- 1.3 This data showed the numbers who had signed up to the scheme, but had not participated (made a bid). Only 20% of under 50s had not participated, compared to 39% of 50-60s and rising to a majority (57%) of over 70s.
- 1.4 This review draws on that report; an evidence gathering session on 9<sup>th</sup>



## 2 Background: Choice and Older People

- 2.1 Choice based lettings are part of the 'personalisation' of public services agenda as they place the onus of matching vacancies on the home seeker, rather than the landlord. This approach also enables social landlords to make





## 4 Barriers and Participation

- 4.1 There are a number of reasons why people may not actively participate in choice based lettings schemes. These include:
- The lack of visibility of the service and the difficulty of registration;
  - The lack of access to information about vacant properties and how to bid;
  - The inability to understand written material (language or literacy difficulties);
  - The inability to understand the scheme and exercise informed choice;
  - The inability to adopt a bidding strategy or use the available bidding methods;
  - The inability to participate in bidding for a sustained period, for example due to poor mental health; and
  - The lack of housing choice.<sup>4</sup>
- 4.2 A rough estimate in research published by the Department for Communities and Local Government stated that around 5-10 per cent of people seeking to secure social housing need additional help.<sup>5</sup> This includes, but is not limited to older people.
- 4.3 The former Housing and Urban Renewal Overview and Scrutiny Committee heard in October 2011 that 35% of those registered with Birmingham Home Choice had not participated in the choice based letting scheme by placing a bid.
- 4.4 A snap shot from the Homes and Neighbourhoods Directorate identified that age is clearly a determining factor in the non-participation rate in Birmingham (see Chart 1).<sup>6</sup> There are four bandings of housing need; those in band A have the highest need and therefore the most points to secure a property. There are not enough older people in band A to be able to reach firm conclusions on their participation rates compared to other age groups.
- 4.5 In band B, however, there are more than 1000 people over fifty years old who have been assessed as having fairly high levels of housing need. Looking at the participation rates of older people in band B, the non-participation rate doubles in relation to the over 50s age group with over 47% of the 1,195 people not participating. This compares with 20% of the 3,553 under 50 year olds who were not participating in the scheme (See Table 1).

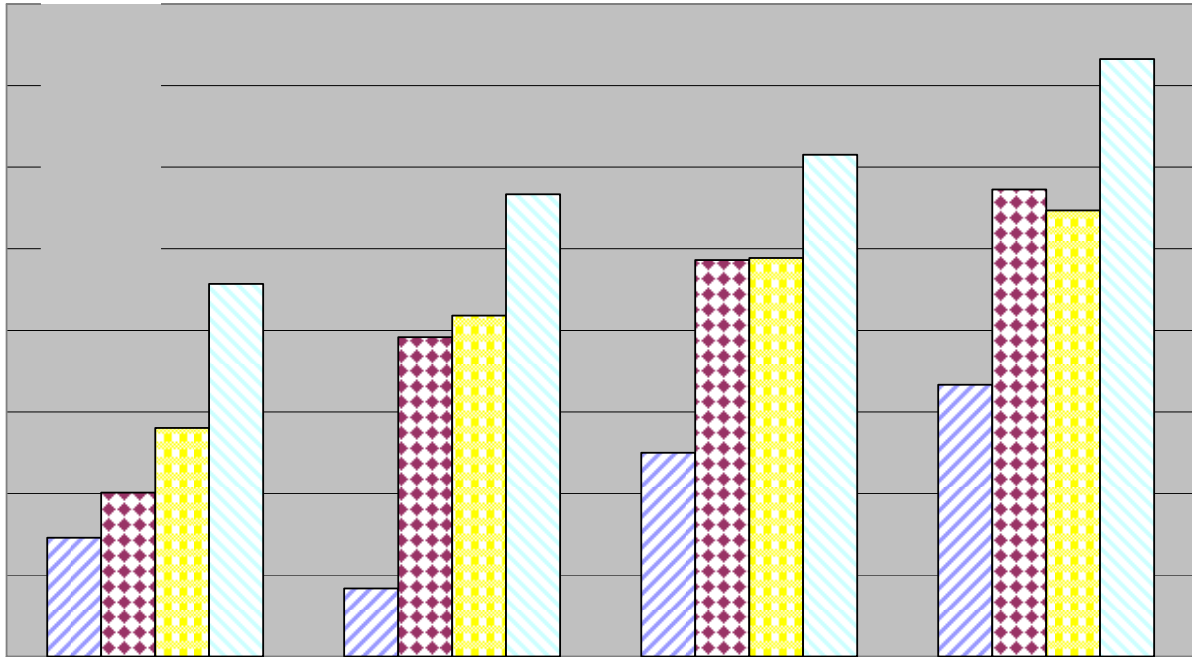
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<sup>4</sup> Lomax, D and Pawson, H (2011) *Choice-based Lettings, Potentially Disadvantaged Groups and Accessible Housing Registers: A Summary Guide to Positive Practice*. DCLG

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Report to Housing and Urban Renewal Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 21<sup>st</sup> October 2011

**Chart 1: Non-Participation in Birmingham Home Choice by Age – October 2011**





## 5 Developing a Proactive Service

- 5.1 For the Committee, the key theme which emerged relates to the need for a choice based lettings scheme to be proactive in its dealings with older people. Steps need to be taken to ensure all vulnerable people and users with additional support requirements are identified.
- 5.2 As the user-led nature of the model can disadvantage some people, Government guidance states that information on an applicant's requirement for support should be proactively sought, routinely collected and shared with partners when appropriate. It notes the very elderly as one group likely to require support.<sup>7</sup> Trigger questions should be included in initial applications (e.g. "Do you need a support worker?"), and frontline staff should see it as routine to ask applicants if they want any help. Local good practice examples include:
- In **Wolverhampton** people are asked on their initial application form if they require assistance. A dedicated support team follow this up with support and advice, if required.
  - **Nottingham's** HomeLink team contacts people with, for example, medical needs on their application form, to ensure that they have support to bid. Those over 60 are sent information on properties. The team also undertake outreach to open days at warden controlled schemes so that they can identify anyone interested in applying for the scheme and, therefore, who will need to be registered and possibly supported to use HomeLink.
- 5.3 In **Birmingham** support needs can be noted at point of registration or after. For example, an applicant can alert the Directorate or an officer may make contact if the applicant has not bid. Recently, the Directorate has been developing a more proactive approach and has made contact with applicants who have not bid and provided assistance where needed. The tailored support could be initial advice and guidance, a 'walk through' of placing a bid, arranging a face to face appointment, weekly telephone calls or sending out the newsletter.
- 5.4 Members note that some local teams within the Directorate are very proactive in this issue and would encourage that good practice be embedded across the city.
- 5.5 In addition to identifying users needing additional support Members believe routine monitoring should take place of those applicants who are high priority, but have not been bidding. Good practice in contacting people who are not participating has been identified in **Bristol** and **Sandwell** and is backed by Department for Communities and Local Gov8 Tw c4.9rGant: .1(d)JJ2TT13 1

tendency to enter ineligible bids – may be a sign that the applicant does not understand or has difficulty navigating the choice based lettings system.”<sup>8</sup>

#### **HomeChoice Bristol**

Bristol City Council sent out a questionnaire to applicants over 65 on the housing register asking about their bidding habits; whether they had ever bid or never bid; and what their usual bidding method was. Of the total responses 49% said they had placed a bid, half of these said they bid via the internet.

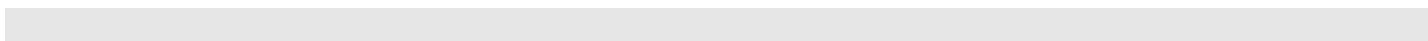
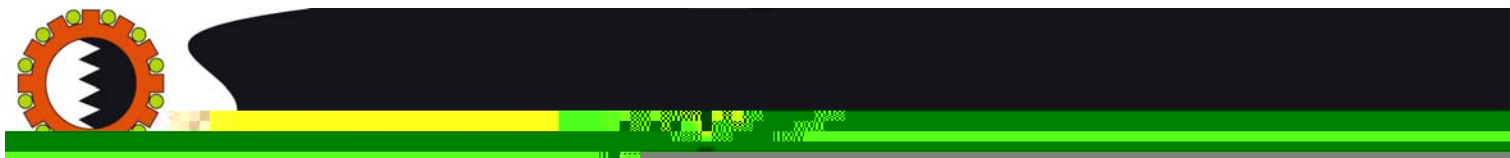
The questionnaire highlighted that many applicants were not bidding because they were only interested in bidding for property types that were in short supply (bungalows). Respondents were then contacted and, where appropriate, the bidding process was explained and realistic advice given regarding the types of properties they could expect to see advertised through HomeChoice Bristol. In order to ensure that older applicants fully understand the scheme and the bidding process, the Rehousing Adviser follows this up with a phone call to discuss how they are going to bid and what support they might need to access the system.

Bristol has introduced more detailed icons to make it easier for applicants to identify properties suitable for their needs, for example icons for a wheelchair accessible shower, or downstairs toilet.

#### **Sandwell: A Proactive Approach**

Choice based lettings has been operating across the borough since 2005. In 2010 approximately 93% of Council voids and 50% of housing association voids were allocated through the scheme, including adapted properties. Extra Care properties are first allocated through a Social Services Housing Panel, and those not allocated in this way are added to choice based lettings.

Bids can be made via the internet (found to be unpopular with older persons), contact centres and via a





## 6 Understanding and Addressing Barriers to Older People's Participation

- 6.1 Extra Care Housing is currently not part of the Birmingham Home Choice scheme. As some older people are not eligible for it, this means that older people are not able to participate in the scheme. This is a barrier to older people's participation in the scheme.



- 6.7 Age Concern has been asked to support the current EINA work and it is important that in carrying out equality analysis that all equality strands, including age, are properly examined.
- 6.8 In **Stoke on Trent** applicants with no housing need are placed on an inactive housing register. There would appear to be advantages of this system. Applicants do not have an unrealistic expectation of getting a home through that route, but it ensures a list of interested people who can be offered a low demand property. In the context of choice based lettings it also helps ensure a more realistic picture of housing needs. This has particular relevance in the context of older people given the levels of void sheltered housing schemes. At the time of writing there are 145 sheltered voids in Birmingham. The local housing teams have recently been successful letting some of the long term voids, particularly in sheltered high rise, by holding open days and targeting eligible customers.

**See Recommendation 3**





think that attendance at such events when those being up-skilled are encouraged to cascade that information are an effective way of providing information within current resource constraints.

- 7.14 Participants at the Older People's Reference Group also noted the need to inform organisations dealing with different communities (such as the Irish Welfare Office and St Anne's) about Birmingham Home Choice.

### Care Centres

- 7.15 The Committee heard from the Council's Community Links Service which runs services from four care centres, each working across 2½ Districts with the remit to support older people. Each of the centres has an IT suite which is open to local older people, in addition to those in residence. Staff can also visit older people in their own homes with a laptop to provide support. Members were surprised, therefore, to note that the Community Links team were unaware of Birmingham Home Choice. They had been involved in no joint working with the Homes and Neighbourhoods Directorate on this subject, and nor do centres receive the newsletters. There are obviously opportunities, which should be investigated, regarding supplying the centres with the weekly newsletter, and wider advertisement of the availability of computers and support in these centres for older people in the community. There is also a need to up-skill the staff to support residents in accessing Birmingham Home Choice.
- 7.16 It is also important that the professionals (such as GPs and social workers) supporting older people understand how choice based lettings works. Further work should be undertaken to understand how they perceive choice based lettings. One approach to getting buy-in from their organisations is by highlighting the savings which could be made to their budgets if the older people they work with have access to appropriate housing.

**See Recommendation 4**



## 8 Information About Using the Scheme and Available Properties

### Newsletter

- 8.1 It was noted that, although the newsletter is not divided into sections, it advertises each of the five housing areas of the city in sequence. Properties suitable for older people are dispersed throughout the newsletter.
- 8.2 The Directorate sends out approximately 100 newsletters each week to customers who are vulnerable (and may be old) and have no other way to view and bid on the properties. It is usual that officers send them a copy and then ring them before the cycle closes. If they are interested in any of the properties, the officer can bid on their behalf (a management bid). The **Sussex** choice based lettings scheme, Homemove, charges a small subscription fee to have the newsletter posted directly to a user's home for six months.

### Website


- 8.3 When the Committee had a demonstration of the website they felt it was generally well laid out with a good level of information about the system and properties. Members noted that there is a language option which will ensure translation of much of the site. On the website anyone can look for available properties: this is positive for those supporting older people looking for properties. However, without individuals having to log on it does mean that the Directorate cannot determine who is inactive and who is looking, but not bidding.
- 8.4 The website has photos of all City Council properties and most housing association ones. Symbols and text are side by side and there is a notes field for additional information. Rents and service charges are included. There is also a view date so applicants know when they would have to be available for a viewing, if they were shortlisted. There is a search facility to narrow down options by size and area of the city (zones A-E).

### Suitable Accommodation

- 8.5 The current Council policy is that only applicants who need a property with adaptations and have been assessed by an occupational therapist can be allocated a home with major adaptations.<sup>11</sup> These properties are identified with a wheelchair icon in the newsletter and on the website. The intention was to provide further detail of adaptations and suitability, but this has not been done.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.birminghamhomechoice.org.uk/media/file/AllocationSummary.pdf>



8.6 It was suggested that older people general



housing which is sent out to people making enquiries and used to promote the service at open days.

- 8.12 Members understand that there is some segmentation of this market. Some over 50s may be attracted to vertical high rise as a quieter option, whilst some older people will be interested in the activities provided in the community hub or additional support needs. It was noted that, although a range of explanatory documents were available on the home page of Birmingham Home Choice website, there was not one on sheltered housing. The Committee suggest that this be added.

### **Access to Information**

- 8.13 It is necessary to have access to the printed newsletter or access to the internet to obtain information on property vacancies. Alternative ways of bidding are not helpful as the automated phone system requires property identification numbers. Digital TV has limited information on properties available.
- 8.14 Advice available to people using the system is limited. There is a user guide which signposts people requiring help to a neighbourhood office and provides a phone number for making an appointment. It shows no helpline number. The weekly newsletter, however, provides a helpline number, but this service has been identified by the Directorate as requiring review.

**See Recommendations 5 to 7**





## 9 Bidding: Enabling Older People's Participation

9.1 As noted there are a range of methods for bidding for properties. In August 2011, in relation to Birmingham Home Choice, the Audit Commission Report on Landlord Services stated that:

"Some aspects of the scheme are positive, including housing associations being part of the initiative, digital TV access to the service and help for vulnerable people to make bids..."


9.2 Properties are advertised each Thursday and bidding



- 9.4 On the same web page is the information for properties advertised each week, regarding how many points each successful applicant had and the number of bidders. Members recognise this is important information as choice only works if users understand how it works and what the choice really is. Members suggest that improvements to the website are explored to see if this data can be incorporated in the feedback to individual bidders. In the shorter term, Members recommend that the pages are renamed to be more accessible to users.
- 9.5 Some properties are in low demand and after being advertised a couple of times are classified as Readily Available Properties. As soon as anyone makes an eligible bid for these they are taken off the website and a viewing is arranged. On the website the acronym RAP is used for such properties and the Committee suggest that acronyms (which it felt were off-putting for older people) are removed entirely from the website.

### **Access to IT Equipment and Support**

- 9.6 Despite there being a variety of bidding methods available the vast majority of people continue to choose to bid online. A single week's snapshot indicated that 96.6% of all the bids made had been made through the internet.<sup>12</sup>
- 9.7 At the Older People's Reference Group meeting half of those present did not use computers. One participant informed us that research indicates that 60% of over 65s have never used the internet.
- 9.8 On the website the system will only show properties applicants are entitled to bid for, if they have logged in. Areas relating to the bidding process where the Committee consider improvements could be made include:
- Including a phone number (so applicants can request a new PIN and ID number) next to where they need to input it to log in. This is particularly important for people who have not bid previously or have not bid for a long time;
  - There is a field saying "notes/queries", which could say something stronger to elicit communication and determine who may require help, such as "if you have any queries or need any support in bidding the Home Choice team will get in contact"; and
  - Enabling the change of contact details to be changed by the user directly (although as many changes of details have an impact on the allocation of points there may be valid reasons not to proceed with this).
- 9.9 For those without computer and internet access, there are a number of ways in which they can access a computer to make a bid. Locations where computers can be accessed free of charge to make bids include:
- Five dedicated computers in the Property Shop which is in the ground floor of the Central



Two of the computers have assistive software installed to assist people with visual impairments;


- Local community libraries;
- Some of the offices of the social housing providers involved in the scheme;
- Neighbourhood offices; and
- Homeless hubs.

9.10 The Library Service has given some consideration to



concern about the lack of time users had to input their details and that the PIN number is repeated back, as this could compromise security.

- 9.16 A form should be developed which indicates the questions which will be asked to ensure older people have their ID, PIN and the property advert numbers all to hand prior to phoning. Otherwise the automated system can be intimidating.
- 9.17 **Coventry** Homefinder supports vulnerable people who approach the service and have no support

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- 9.22 Overall, the view from the Birmingham Social Housing Partnership was that some older people need support to access choice based lettings and make bids, and that this needs to be happen more formally through enhanced management bidding and a dedicated help team.
- 9.23 Discussion with officers indicates that assisted bidding by support workers and family members is encouraged where it is felt that the existing methods disadvantage individuals. This requires an older person to disclose their log in details and a clear understanding about the nature of properties they would accept. This is only publicised, currently, in a frequently asked questions area of the website and, perhaps, should be incorporated as an option for those requiring additional support.
- 9.24 **In Shropshire**, Homepoint, the choice based lettings scheme, advises people that they can ask a relative, friend, carer or support worker to receive details on their behalf and help them bid on their website.

**See Recommendations 8 to 10**



# 10 Transparent Social Housing Options for Older People

# 11 Conclusions and Recommendations

- 11.1 Members support the successful roll out of the choice based lettings system, but have some concerns about the impact on older people. One particular area Members would like to be explored through the Directorate's review of the first year of Birmingham Home Choice is the reasons for non-participation of older people. Steps can be taken to make the scheme more widely understood; more user friendly for older people; and to help ensure a good fit between the available housing stock and specific housing needs.
- 11.2 It is important to ensure that the Council is carrying out its duties under the Equality Act 2010 and its obligations under the Housing Act 1996:
- "A local housing authority shall secure that any necessary assistance in making such an application (for an allocation of housing accommodation) is available



### **Developing a Proactive Approach**

**Recommendation 1:** That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing develops a more proactive approach to dealing with older people in the high priority bands A and B who have not participated in Birmingham Home Choice in the previous six months.

**Recommendation 2:** That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing explores what additional support could be made available to older people on the housing register to encourage a move within Birmingham Home Choice (building on the good practice existing within the Directorate of the Clearance and Wise Move teams) and the resource implications of this.

### **Understanding and Addressing Barriers to Older People's Participation**

**Recommendation 3:** That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing consults with the over 60s on the housing register regarding their reasons for being on the register, satisfaction with the process and, if applicable, reasons for non-participation.

### **Informing Older People and Others about Birmingham Home Choice**

**Recommendation 4:** That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing explores further opportunities for advertising Birmingham Home Choice and up-skilling Council staff and key partners to support older users to include:

- Identifying officers (including those in the Community Links Service) and partners who would benefit from a better understanding of Birmingham Home Choice; using and creating opportunities (including training and mailings of information) to up-skill them and encouraging them to cascade information; and implementing cost effective ways of informing them about the scheme on an ongoing basis;
- Encouraging officers to develop local solutions, building on existing networks and local knowledge, to advertise local voids and target marketing to eligible older people and professionals (such as GPs and District Nurses) working with older people; and
- Exploring the possibility of using care centres and other suitable venues for holding events to publicise the service to partners and local communities.

### **Information About Using the Scheme and Available Properties**

**Recommendation 5:** That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing explores whether more needs to be done to ensure all older people have access to the Birmingham Home Choice property newsletter, such as sending it to care centres, exploring the additional resources required of distributing the newsletter to more residents.

**Recommendation 6:** That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing reviews the existing Birmingham Home Choice helpline and its resourcing.



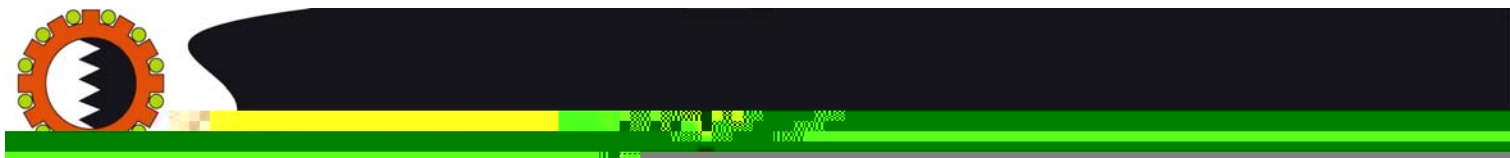
**Recommendation 7:** That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing explores how further information about property adaptations, scope for adaptations and suitability for older people could be provided through:

- Consulting with users on improving the information on available properties;
- Aligning the stock condition survey to meet this need and incorporating relevant information into the Birmingham Home Choice system;
- Encouraging the development of local information alongside the stock condition survey to fill gaps over the five year survey period and to ensure that data is updated as appropriate; and
- Increasing the scope of the symbols used in the Birmingham Home Choice property data to incorporate information relating to adaptations and suitability, whilst also ensuring that such information is provided in text form.

#### **Bidding: Enabling Older People's Participation**

**Recommendation 8:** That the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing ensures there is on-going dialogue with the Library Service especially with regard to:

- The Community Libraries Service Review and proposed opening hours; sharing information about weekly patterns on the Birmingham Home Choice web use, and any potential changes to the weekly bidding cycle;
- Opportunities for extending information and support through the Home Library Service; and
-



# Appendix 1: Witnesses

We would like to thank the witnesses listed below who met with Members regarding choice based lettings, plus other officers and partners who provided us with additional information.

Linda Butler – Head of Library Services, Environment and Culture

Barry Clewer – Chairman of the Birmingham Advisory Council of Older People

Jim Crawshaw – Integrated Service Head – Homelessness and Pre-Tenancy Services, Homes and Neighbourhoods

Gaynor Darby – Birmingham Home Choice Allocations Manager, Homes and Neighbourhoods

Lucy Hales – Director of Housing and Care Services, Nehemiah UCHA

Norman Howell – Chairman of the City-wide Older Peoples Reference Group

Devinder Kalhan – Group Manager, Specialist Care Services, Adult and Communities

Wendy Peniket – Lettings Manager Sandwell Homes Ltd

Ann-Marie Powell – Head of Housing Strategy and Commissioning, Homes and Neighbourhoods

Emma Pugh – Service Manager – Community Links, Perry Tree Centre, Adult and Communities

Neville Rowe – Strategy and Research Manager, Sandwell MBC

Members of the City-Wide Older Peoples Group