



Improving efficiency & customer service at South Norfolk Council

Following a lean service review of its housing allocation policies and processes, South Norfolk Council selected Abrisitas' integrated web-based housing needs software to increase efficiency and improve its service to customers.

Introduction

As a rural area, South Norfolk is a popular place to live, with a population of ca. 110,000 and as in most other regions of the UK social housing stock is a scarce resource, representing just 11% of the total housing available. In November 2007, a choice based lettings scheme for affordable housing was introduced, enabling the public to bid for properties that were available to rent. Each household that applied was awarded

preference according to how urgently they needed housing.

South Norfolk Council has been using Abrisitas' Choice Based Letting (CBL) software since that time and in 2011, in conjunction with KPMG, undertook a lean service review of its housing allocation policies and processes, with a view to improving efficiency and consequently its service to customers.



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The Review Process

The review process involved looking at the customer journey and considering how it could be improved by making the processes simpler and how by providing a more personal, individual service council resources could be focused most on customers with a housing need.

At the time the council used Abrisas' CBL software in conjunction with Capita's Open Housing system, along with numerous other spreadsheets to manage temporary accommodation.

The lean service review confirmed the belief of the housing team that one integrated system would improve both the working systems for the team and the service to the customer. The data collected during the review supported this view and helped quantify the cost of staff time wasted as a result of inefficient and unnecessary processes, as well as showing where actual savings and improvements could be made.

A review of the formerly 5,000 strong housing register also highlighted that 70% of applicants had little or no need for social housing and just over half had never even bid for a home under its current CBL scheme.

At the same time the housing team considered whether to return to a nomination based lettings approach, however could not think of a single reason to do so, since choice based lettings (CBL) had delivered so many improvements in the service offered to customers. Primarily CBL offers a much more transparent approach to assessment of need against

simple bands that is open and clear to both customers and partners. Applicants are also aware of all properties that become available and can choose which ones to apply for, as well as receive feedback on previously advertised properties and which band the successful applicant was in.

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Gill Duffy
Housing & Advice Services Manager, South Norfolk Council

Solution

Using the results of the review, the council progressed a tender for the procurement of a single new integrated system. The selection criteria used covered a combination of factors – ability to host the system, track record of delivery, cost functionality and ability to provide the service the council wanted.

Ultimately the decision was made to implement a complete Abrisas solution consisting of an upgraded version of the CBL solution already in place, plus the Housing Register, Housing Advice & Homelessness and Tenancies & Rents modules.



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Gill Duffy, Housing & Advice Services Manager at South Norfolk Council explains:

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Other factors included the fact that the Abrisas system is externally hosted and all modules are browser based and easily navigable, coupled with Abrisas' willingness and flexibility to work on innovating new ideas and requirements.

In addition to implementing the new system, South Norfolk Council has introduced strict new rules for social housing applications to dramatically reduce its housing register. Any applicant with a housing need would qualify for the register, as well as any applicants who have a local connection. Previously anyone from anywhere could join simply by filling out a form, this has now been replaced with a two-stage interview with officers and then those who do join the register must then actively pursue a social home. Anyone failing to make at least one bid in a year is removed from the register.

The new rules will not only reduce South Norfolk's housing register, they will also allow the authority to concentrate resources and efforts on those in greatest need. Thereby echoing the government's call last year for a return to the central principle that social

housing should only be given to those in greatest need.

Outcome and Benefits

Abrisas has recently successfully completed the implementation of phase 1 of the project and phase 2 to add in the Abrisas Enhanced Housing Options module is currently underway.

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Gill Duffy

Housing & Advice Services Manager, South Norfolk Council

Gill Duffy describes Abrisas' support in positive terms:

"We have had a good relationship with our project manager and the helpdesk is always understanding and responsive."

In terms of benefits realised Gill explains:



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It is too early to quantify the cost benefits at this early stage; however the council is expecting to save costs on staffing and administration over the next year as a result of changing the way in which the housing team works.

The new system has enabled smoother processes and reduced the time spent on administration so that the team can focus on spending time with customers giving them advice and encouraging them to choose realistic options. It has also led to the greater engagement of customers in the system, who are now able to understand the information held about them and update it and their application themselves.

In response to the question 'What do you like most about the Abrisas system?' Gill explains:

"The customised elements that enable our policy and processes to be smoothly managed i.e. firstly the automatic short listing of applicants where there are complicated s106 and local needs cascade criteria in place and secondly the folder that shows the applicants who have not placed a bid for a year."

Conclusion

Many councils are in the process of or have already undertaken reviews of their housing allocation practices and policy; however the focus for South Norfolk Council was firmly on improving the service to the customer and not simply on cutting resources. They have clearly demonstrated that simpler processes will naturally result in costs savings.

The council believes that their housing register is more up to date and truly represents housing need and housing desire as a result and that the choice based lettings approach gives customers the best service, as it is transparent and gives them choice over the areas and property types that they can apply for. It does not, of course, provide a home for every applicant.

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