

Transformation

Organisational Re-engineering

Housing and Regeneration Services

**(Voids & Allocations, Estate Management & Rent &
Money Advice Teams)**

Management Report

September 2014

Management Report – Housing and Regeneration Landlord Services OR

1.0 Executive Summary

1.1 Introduction

The Council's Business Plan recognises Organisational Re-engineering (OR) as an essential tool in helping to deliver savings and efficiencies for the authority in a planned and co-ordinated way. Following a Major Service Review exercise, Members agreed that the Council's OR Manager would be best utilised to conduct reviews within Housing and Regeneration Services. A 24-month period has been allocated for undertaking this work from April 2013 to March 2015. The OR Manager spent 80% of their time conducting this review; the cost of this was funded from the Housing Revenue Account. The remaining 20% of the OR Managers time was funded from the General Revenue Account to allow the OR Manager to conduct corporate work.

It was agreed that the OR Manager's first review would be conducted across three service areas. These are:-

- Voids & Allocations
- Estate Management
- Rent & Money advice

1.2 Purpose

The review commenced in May 2013 and explored the 'lifecycle' of a tenant, starting at the beginning of the customer's journey when a Housing application is made through to termination of the tenancy.

To achieve this it concentrated on high volume services provided to customers from the above service area.

The OR Manager was asked to explore alternative methods of service delivery whilst conducting this review to ascertain if there is any merit in restructuring the three teams.

The three key objectives were to:

- Carry out an Organisational Re-Engineering project within the Council's Housing and Regeneration Landlord Services and make appropriate recommendations for improved service delivery. These recommendations will ensure that the services operate in the most efficient, effective and economic manner and support delivery of the vision to be a 'Top Performing Landlord'
- Where possible embed capability and capacity into operational running so that it is sustainable after the project closes. This will enable officers to build on the success of the project by continuing lean systems thinking and seek to deliver continuous improvement.
- To maximise the accessibility of services using customer insight to ensure they are targeted and tailored to the specific needs of the Housing and Regeneration Services customer base and promote where possible channel shift in line with the authorities corporate objectives.

1.3 How the review was conducted

The review was conducted using the Council's OR model, which incorporates Prince II Principles and Lean Methodology. The Council's OR Manager led the review and worked closely with the Council's Housing Operations Manager. Accordingly, a Project Board was set up in order to oversee the work.

To assist the OR Manager a Project Team made up of key officers from Housing and other sections of the Council was set up. Members of the Project Team met throughout the review attending meetings when required, as directed by the Project Manager/Operations Manager.

The review used the three voices method, which captures the ‘voice of the Customer’, the ‘voice of the Staff’ and the ‘voice of the Process’. Staff were highly engaged throughout the review and Managers and staff who deliver the service were involved in the following ways:-

- Interviews/workshops to identify issues, map out processes both at the ‘As is’ stage and ‘To be’ stages, identify wasteful activity within processes and ‘Blue Sky’ Workshops.
- Assisted in the collation of workload volumes, numbers of processes and ICT data, this included completing timesheets/visit sheets.
- Helped conduct telephone/email surveys with customers who had used one of the three services within six months prior to the review starting and arrange focus groups with customers to obtain their views in relation to current service delivery as well as their aspirations for the future.
- Participated in desktop research, a site visit Halton Housing and attended Housing Conferences and Seminars to ascertain and share best practice.

1.4 Findings

Section 4 of this report gives a detailed breakdown of the findings from this review including a list of operational recommendations for improvement. For ease, these have been grouped into the following high-level headings.

- Generic Working - The customer experience could be further improved by having generic Housing Officers. Housing Officers currently work in functional teams i.e. Voids and Allocations, Estate Management and Rents & Money Advice. This can, on occasion lead to silo working, duplication within processes and the Customer not knowing whom to contact when they have a particular issue. Specialist teams were set up to deliver performance improvement, which was achieved, the service having previously been delivered on a generic basis.
- Improve customer access – the number of services customers can access at first point of contact i.e. via the Council’s website/Customer Services and through mobile working is limited at present. This often results in the customer having to speak to multiple officers when queries could be resolved in one interaction.
- ICT Systems should be automated to streamline processes. An example of this is the applications process, which is currently paper driven and as a result the 3 FTEs within this team spend the majority of their time data inputting. A further example is service requests from front office currently creates an email to Housing back office which then has to be input into the Housings QL system. This rework could be mitigated if systems were more integrated however, costs of integration would need to be considered.

1.5 Key Recommendations

Below is an outline summary of the main recommendations that have been derived from the findings within Section 4 of this report, together with a general summary of the more salient points and outcomes of the project:-

1. Promote and increase online Housing applications and phase out paper applications completely.
2. Explore flexible working arrangements for Housing staff delivering the three services to include early evenings/Saturday mornings. This may require a change to contracts.
3. Develop/Integrate ICT systems, which will stop duplication of work, allow information to be accessed in real – time and provide a more efficient service to Customers. This includes integration between – Northgate Front Office system and Housings QL client database system.
4. Restructure the Voids & Allocations, Estate Management and Rent & Money Advice teams from three teams into two with a view to freeing up a cashable resource saving of

approximately £235,000 to be reinvested back into the Housing and Regeneration Services (as detailed in section 4.5.2 of this report).

5. Explore the flexibility of creating a customer sign in for Council tenants on the Council’s website – As a result, customers will be able to access more services online.
6. Consider applying for paperless accreditation from the bank to allow direct debits to be set up in one transaction and everyday direct debits.
7. Empower Customer Services staff to provide a service at first point of contact; to include setting up direct debits, booking/rearranging appointments for Housing staff, providing advice and assistance for Housing applications, bidding and allocations enquiries including assistance with online applications. This will require a resource/cash transfer of 1.5 FTEs.
8. Run a pilot in Customer Services to enable Customer Service staff to talk to customers about their rent account when they contact the council. This includes capturing payments and where appropriate setting up payment arrangements. This will require a resource/cash transfer of 1 FTE.
9. Develop a set of internal service standards for delivery of work related to Landlord Services.
10. Implement the corporate EDM solution within the Landlord Service areas reviewed.

1.6 Savings

The following table provides an estimated summary of the cash and efficiency savings that will be generated within the first year i.e. 2016/17 as a result of implementing those recommendations detailed within Section 5 of this report.

Section	Full Year OR Cash/Resource savings (£)	Full Year OR Efficiency (£)
<u>Housing Options</u>	£48,519	£15,500
<u>Voids & Allocations</u>	£178,329	£11,600
<u>Estate Management</u>	£39,418	£10,600
<u>Rent & Money Advice</u>	£42,734	£73,265
<u>Additional Savings i.e. stationary/printing etc</u>	£4,950	£3,300
Total	£313,950	£114,265
<u>Transfer of Cash/Resources</u>	£73,080	
Total full year cash saving/resource	£240,870	
Total full year efficiency saving		£114,265

This space left intentionally blank for formatting purposes

<i>Management Report – Housing and Regeneration Landlord Services OR</i>	2
<i>1.0 Executive Summary</i>	2
<i>1.1 Introduction</i>	2
<i>1.2 Purpose</i>	2
<i>1.3 How the review was conducted</i>	2
<i>1.4 Findings</i>	3
<i>1.5 Key Recommendations</i>	3
<i>1.6 Savings</i>	4
<i>2.0 Background and Overview</i>	6
<i>2.1 Introduction</i>	6
<i>2.2 Purpose and Aim</i>	6
<i>2.3 Scope & Key Objectives</i>	6
<i>2.4 Approach & Methodology</i>	7
<i>3.0 Factors for Consideration</i>	8
<i>3.1 Changes throughout the review</i>	8
<i>3.2 Welfare Reform</i>	9
<i>4.1 The Voice Exercises</i>	10
<i>4.1.1 The voice of the Customer</i>	10
<i>4.1.2 The voice of the Process</i>	12
<i>4.1.3 The voice of the Staff</i>	13
<i>4.2 Voids & Allocations/Housing Options</i>	14
<i>4.2.1 Housing Options</i>	14
<i>4.2.2 Voids & Allocations</i>	16
<i>4.3 Estate Management Team (EMT)</i>	18
<i>4.4 Rents & Money Advice</i>	20
<i>4.5 Cross Cutting Themes</i>	22
<i>4.5.1 Customer Access</i>	22
<i>4.5.2 Cross team working</i>	26
<i>4.5.3 ICT</i>	28
<i>4.5.5 Partnership working</i>	29
<i>5.0 Project Recommendations</i>	30
<i>6.0 Savings</i>	31
<i>7.0 Continuous improvement</i>	32
<i>8.0 Implementation</i>	33

2.0 Background and Overview

2.1 Introduction

The Council's Business Plan recognises Organisational Re-engineering (OR) as an essential tool in helping to deliver savings and efficiencies for the authority in a planned and co-ordinated way. Following a Major Service Review exercise, Members agreed that the Council's OR Manager would be best utilised to conduct reviews within Housing and Regeneration Services. A 24-month period has been allocated for undertaking this work from April 2013 to March 2015. The OR Manager spent 80% of their time conducting this review; the cost of this was funded from the Housing Revenue Account. The remaining 20% of the OR Managers time was funded from the General Revenue Account to allow the OR Manager to conduct corporate work.

2.2 Purpose and Aim

The OR exercise within Housing and Regeneration Landlord Services has resulted in this detailed findings/recommendations report and it was agreed that the review must identify opportunities for service efficiencies and improvements to support the service in achieving their vision of becoming a top performing Landlord.

The Project Initiation Document (PID) stated, 'The project will achieve this by looking to develop new ways of working based on findings from 'the voice of the customer, the voice of the process and the voice of people'. Ultimately, the project will look to create positive change within Landlord Services. These changes could include culture (championing Continuous Improvement (CI)) as well as changes to roles and structures. It will seek to remove waste from existing processes, through re-design and change; and provide sustainability and agility for the service as a whole.'

The main aim of the review was to help the Council's Housing and Regeneration Service achieve their vision:-

'To be a top performing Landlord in an economically vibrant West Lancashire'.

The Project Board agreed within the PID that the review would support this by generating service efficiencies and any savings resulting from this could, as an option, then be reinvested within the service to support delivery of this vision.

2.3 Scope & Key Objectives

It was agreed that the OR Manager's first review would be conducted across three service areas. These are:-

- Voids & Allocations
- Estate Management
- Rent & Money Advice

The review commenced in May 2013 and explored the 'lifecycle' of a tenant, starting at the beginning of the customer's journey when a Housing application is made, through to termination of the tenancy. It concentrated on the services provided to customers from the above service areas. It should however be noted that this did not include the services delivered by Property Services as this will be the next area for review and will be looked at separately in the future.

The OR Manager was asked to explore alternative methods of service delivery whilst conducting this review to ascertain if there is any merit in restructuring the three teams.

In summary, the key objectives of this project were therefore to:

- Carry out an OR project within the Council's Housing and Regeneration Landlord Services and make appropriate recommendations for improved service delivery. These recommendations will ensure that the services operate in the most efficient, effective and economic manner and support delivery of the vision to be a 'Top Performing Landlord'
- Where possible embed capability and capacity into operational running so that it is sustainable after the project closes. This will enable officers to build on the success of the project by continuing lean systems thinking and seek to deliver continuous improvement.
- To maximise the accessibility of services using customer insight to ensure they are targeted and tailored to the specific needs of the Housing and Regeneration Services customer base and promote channel shift in line with the authorities corporate objectives.

2.4 Approach & Methodology

The review was conducted using Prince II Principles and Lean Methodology. The Council's OR Manager led the review and a Project Board was set up in order to oversee the projects key deliverables.

To ensure a 360-degree review, a Project Team was set up consisting of three main groups. These were:-

- i. Direct Service Managers / Representatives, including the, Deputy Assistant Director Housing & Regeneration, Housing Services Operations Manager and Services Managers / Representatives from the three service areas. (Who was also the main link in delivering this project in conjunction with the OR Manager.)
- ii. Support Service Managers, including; Housings Performance and Project Managers and Tenant Involvement Manager.
- iii. Co-opted Members; from other internal Council Service areas such as Customer Services, Human Resources, Communications and Consultation, Accountancy, Audit; as well as Union and British Telecom Lancashire Services (BTLS) representatives.

Members of the Project Team met throughout the review with co-opted members attending meetings when required as directed by the Project Manager/ Operations Manager

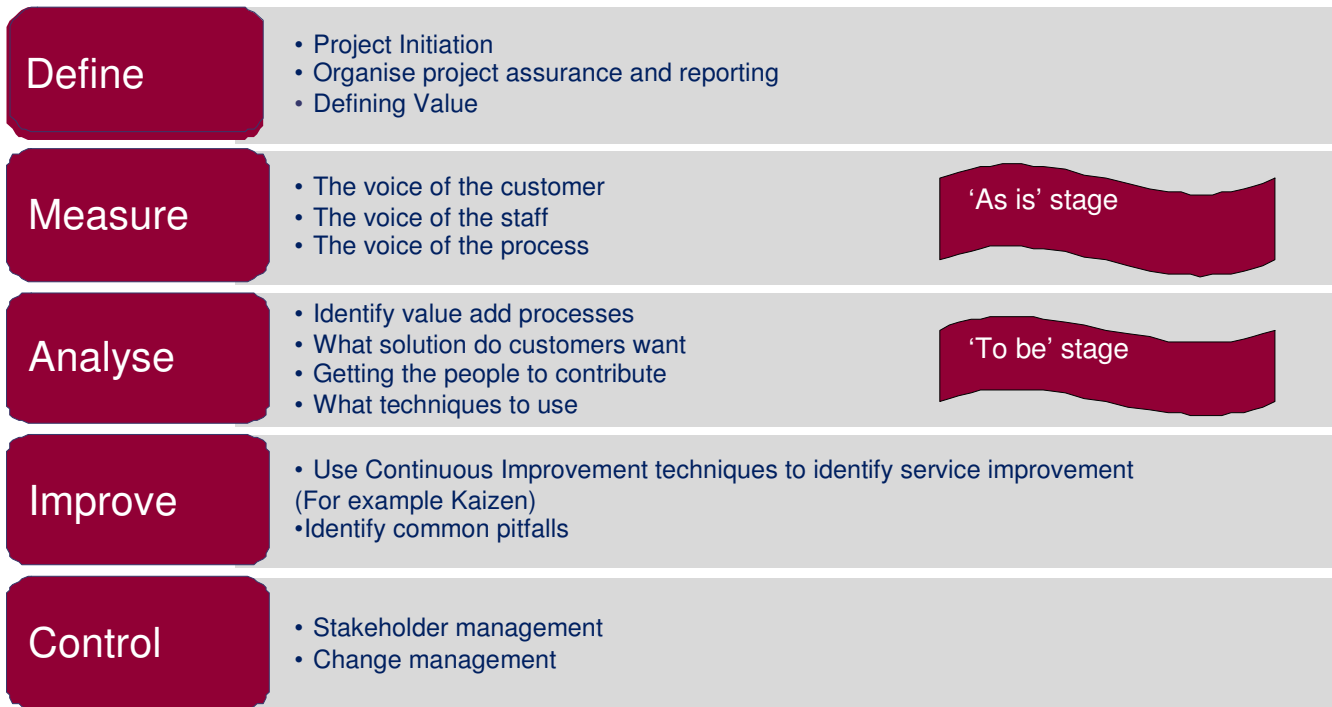
Staff were highly engaged throughout the review and were involved in activities, which included:-

- Staff interviews to identify their priorities and issues.
- Various workshops including Process Mapping both at the 'As is' stage and 'To be' stage, Value adding and non-value adding exercise to identify wasteful activity within processes and 'Blue Sky' Workshops.
- Assisted in providing relevant volumetric data when required, this included completing timesheets/visit sheets.

This space left intentionally blank for formatting purposes

At the beginning of the review, a PID was agreed by the Project Board. The PID outlined the scope of the project and detailed the methodology for the review, using Six Sigma sub-methodology: DMAIC. The DMAIC model splits the project into five separate phases shown below:-

Methodology



Consult with Stakeholders throughout the review

3.0 Factors for Consideration

3.1 Changes throughout the review

Over the last few years, the Housing and Regeneration Service has been constantly striving to improve the service it delivers to its customers and this has resulted in continual change and improvement. This was evident throughout the review as the three Service areas are fast moving and changes were constantly taking place throughout the project, which also proved challenging for the review itself. These included:-

- A review of the Allocations Policy took place at the beginning of the review to take account of new legislation.
- Delivering year 2 of the Housing ICT Strategy.
- Research work to provide Customer Insight, (this information will be used to provide a more tailored service to Tenants applying for and living in council housing properties).
- A number of significant changes and actions have taken place to help prepare and deliver the Welfare Reform agenda.
- The Housing Service Development team has worked closely with the Furnished Tenancies and Recharge Officers to migrate these services onto QL-Housing Case Management system during the review.

3.2 Welfare Reform

The welfare reform agenda has already had a significant financial impact on the Housing Revenue Account. Since the introduction of the Social Sector Size Criteria in April 2013, rent arrears for those tenants affected have increased by £93k whilst the Rent and Money Advice team maintained arrears performance during this period. It should however be noted that the full impact of under occupation charges were mitigated by the financial support provided to tenants who applied for Discretionary Housing Payment, (DHP). This saw an additional £96,499 of benefit awarded. Funding for DHP is provided from Central Government and whilst there is a budget for the current year, there is no guarantee that this will continue at its current rate or at all.

There has also been an increase in terminations of tenancies and 3 / 4 bedroom family properties in some areas and these properties have become more difficult to let.

The full impact of the welfare reform agenda is yet to be realised and the introduction of Universal Credit represents the most radical reform to the welfare benefit system to date. Universal Credit is due to be rolled out to specific groups in West Lancashire from September 2014.

Universal Credit combines 6 existing benefits including Housing Benefit and is paid 4 weekly in arrears. There are currently 2334 working age tenants who are in receipt of Housing Benefit to the value of £175k per week to the Housing Revenue Account. Currently Housing Benefit is paid weekly directly to a Landlord. However, under Universal Credit a universal benefit will be paid direct to the claimant who will then be expected to pay their rent directly to their Landlord. Approximately 70% of customers living within WLBC properties currently receive housing benefits however, 45% of these are of Pensionable age and therefore the new regime will not apply to them.

The OR process is closely linked to preparing the service to meet these challenges and the following should be considered:

- There are currently in the region of 1000 customers affected by under occupation charges.
- The full impact of under occupation charges was mitigated by the extensive use of DHP's but this was not a long term solution and has deferred the full impact of this reduction in benefit on the HRA. Of those affected approximately, a third managed to pay the charges while the others have incurred arrears.
- Out of a collectable rent of £23,833,007 it is estimated that Under Occupation may have increased rent arrears by up to £93,000
- Since October 580,000 JSA claimants have been sanctioned. This is 5% of all claimants, as they have not complied with the DWP expectations of them having to find employment.
- Universal Credit migration will begin from September 2014. Of all those of working age who are currently in receipt of Housing Benefit it will see an increase of over £8 million in the amount of rent to be collected. Data from the pathfinder sites reports a reduced average rent collection rate of 85% for those tenants who have migrated to UC, this could see an increase in arrears of over £4.1 million over the first 3 years of roll out.
- Research from the direct payment projects conducted by the DWP has shown that contact with tenants regarding their accounts is three times higher than before and that the arrears process requires considerably more effort and staffing resources with a lower return rate.
- The average collection rate for the direct payment projects is 84%, compared to our current 97.58%.
- Under Occupation has also had an impact on void properties as bids on 3/4 bedroom family houses in Skelmersdale have reduced and these properties are now becoming harder to let. As a result, a decision has been made to allow more flexibility for applicants when applying for these properties providing they are able to meet the rent requirements.

4.1 The Voice Exercises

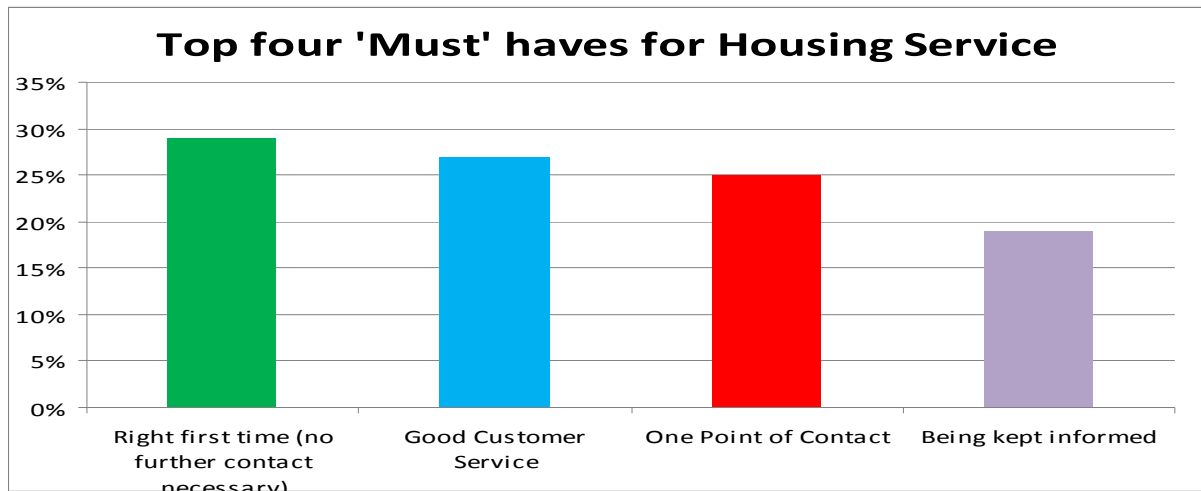
As with all OR reviews, it is important to ensure a holistic approach and for this reason a key part of any project is to conduct the ‘three voices exercises’. This includes:

- The voice of the Customer - This identifies the expressed and non-expressed needs, wants and desires of the recipient of a service. Because customers’ behaviour is key to strategy and process redesign, their insights drive the value levers and mapping, and they define value-added services and products. Additionally, through their use of products and services, they provide ongoing feedback and help identify new product development opportunities.
- The voice of the Process - This looks at the performance, volume and capability of a process to meet both business and customer needs. The voices of the customer and staff feed into process classification and relevancy, and further mapping shows the significance and effectiveness of each process. Each step within a process is given value adding and non-value adding ranking, which helps identify what is most significant to customers and the business. This information is then used to redesign services as it provides an opportunity to tie the customer’s voice to the process culture and separate what is important in the customer’s eyes from more company or business-centric processes.
- The voice of the Staff - This is also linked to the voice of the process in that problem areas can be highlighted along with the voice of the customer to identify potential opportunities. This exercise encourages staff to take personal ownership and a sense of responsibility to ensure that they are directly contributing to the project success. This also has an impact on financial results, as staff can share information related to resources, costs, talent, processes and solutions that provide strategic direction for the review. An overarching impact that is sometimes overlooked is the influence employees have on cultural change, through their voice; employees provide a dialogue within the project that sheds light on how they will apply the company vision to their daily tasks within the proposed redesign.

Analysis from the three voices is used to help form recommendations put forward for future service delivery. It ensures that these recommendations meet the needs of our customers as well as the needs of the business. The next three items (4.1.1, 4.1.2 & 4.1.3) shows generic findings from the three voices analysis; however, this analysis is also threaded throughout the rest of the findings section of this report as and when appropriate.

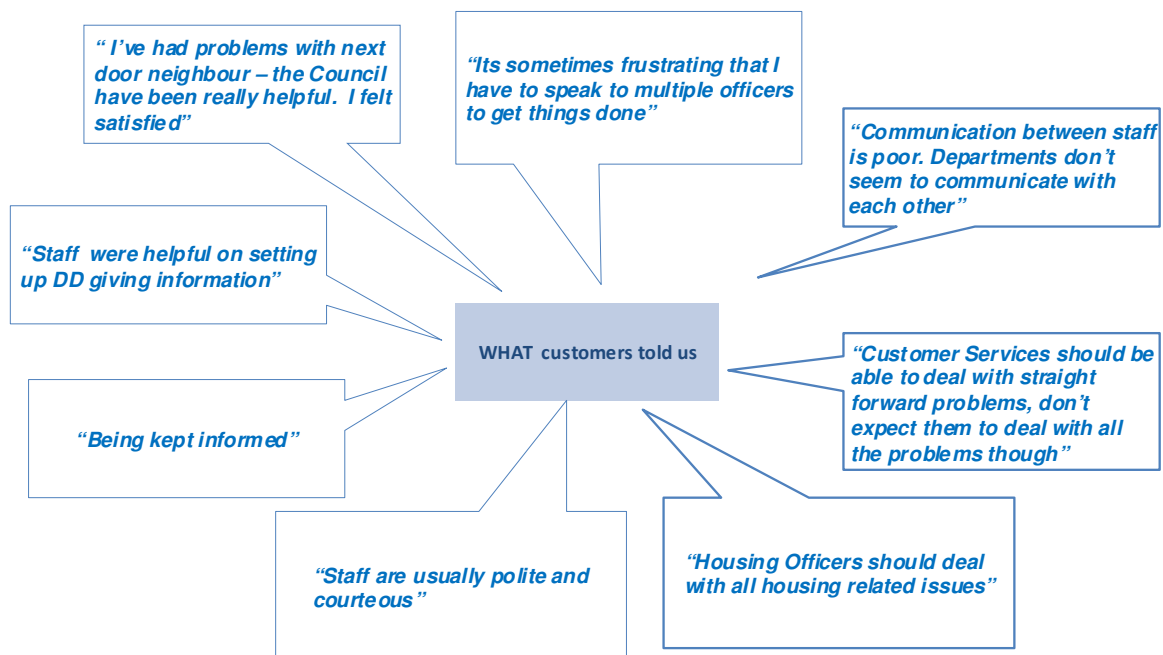
4.1.1 The voice of the Customer

The project team identified that in total 1113 customers had accessed services provided by the three service areas within the six months leading up to the project. This sample size was used to conduct telephone and email surveys. The surveys took into account customers equality characteristics to ensure that we obtained views from a diverse range of customers. The surveys were put together using a ‘Keno’ approach, which examines what customers deem as a ‘must’ from a service. What customers ‘want’ from a service and what would ‘wow’ customers if it were part of a service. 135 surveys were successfully completed from the initial sample size. As well as the surveys, a number of small focus groups took place with ‘involved’ and ‘non-involved’ tenants. ‘Involved tenants’ are customers who live in WLBC council properties and regularly provide feedback on Housing Services to Housing. ‘Non involved tenants’ live in WLBC council properties however, they do not usually participate in feedback. The purpose of these groups was to ascertain their views and aspirations. The project also engaged with tenant groups from the Housing tenant structure; this included the Service Review Group and the Tenants & Residents Forum. Information already collected i.e. the Star Survey, Customer Insight information was also used as reference material. Key results from the Voice of the Customer are shown below:-



Customers Wants & Wows from their Housing Service

- Quick Response & prompt service
- Polite, honest & courteous staff
- Easy to access information
- Better working between sections of the Housing service
- One person to deal with everything
- Help with the welfare reform



4.1.2 The voice of the Process

It was important for the review to focus on those processes and procedures, which involved a high volume of customer contact. In order to identify these specific areas the OR Manager met with the three Service Managers and staff from the teams to identify which processes to target more intensely during the review.

This resulted in the project team identifying three work streams. These were:-

- Becoming a customer
- Being a customer
- Ending a tenancy

An initial data gathering exercise took place to help analyse the time, cycle and numbers of those processes deemed to be high volume.

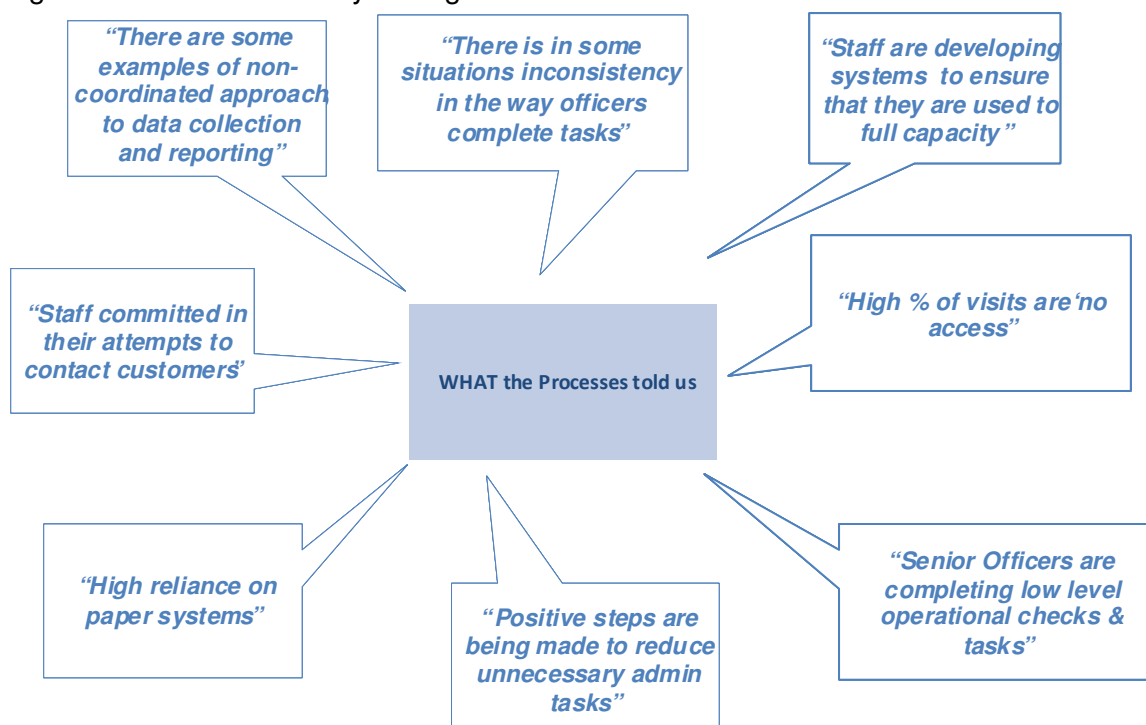
In order to collect the correct information and gain a detailed understanding of the service as a whole, it was important to utilise the skills and knowledge of staff involved in delivering the service. Staff assisted in:-

- Mapping workshops to gain an understanding of current processes including identifying value adding & non-value adding steps within these services.
- Carrying out detailed timings exercises including ‘Week in the life of’ and visit sheets to identify how officers spend their time on a weekly basis.
- Interrogation of systems in order to extrapolate data regarding volumes.
- Shadowing staff undertaking their daily duties (commonly known as going to Gemba).

The review also:-

- Listened to call recordings in the Contact Centre to understand service delivery.
- Conducted Volumetric and KPI analysis.
- Conducted site visits and desktop research with other Social Housing Providers.

The diagram below illustrates key findings from the Voice of the Process:-



4.1.3 The voice of the Staff

The review held a number of ‘critical questioning’ sessions with staff from the three Services areas. This included meetings with Managers & Team Leaders as well as with key officers from other service areas within the Council, for example Customer Services staff.

Meetings also took place with the Assistant Director of Housing & Regeneration, the Deputy Assistant Director of Housing and Regeneration and Housing & Regenerations two Portfolio Holders.

The purpose of these sessions was to identify their main issues, priorities and aspirations.

As well as identifying the three work steams mentioned earlier in this report, these sessions highlighted a number of cross cutting themes, which were taken into account throughout the review. These were:-

- Cross team working
- Communication
- Customer access
- ICT
- Partnership working

The project team met on a regular basis throughout the review to discuss findings and identify possible solutions.

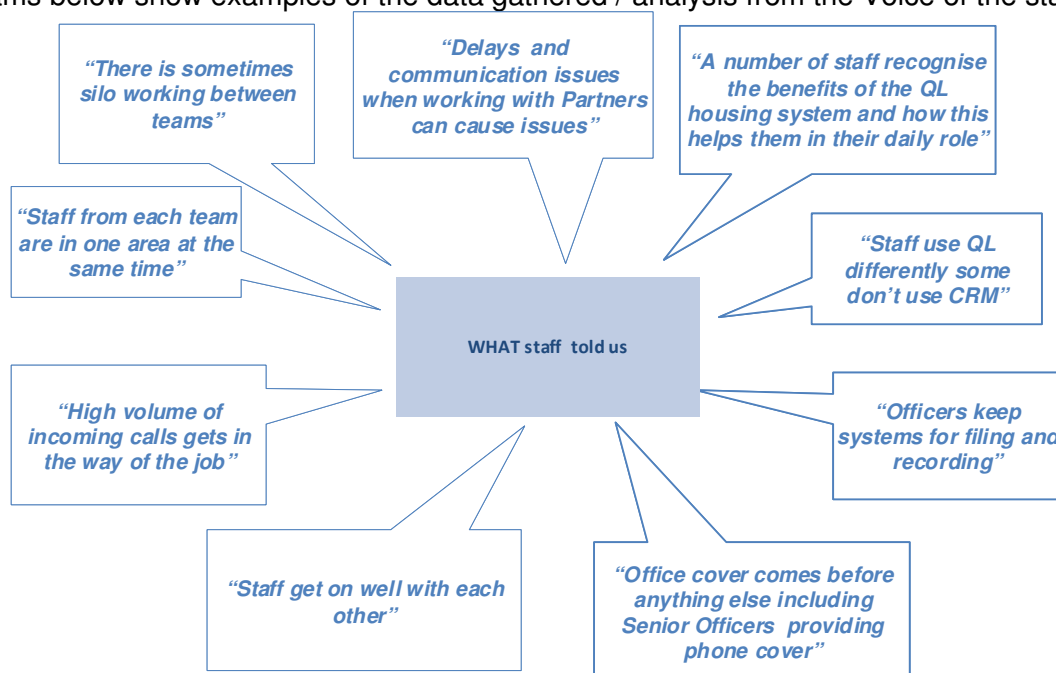
Regular meetings where held with the Assistant Director of Housing & Regeneration, Deputy Assistant Director of Housing and Regeneration & Housing and Regeneration Portfolio Holders to obtain their aspirations and ensure that they were ‘kept in the loop’.

The OR Manager and Housing Operations Manager worked in close partnership for the duration of the review.

As well as the ‘critical questioning’ sessions, officers also took part in ‘Blue sky’ workshops putting forward innovative ideas for the redesign of the new service.

Key Officers across the authority were consulted with during the project to ensure that findings and recommendations for the review are accurate and viable.

The diagrams below show examples of the data gathered / analysis from the Voice of the staff:-



4.2 Voids & Allocations/Housing Options

4.2.1 Housing Options

Housing Applications

It became clear during the 'voices exercises' that the Housing options team are spending the bulk of their time data inputting and assessing Housing applications. Whilst this means that the service is meeting the relevant PI target of 10 days to input a Housing Application, staff are spending all their time inputting and assessing applications and as a result, the service is not as qualitative as it perhaps could be. Staff advised that under the 'as is' service they do not have the time to provide advice & support to prospective customers. Whilst not all applicants require this level of service, some customers apply for properties without understanding what's involved i.e. what is expected from them as a tenant and what the Council will do as their Landlord. Whilst the Council would not want to stop customers applying for accommodation, the impact of not providing this information up front can result in the tenancy not being sustainable. For example, rent arrears accumulating or customers giving up properties, as they cannot manage to maintain their tenancies.

This service has high volume processes and receives approximately 2000 Housing Applications per year; 23% of these are completed online; 77% are paper applications. Once an application is processed, customers are put into an appropriate banding from A-D depending on their level of need – 'A' being the highest priority and 'D' being the lowest. 25% of applications received are banded either 'A' or 'B' the remaining 75% are considered as low level needs. Customers can only apply for a property within their banding.

The current process is paper driven and 98% of applications received require further information before their application is 'banded'. An application will only be 'banded' once all of the relevant information is received, whilst any others will remain pending until such time. At the start of the review, there was no trigger in place for pending applications and as a result, there were a large amount of applications 'on hold'. However, to try to address this, staff have conducted an exercise in contacting customers with a pending application status during the review which has seen a 50% reduction in applications 'on hold' on the Housing Register.

The service uses Abritas systems to manage applications from customers applying for properties; this includes the management of these applications within a housing register. The applications module encourages self-serve and can electronically assess and band an application. However, as shown above the system is not currently being used, to its full potential. Research during the review established that other Social Housing Providers (for example Halton Housing) are switching off paper applications and all customers will be required to use the online application form. They also use the system to assess and band 100% of their applications.

Research throughout the review highlighted that 61% of contact from customers, enquiring about Housing Options related enquiries was 'avoidable contact'. This includes requests for Housing applications forms, customers returning completed application forms and customers enquiring about the progress of their Housing application form. This contact could be avoided by switching to online applications which will automatically assess and band a customers application. Clearly, online help will be required for some customers to assist them when completing the form and this could be done using various methods. For example using alerts built into the form to guide customers and "how to" you tube style videos. However, some customers will require further help/assistance when completing this form and this could be done either via Mobile Working, via the Contact Centre or via the CSP's. As the research shows, it is likely that approximately 39% of customers will still make contact with Customer Services to obtain advice on; how to apply for accommodation, help with completing their Housing application etc. To deliver this service Customer Services would require a resource of 0.5 FTE, however as stated online applications would reduce the 'unavoidable contact' by 61% which is a saving of 0.5 FTE. Therefore, no additional resource would be required to deliver this service.

Housing Application Visits

Officers conduct on average 98 Housing Application visits per year. The purpose of these visits is to assess if a customer applying for a council property has; a medical condition, which requires particular living requirements and/or is currently living in an overcrowded property and/or has social needs. The majority of applications requiring a visit are placed as pending status and therefore the applicants are not eligible to bid on any properties until after a visit has taken place. The purpose of a visit is to assess if a customer is eligible to be placed into a higher band and not to ascertain if they are eligible to apply for Housing. Therefore, these customers could be placed in a lower banding prior to their visit, which would allow them to bid on lower priority properties, thus increasing the possibility of satisfying their housing needs sooner, as well as generating rental income.

Housing Application Appeals

Whilst the number of Housing Application appeals received each year is relatively low, 43% of them are from customers not agreeing with their 'banding'. 37% of these currently result in the original decision being changed i.e. a significant proportion. Appeals are assessed at senior manager's grade, which could be seen as inappropriately high for this level of work.

Process	Hours to complete
Housing Applications	5043
Housing Applications Visits	174
Housing Applications Appeals	104
Total	5321
FTEs	3.3

As can be seen from the above table the total workload of the 'as is' processes conducted within the Housing Options team prior to the review equates to 5321 hours, i.e. the equivalent of 3.3 FTE's. The current number of FTEs responsible for this workload is three Housing Options Assistants however; the Voids & Allocations Service Manager is currently responsible for conducting the appeals process, which accounts for the additional 0.3 FTE.

Ref	Service Recommendations
SR1.	Promote and increase online Housing Applications and phase out paper applications completely.
SR2.	Further, develop Abris to assess and band all applications.
SR3.	Further develop the Housing Application form to advise customers of the information they will be required to supply when completing each section of the form.
SR4.	Abris to automatically cancel applications forms after an agreed period should a customer fail to provide the required proofs.
SR5.	Provide additional internet access at the Customer Service Points. To promote digital inclusion for applicants to be able to complete online application forms as well as enabling existing customers to access Housing Services online.
SR6.	Customer Service staff to provide support to customers when completing online application forms.

4.2.2 Voids & Allocations

Adverts

On average, the authority advertises 94 Housing properties per month, 77% of properties advertised are let within the 1st cycle of it being advertised. Properties available to rent are displayed within the Council's two Customer Services Points (CSP's), as well as online through Abrisas via a link on the Council's website to West Lancs. HomeFinder. The current process relies on staff printing out copies of each advert, and then travelling to both CSP's to put each advert into separate display boxes, which are attached to the window and walls within both locations. Customers highlighted during the 'voice of the customer' exercise that sometimes adverts do not have the correct property picture and they that this can be misleading. Customers expressed that they would like the right picture to be advertised against the correct property. To ensure that the 'voice of the customer' findings were factual adverts were quality checked throughout the review. This revealed that properties are frequently advertised without any picture of the property being attached.

Housing currently uses Abrisas Software (Choice Based Lettings) to manage a property from when a tenant informs of their notice to terminate to the advertisement and letting of a property. This allows customers to bid for properties online through West Lancs. HomeFinder via a link on the Council's website. Customers can also complete a paper bidding form at the CSP's, which Officers then manually input into the Abrisas system. This is causing duplication within this process when there is access to computers at both locations that customers could use.

Adverts are created manually, however Abrisas has a voids module which could be used to automatically populate the majority of an advert once notification is received that a property is about to become vacant. This can be used in collaboration with QL (Housings case management system). The advert could be then be checked and any additional information could be added either; by Housings Admin team within the 0.5 FTE transfer or by Customer services staff, (no additional resource has been calculated for Customer Services as the Customer Service Manager has agreed that this work would be absorbed into current roles).

All adverts are checked at a Senior Managers level for errors including spelling. However, the majority of the advert is created via templates and the risk of error should be low, therefore they should not require this level of checking. It is possible that the additional checking could be as a result of officers requiring additional training and therefore be addressed, as a development need. This will then eliminate the need for rechecking at a senior level.

Allocations

As the authority uses a Choice Based Lettings system, the allocation process should be a simple quick procedure as the system automatically matches a customer to a property. The current process is longer than it needs to be and includes high levels of checking and some duplication of work. A lot of this involves checking information, which has previously been examined during the application stage, as well as Senior Managers checking officer's work.

Viewings

18% of the 848 viewings conducted per year result in customers declining the property. Using feedback gathered from the 'voice of the customer' exercise this could be reduced by showing floor plans and correct room dimensions on the property adverts as well as the correct pictures. Intelligence gathered from involved tenants and complaints received shows that there are issues with the void re-let standard which also has an impact on property refusals. Viewings currently take place within working hours although this is not an issue now, as customers tend to keep their viewing appointments. Private Landlords are constantly growing within the Borough and desktop research has shown that they have a flexible approach when conducting viewings, which for example can include Saturday mornings. Having limited viewing times compared to other Housing Providers

could affect the authority in the future and could result in customers choosing to go with Housing Providers that are more flexible.

Sign up

On average sign ups, take approximately 1hr. Findings from the review would suggest that this is an appropriate amount of time to spend with a customer. However, the current process is not as effective as it could be. At the start of the review, a lot of time during the sign up was spent giving out information to customers as well as inputting duplicate information into multiple forms. For example the customers personal details, name, address etc. This detracted officers from ensuring that the customer completed a Housing Benefit form when necessary. As a result, customers were sometimes going into unnecessary arrears, which caused problems for the rents team further on into the tenancy. Following an instruction from the Housing Operations Manager and work undertaken by the new Financial and Inclusion Officer this has now been rectified. Currently all sign-ups are identical, only differing if someone is making a claim for benefits or signing for Sheltered Accommodation. The difference being that they are given additional forms to complete/information regarding their property. However, research during the review has identified that customers have different levels of need, some requiring more assistance than others do. Therefore, sign-ups should be more specific to meet the needs of the individual customer and take into account their profiling information using customer insight information held by Housing. First Choice Homes Oldham have taken this approach a stage further by introducing a sustainable tenancy risk assessment at application stage to assess the level of work required at sign up to try to ensure sustainable tenancies.

Notice to Terminate a Tenancy

Whilst customers can inform the organisation that they wish to give notice to terminate their tenancy both in writing and over the phone, the current process requires a signature from a customer before notice can be given. Customers will also be written to if they have not included the right dates for termination on their termination notice and asked to sign a new form with the correct dates. Customers cannot currently give notice to terminate their tenancies online. Discussions with staff and the Council's Legal Services section during the review identified that it is not a legal requirement to obtain a signature to terminate a tenancy. All that is required is for the authority to be able to prove it was the tenant who gave notice. This could be achieved by introducing an authentication process on the Council's website. This is covered in more detail at section 4.5.1 of this report.

Receiving Keys

The process for returning keys has levels of rework for Voids and Allocations staff, as they are inputting information, which has already been completed by Customer Service staff. Keys are returned to the CSP's, booked in by officers and passed to the Voids and Allocations team. They then close the tenancy down; order more keys if required; arrange for a Surveyor to inspect the void property and order the necessary repair works from the required contractor. A solution would be for Customer Services and Housing QL systems to communicate with each other when keys are handed in. For example, Customer Services staff will be able to use front office systems, which will automatically be updated in Housings QL system to close the tenancy down as well as book an appointment for a Surveyor. The keys would then be signed out directly to the Surveyor from Customer Services. Customers are given two sets of keys at sign up and as part of their tenancy agreement they are required to hand back two sets when they leave a property. On average 26% of the keys handed in by customer are missing a set. This works out at a cost to the authority of approximately £1800 per year for keys to be cut and an additional 46 hours of officer's time to arrange for keys to be cut. However, we do not enforce or recharge for this work. Discussions with the Assistant Director of Housing highlighted that Property Services have in the past, looked into buying a key cutting machine that will allow keys to be cut in-house. This could prove a cheaper alternative.

Process	Total hours for Housing Assistants to complete each process per annum
Adverts	1012
Allocations	532
Viewing	1119
Sign up	1717
Notice to Terminate	508
Receiving Keys	369
Total	5257
FTE	3.3

As can be seen from the above table the total workload of the above processes for Housing Assistants equates to 5257 hours, i.e. the equivalent of 3.3 FTE's, the current number of FTEs responsible for this work load is 5 Housing Assistants. Using the week in the life exercises this indicates that the remaining 34% of their time is taken up conducting administrative and communication tasks such as replying to emails and taking and receiving telephone calls. Using information collected via customer services, 100% of incoming calls in relation to the above processes could be answered by Customer Services providing they could access back office information. This would contribute to meeting the needs and desires of our customers as the 'voice of the customer' exercise identified their 'musts' are 'good customer service' and 'one point of contact'. This will include Customer Services providing advice on when properties/keys will be ready, help with on-line bids, arranging appointments for viewings etc.

Ref	Service Recommendations
SR7.	Develop systems to automatically upload adverts to the 2 CSP's.
SR8.	Display adverts on a digital screen in windows of both CSP's.
SR9.	Develop adverts to display the right picture/room size/room dimensions.
SR10.	Stop paper bids by encouraging customers to use online bidding system.
SR11.	Implement Abritas voids module to automatically create adverts when notice to terminate has been given.
SR12.	Work with officers to provide training on how to complete free text on advert templates to mitigate the need for rechecking at a senior level.
SR13.	Explore the possibility of flexible viewings to include outside 9-5 and on Saturday Mornings.
SR14.	Review and update sign up pack.
SR15.	Tailor sign ups to meet the individual needs of the customer by using Customer Insight and profiling information. I.e. some customers will require less support and information than others. .
SR16.	Complete a cost benefit analysis to assess the viability of recharging customers when keys are not returned. This includes the keys being cut in-house via Property Services
SR17.	'New Tenant Visits' should be arranged/booked at customer sign up stage.

4.3 Estate Management Team (EMT)

New Tenant Visit

Officers appear to spend a disproportionate amount of time trying to contact new customers to arrange a 'new tenant visit' with them. A simple solution to this would be for officers to arrange an appointment with the customer at sign up stage. This could be followed up with an email/text message to remind customers of this appointment. In total 36% of new tenant visits result in no access from the first visit, 8% result in no access from the second visit. Officers will continue to try to contact new customers to arrange a new tenant visit with some visiting up to 7 times without gaining access. 4% of new customers are served with a Notice to Quit, as they cannot be contacted after sign up. It became clear during the review that the majority of these visits are conducted between 9.30am - 12 noon and 2.00pm – 4.30pm. There is currently no flexibility and employed customers

are expected to be available during these hours. Officers currently work on flexi time, which allows them to work from 7.00am until 7.00pm and therefore introducing a flexible approach would help reduce the number of no accesses from ‘new tenant visit’ or indeed any other visits.

Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB)

Customers can currently report ASB via the Council’s website, over the telephone, face to face or in writing. The current process for reporting ASB is very basic and requires minimum details, for example name and address of the perpetrator/complainant. It is also unclear as to what details are required. This can result in Housing Officers having to reroute initial complaints to other departments. A diagnostic approach should be adapted at first point of contact to assess the level of the complaint. For example, customers should be asked a series of questions when making an initial complaint, to assess how serious the complaint is and whom this should be directed to. This will help filter the complaint to the appropriate department. For example should this be a referral to the MAPS team or alternatively an appointment arranged with a Housing Officer.

When an initial complaint of ASB is made officers agree a frequency of contact with the complainants, however this agreement places the onus on the officer to maintain contact with the complainant. This often leads officers making repeat unanswered phone calls and no access visits. The reason for this no contact is usually that the problem/complaint has ceased and is no longer causing an issue for the complainant. A more efficient process would be for the agreement to place onus on the complainant to contact the Council should the ASB continue, with a timeframe in place to close the case if no contact is made. However, to ensure that customers are kept informed on progress, Officers should also agree with the complainant that they will keep them updated on any progress/action taken.

Notice to Quit

Information gathered from the ‘officer visits’ exercise highlighted that officers could visit a property up to 10 times to assess if the property has been abandoned. This information also showed that 100% of visits officers made after the initial attempt were unsuccessful. Whilst every effort should be made to ensure that the property has been abandoned before serving notice to customers, the current process appears to be rather drawn out and officers should cut down on the number of visits they make to a property before serving notice, as this clearly is not adding any value to the process.

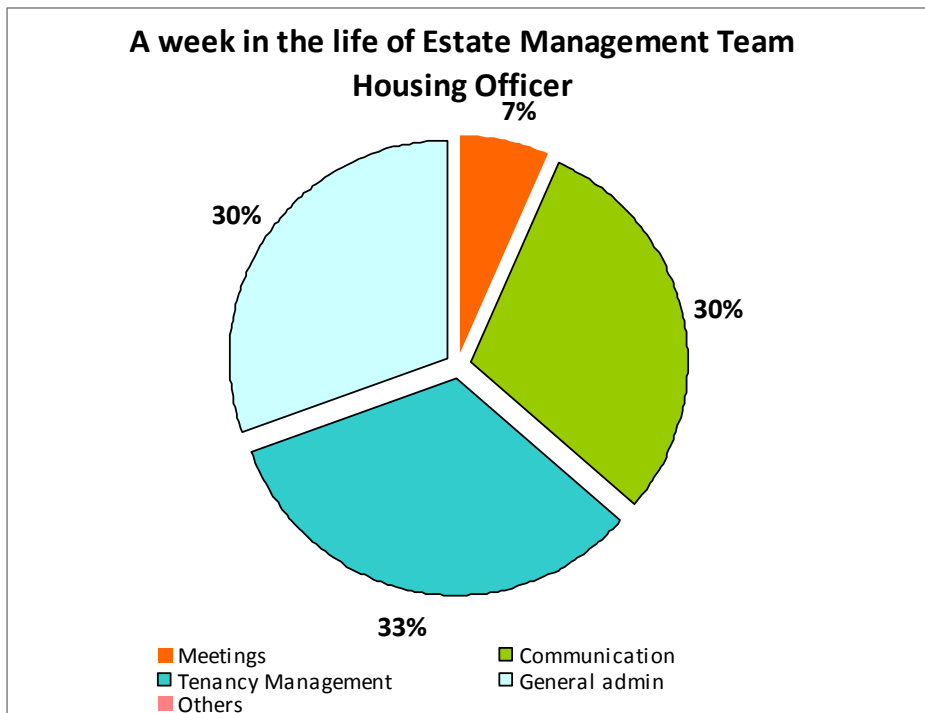
If a tenant informs an officer that they are intending to give up their tenancy, they are asked to call into their nearest CSP to complete a ‘Notice to Terminate’. This is adding an unnecessary step for customers as officers should be able to action this request when advised by the customer either via a handheld device if the officer is out on their patch or alternatively via the telephone to Customer Services.

Process	Total hours for Housing Officers to complete each process per annum
New Tenant Visits	1218
ASB	1022
Notice to Quit	387
Total	2627
FTE	1.6

As can be seen from the above table the total workload of the above processes for Housing Officers equates to 2627 hours, which is approximately 30% of their time, i.e. the equivalent of 1.6 FTE’s. The current number of Housing Officers responsible for this workload within the EMT is 5.25 FTEs. The above does not take into account other Housing Officers duties within the EMT including; land issues/sales, changes to tenancies i.e. sole to joint/succession/assignment of tenancies. However, the week in the life exercises indicates that these additional duties take up approximately 10% of their time, which equates to 0.5 FTE. The additional 60% of Housing Officers time within this team is taken up conducting administrative and communication task such as, replying to emails, updating QL (Housings Management case system), making, and receiving telephone calls. This time would be

better spent out on their patch and being more productive. Using the information collected via customer services 47% of calls for the EMT could be answered by Customer Services at first point of contact which is a desire of customers identified as part of the ‘voice of the customer’ exercise.

The diagram below shows the results from ‘a week in the life of EMT Housing Officer’. This clearly shows how they spend their time.



Ref	Service Recommendations
SR18.	Develop a diagnostic approach for customers wanting to report ASB.
SR19.	Change current contact agreements with customers to ensure that there is a balance of contact. For example customers will contact Officers should and ASB complaint continue and Officers will insure the complainant is updated on any progress/action taken.
SR20.	Explore the possibility of flexible visits to include outside 9-5 and on Saturday Mornings.
SR21.	Ensure that customers can submit a Notice to Terminate a Tenancy via all access channels this includes; via the Council’s website, over the phone and face to face.

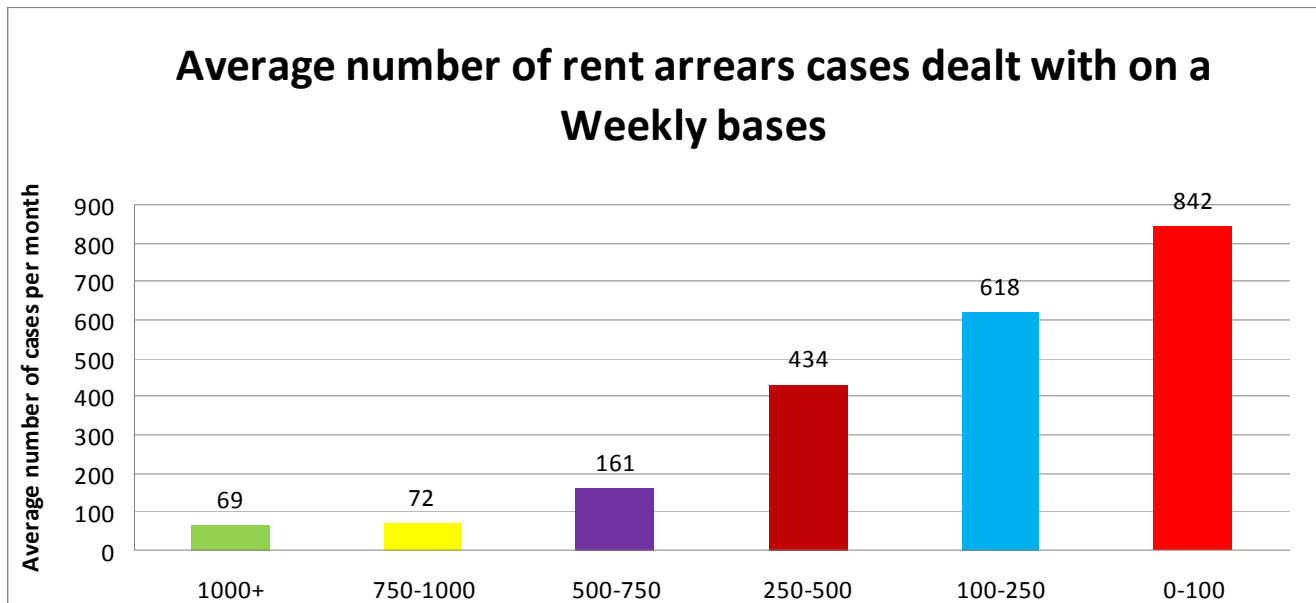
4.4 Rents & Money Advice

Rent Arrears

There is currently a rolling average of 2196 rent arrears cases per week. This is split between Housing Officers and Housing Assistants. Housing Assistants are responsible for low-level rent arrears under £250 and Housing Officers for rent arrears over £250. However, on occasion Housing Officers will take responsibility for cases under £250 and Housing Assistants will take responsibility for cases over £250 depending on the nature of the case. For example Housing Assistants do not conduct home visits and sometimes customers with arrears under the £250 mark may require a visit as they are deemed ‘long term arrears cases’. During the review the Rents and Money Advice Service Manager worked with Housings Service Development team to introduce text messaging. All customers with a mobile number and are in rent arrears are now sent a weekly text message to advise them that their rent is overdue. The remaining rent arrears customers are sent a weekly letter to advise them that their rent is overdue

The average number of cases under £250 per week equates to 1460. Housing Assistants advised that they manage to speak to approximately 30/40 cases per week over the phone, which in total equates to 11% of low level arrears per week. This includes both incoming and outbound calls. Customer Services could assist with this work and more detail is given at section 4.5.1 of this report.

The diagram below provides a breakdown of the average number of arrears cases each week including a breakdown of arrears bands.



Analysis from the Housing Officer visits showed that 81% of all rent arrears visits result in no access. There is no current monitoring in place to assess how many customers contact the Rent & Money Advice team in response to a No Access Card (NAC). However due to the nature of these visits it would be unlikely that the response rate is high. Future monitoring on responses from NAC's should be conducted to assess if it is viable to continue cold calling arrears visits, as this could provide an additional efficiency saving of up to £18000.

Evictions

38 evictions were conducted last year. This process has a lot of crossover from Officer to Officer throughout the process i.e. from the Senior Housing Officer to Housing Officers and Housing Assistants. For example the Senior Housing Officer will pass letters/memos to Housing Assistants for typing up; these are then passed back to the Senior Housing Officer to check before being posted out.

The Senior Housing Officer is responsible for making an application to court for a customer to be evicted and this includes inputting information into the Possession Claim Online (PCOL) database which is done manually. However Housings QL system has a PCOL module which will electronically transfer the data. The eviction process is paper driven and each case has a paper file, on average 329 paper files are created each year with an average of 40 pages in each, which includes formal documentation as well as information printed from QL i.e. case notes/actions. Should a case go to court this file is duplicated at least a further two times to provide a copy for the judge and for any other interested party i.e. the Customers representative/Citizens Advice. From discussions with the Council's Legal Service, the courts are looking to move towards an improved electronic system in the future and this will mean that case files could be forwarded electronically in the future. However in the short term, QL already has an electronic court report which will produce a full electronic case history in chronological order. This can be run remotely from an encrypted electronic device to allow Officers to access data in real time from a court hearing to be shared, rather than relying on paper based information that could be out of date should a customer make a payment.

Analysis at the beginning of the review concluded that under the current rent arrears process it would take Housing Assistants a total of 1700 days per annum to complete the process on all low level rent arrears cases this is the equivalent of 7.5 FTE's. Housing has been preparing for the introduction of Universal Credit throughout the review and as a result the Rent & Money Advice service has been

constantly changing. This has made it difficult to calculate the volumetrics for the both the Rent Arrears and the Eviction processes but it is evident that the initiatives put in place have reduced the original 'as is' process timings to ensure that they are more manageable for the team. The implemented changes included those to the rent arrears escalation process as well as the introduction of text messaging to all customers in rent arrears. Therefore using the original calculation for low level rent arrears of 7.5 FTEs, taken at the beginning of the review and given that the process is now more manageable for the 4.8 FTE Housing Assistants responsible for completing this work it is estimated that this has produced an efficiency saving of approximately £73,000 i.e. 2.8 FTEs. The Rent & Money Advice Service Manager is currently looking at reducing the number of evictions carried out each year as the focus should be on helping customers sustain their tenancies. Therefore any recommendations contained within this report are put forward with knowledge of this policy direction.

Ref	Service Recommendations
SR22.	Monitor future responses from NAC's to assess if it is viable to continue cold-calling arrears visits. (This equates to 1 FTE).
SR23.	Develop PCOL in QL to electronically transfer data and submit an application to court
SR24.	Officers to use hand held devices when at court to run electronic reports to access information in real time.
SR25.	Further develop arrears process to introduce more preventative work around managing money

4.5 Cross Cutting Themes

4.5.1 Customer Access

Website

The number of housing services customers can currently access in relation to the three services areas via the Council's website is very limited. The bullet points below shows the services customers can access at present via the Council's website. Customers can:-

- Pay their council house rent
- Make a housing enquiry
- Request a rent refund
- Request a rent statement
- Apply to rent a council garage
- Report a nuisance neighbour

Contained within the Council's website is a link to the West Lancashire Homefinder portal where customers can:-

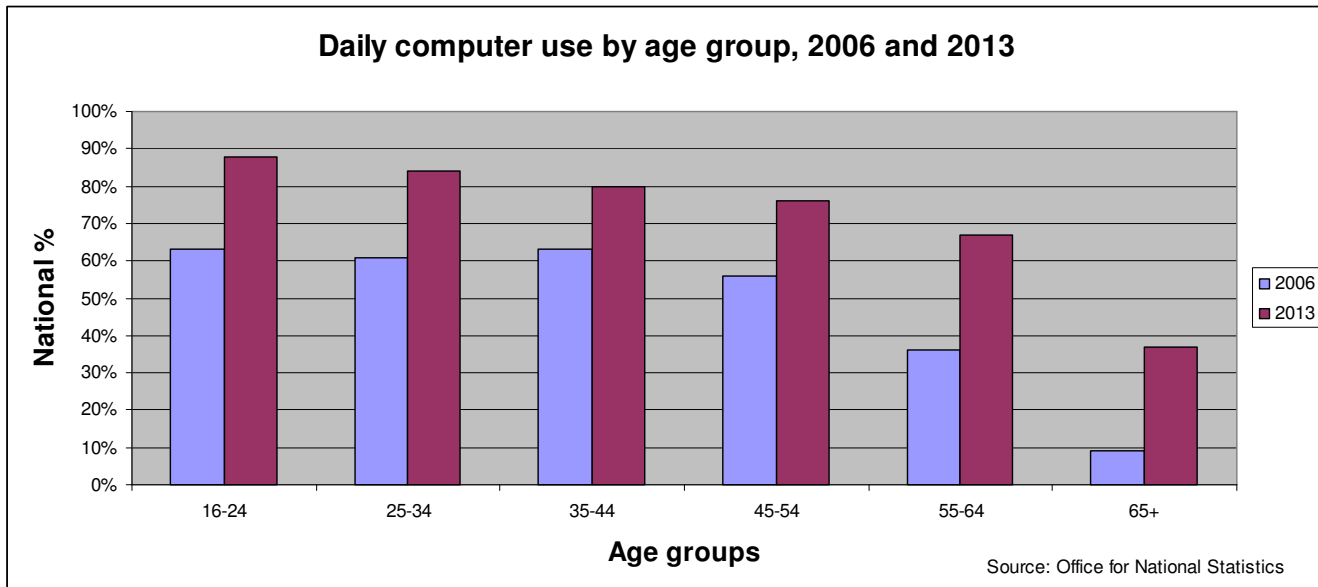
- Make an application to join the Housing Register
- Browse & apply for vacant Social Landlord properties to rent within West Lancashire

Research conducted both on a national level by Cabinet Office and on a local level has identified that by moving services to the web to increase customer online transactions can generate savings and reduce costs by up to 50%. However, its not just about reducing costs, research has also shown that '*customers increasingly expect to access services quickly and conveniently, at times and in ways that suit them*'. As a result, a number of Social Housing Providers are looking to enhance digital inclusion by promoting channel shift and moving a number of services to the web. An example of this is at Halton Housing This is also in accordance with the Council's priority for Click, Call, Come in, and is now more important than ever for Housing Services in relation to its role in the support required for the delivery of UC.

Housing's Performance & Project Management team have worked with Experian (a credit reference agency) to gain an insight in to their customers including, how they are likely to access information

and services. This information highlighted that whilst our customers are using the internet to buy car insurance, book a holiday and for online banking, they are currently less likely to use this method when accessing the Council’s Housing Service. This is likely because there is a need to increase the amount of Housing services available online as well as further promoting these services.

Information from the Office for National Statistics shows that in 2013, 36 million adults (73%) in Great Britain accessed the Internet every day, 20 million more than in 2006, when directly comparable records began. This is illustrated in the diagram below:-¹



Desktop research during the review has also identified that other Social Housing Providers have developed a customer authentication process within their website. This allows customers to register and create a secure password to allow them to log in to an account in order to obtain information and access services 24/7. For example, they may obtain their rent balance before paying their rent, set up a direct debit, etc. By having a secure account customers would also be able to advise the Council that they wish to terminate a tenancy online as already covered in section 4.2.2 of this report (An example of this is Helena Housing).

During the review, the OR Manager and Customer Services Manager met with Northgate to discuss future updates for their Customer Relationship Management system - this is the system used by Customer Services when delivering Services in front office as well as to create the Council’s online webforms. However, this system can also be used to authenticate/sign on customers. Northgate advised that customer authentication could be securely set up via the Council’s website.

Customer Services

Customers can currently access 24 Housing services covering the three service areas including general advice and assistance. Using data provided from Customer Services the average number of service requests currently delivered for the three service areas per year is approximately 20,000.

As part of the review, Customer Service staff were asked to keep a log of all incoming calls/face to face enquires relating to three service areas over a four week period. The purpose of the exercise was to assess the different types of incoming enquiries for each service area, any issues which stopped Customer Services staff being able to deliver an efficient service at first point of contact and the types of enquires which were being passed to back office Housing staff. Customer Service staff were also asked if they could recommend any future improvements which would help them deliver a better more efficient service to these customers. Using this information it became apparent that if customer services staff were able to access information from Housings QL database they could increase the amount of services they deliver for the three services as well as provide a more in-depth

¹ http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_322713.pdf

service for customers all within one interaction. It should also be noted that tenants have wider customer needs than just in relation to Housing Services and these could therefore be better met this way. As highlighted at section 4.1.1 of this report 'The Voice of the Customer', Customers advised that one point of contact is a 'must'. An example of this is that Customer Services staff are currently unable to access a customer's rent balance or search for their rent reference number which is required for customers to be able to make a payment over the phone. As a result calls are lasting longer than necessary with officers having to ring through to back office to obtain this information prior to taking a rent payment from customers. On some occasions if a customer rings after 17:00 Customer Service staff are not always able to contact anyone from the Rents department and as a result cannot take a rent payment.

With the introduction of Universal Credit (UC) it is important to ensure that every contact counts and this includes being able to deliver the right service, to the right customers at the right time using the right method. As well as delivering services for the three service areas Customer Services also delivers a number of other Housing services including; day to day repairs and right to buy and it is estimated that 16,000 Customers accessed these services via Customer Services last year. Taking into account the 20,000 customers per year who contact Customer Services to access services covered by the three service areas (as previously mentioned at paragraph one of this section), it is estimated that on average Customer Services receive 36,000 service requests per year in relation to all Housing Services. It is likely that a percentage of these customers will have rent arrears and quite possibly be customers that the Rent & Money Advice team has previously tried to contact. This provides a perfect opportunity to capture these customers at first point of contact to discuss their rent account. Housing have introduced a number of initiatives to help with the implementation of UC and Customer Service staff could assist Housing with this by being able to make rent arrangements/agreements with customers, take payments and setting up direct debits all in on interaction. This approach has already been adopted by a number of Social Housing Providers including Helena Housing, Cobalt & Muir Group Housing. Clearly Housing would have to work closely with the Council's Customer Service Manager to ensure that the correct systems and training are put in place to accommodate this.

There were a high amount of requests from customers trying to make or cancel an appointment with a specific officer, again under the current regime Customer Service staff could not deal with these calls and had to ring back office Housing staff. On a number of occasions the required officer was unavailable and as a result the customer was advised that a message would be passed on re their request. A more efficient method would be for Customer Services staff to be able to book/cancel appointments directly into Officers diaries. This facility is already available as Customer Services already provide this service to other Officers of the Council; for example within Community Services.

Currently 27% of tenants pay their dwelling rent by DD and 67% of tenants pay their garage rent by DD. Whilst 73% of customers in dwellings and 33% of customers who rent a garage use alternative methods of payments including Payment Cards and Standing Orders. Direct debits are a better payment method for both customers and the Council as it ensures the correct amount of rent is paid from their account on time. Therefore saving time and effort for the customer as well as the Council this also has cheaper transaction costs. During the review the process for setting up direct debits was streamlined with the introduction of Task Centre (see section 4.5.3). However this still involves customers being sent a paper mandate to complete and send back for this to be manually set up. Should the Council apply for paperless accreditation from the bank this would enable customers to be able to set up direct debits over the phone, instantly and in one transaction.

Customer Services use Interactive Voice Response system (IVR) to ensure that calls are routed through to the appropriate member of staff in Customer Services with the correct skills to be able to deal with the incoming call. Housing already utilise this for their Customers reporting Housing Repairs. Discussions with the Council's Customer Service Manager have revealed that IVR could have a Housing option for all Housing calls, which can then be broken down further should customers want to report a repair or pay their rent. For example customers are given a number of options via the welcome message when calling Customer Services. This could be modified to advise customers to press 1 for Housing Services, should a customer choose to press 1 a further option could be given to the customer to instruct them to; press 1 for Housing Repairs; 2 for Housing rent enquires etc. This would allow the call to be routed to the appropriate Officer with the correct skills set to deal with the incoming call.

Integration of Northgate and QL will also allow Customer Services staff to assist Housing in capturing customer profiling information at first point of contact via the Council's website, over the phone or face to face. Housing will then use this information to create future efficiencies by tailoring future service delivery to meet the needs of customers. Clearly the systems will have to work in real time and be able to transfer information both ways. Housing currently and will continue to collect this information through various channels including when a customer makes an application to join the Housing register. Therefore Customer Services would in the main be conducting spot checks to ensure that this information is up to date. As it is not yet known the volume of this work or to what degree this will affect Customer Services. The review would suggest that Housing work with the Customer Services Manager to identify/agree how this work should be conducted and if any resource transfer would be required at that time.

Automated Payment Line

The Council currently has an automated payment line in place to allow customers to make payments over the phone without any human intervention. Discussions with British Telecom Lancashire Services (BTLS) have concluded that this could be developed to authenticate a customer to allow them to obtain rent balances prior to making a payment.

Voicemail

To gain a clear understanding of the types of calls coming into the three service areas, the OR Manager spent time listening to a random-selection of the 20,000 annual incoming calls to Customer Services. For the vast majority of the sampled calls Customer Services staff struggled to contact the relevant officer and often spent time ringing 3/4 extension number trying to locate the relevant officer, which then resulted in an email from Customer Services requesting the officer to call the customer back. Customer Services could, deal with a large percentage of these calls as already identified at sections 4.1-4.4 of this report. The remaining calls could be transferred and picked up via voicemail. The benefit of this is that it will allow officers to be out on their patch rather than providing office phone cover. It will also reduce the call length for customers as Customer Services will only have to make one phone call to the appropriate officer.

Ref	Service Recommendations
SR26.	Create a customer sign in on the Council's Website.
SR27.	Promote Channel shift by transferring services to the Council's website.
SR28.	Develop integration between Customer Services Northgate system and Housing QL systems to ensure that Customer Services staff can answer simple basic queries. Both systems will need to be able to transfer information in real time.
SR29.	Run a pilot in Customer Services to enable Customer Service staff to talk to customers about their rent account when they contact the council. This includes capturing payments and where appropriate setting up repayment arrangements. This will require a resource/cash transfer of 1 FTE.
SR30.	Introduce a real time bookable appointments system for Housing Officers which can be accessed by customer at first point of contact i.e. via the Council's website, over the telephone or face to face. This will require a resource transfer of 0.5 FTE.
SR31.	Apply to the bank for paperless accreditation to enable customers to set up Direct Debits instantly at first point of contact, i.e. online, over the phone and face-to-face. This will require a resource/cash transfer of 1 FTE.
SR32.	Housing to work with the Customer Services Manager to ensure that any services transferred are set up in the right way and that staff receive the correct training.
SR33.	Develop Automated Payment line to be able to authenticate customers to obtain rent balances.
SR34.	Implement voicemail.

4.5.2 Cross team working

Team Structures

The 'Voices Exercises' highlighted that there are high levels of separate working across the three teams as officers are predominately focused on their specialist area.

The current structure has three teams; Voids and Allocations, Estate Management and Rents & Money Advice, with specialist teams sitting within each team. This is shown in the diagram below:-

Current Structure



Each team has both a Service Manager and Senior Housing Officer, however all except the Voids and Allocations Service Manager are graded at – PO1, the Voids and Allocations Manager is graded at PO3. Using information gathered throughout the review it has become evident that there are high Management costs with Managers splitting some of their tasks and levels of responsibility between the Service Manager post and Senior Housing Officer Post creating blurred roles.

When the teams were set up as functional, it was deemed that the Service Managers role was to be strategic, however over the years these roles have evolved into more operational roles, to the point where some Managers are conducting high levels of admin work and even office cover. Managers have also adopted a checking and controlling culture, which includes reviewing tasks previously completed by officers within their teams some of which are deemed as low risk processes.

Having specialist teams has created problems associated with 'silo working' whereby officers work strictly within the limits of their team and as a result, they don't possibly always see or understand the 'bigger housing picture'. This impacts on how each team shares information and communication is not as effective as it perhaps could be between the teams and indeed with colleagues elsewhere.

Findings from the 'voice of the people' exercise highlighted issues that can arise when having specialist teams. For example, officers from within the Estate Management team only meet customers after they have moved into their property. A consequence of this is that they sometimes struggle when trying to build and manage relationships with customers; this is evident in the high levels of no access for 'New Tenant visits' and perhaps tenancies are not being sustained for as long. This is also true when looking at the high amounts of no accesses for 'Rent Arrears visits'. As highlighted in section 5.2 the 'visits' exercise showed that 81% of these visits resulted in 'no accesses'. Housing Officers from the Rent and Money advice team do not have the opportunity to build a relationship with customers, as the first contact they make is when a customer has fallen into

arrears. Staff advised that customers moving into a property are not always aware of the type of property they are moving into and the responsibilities that come with it e.g. pets not allowed in flats and service charges on certain properties etc. Again, this is causing problems with Tenancy issues and Rent Arrears later on down the line.

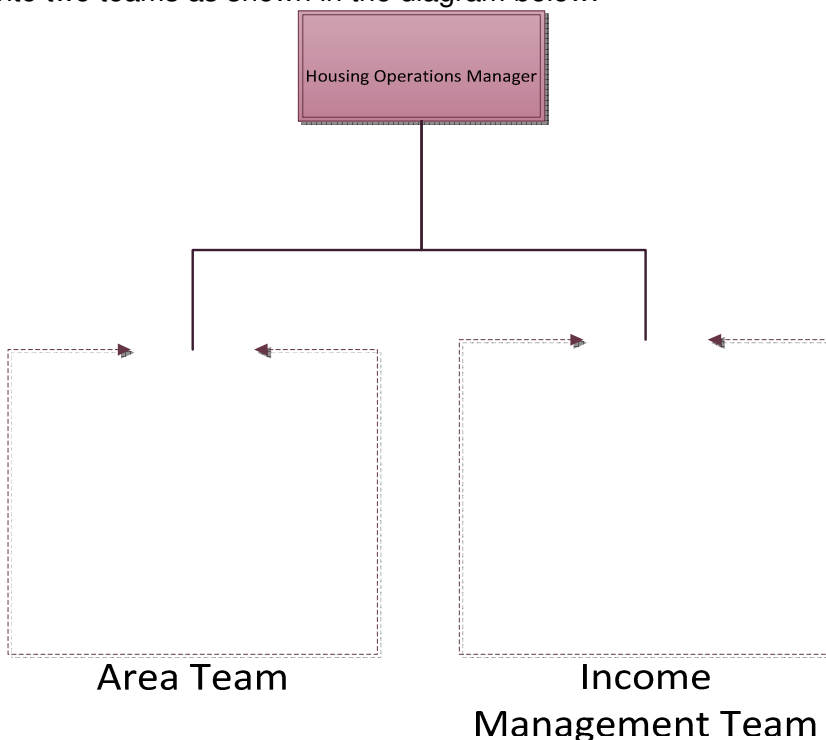
Under the current structure, customers could conceivably receive a visit from as many as four different officers depending upon their service request / Housing need. In reality, the 'visits' exercise showed that up to three officers could be in one area at the same time.

Customers advised during the 'voice of the customer' exercise that it can be frustrating when only certain staff can deal with certain issues and a number of our long standing customers referred to a time when 'their Housing Officer used to deal with everything' and also confirmed that this was their preferred model of service delivery.

The review has concluded that the role of the Housing Officer should become more flexible and generic. Housing Officers should start building a relationship with a customer at the allocations stage. This includes; conducting property viewings, conducting sign up, as well as all other tenancy related issues such as; discussing customers rent accounts, capturing payments and where appropriate setting up repayment arrangements etc. There will however, be a need for some specialist staff when dealing with income management. Especially with the introduction of the Welfare Reforms agenda and Universal Credit, which, will include more in-depth preventative arrears work. Research during the review highlighted that this approach has been adopted by other Social Housing Providers with some moving towards having Housing Officers who offer a full generic role.

The current Housing Officers job descriptions are generic therefore there will be no changes required to this. However generic working will inevitably raise some training issues for staff who have worked in one particular field of housing and there may be some staff resistance to the suggested change, which will need to be carefully managed. In-house training and familiarisation with issues in other parts of the service as shared learning for all staff will help during the transitional period.

To accommodate the above changes the review would recommend restructuring the three teams into two teams as shown in the diagram below:



It is estimated that the implementation of the above-proposed structure would free up a minimum cashable resource of approximately £235,000. The Assistant Director of Housing will produce a detailed staffing structure prior to the implementation of the proposed restructure. This will be subject to the normal consultation arrangements and redeployment considerations as appropriate.

Possible Areas for Reinvestment

As agreed as part of the project deliverables/requirement the savings will be reinvested to create new posts within the Housing and Regeneration Service to assist them in achieving their vision '**To be a top performing Landlord in an economically vibrant West Lancashire**'. The bullet points below provide some examples on areas for reinvestment, which could contribute towards housing achieving their vision. This includes;

Leaseholders

The Council, under the National Capital Right to Buy (RTB) legislation are required to sell the Freehold of houses and the Leasehold of flats where Council Tenants require this. The Council has sold approximately 371 flats under the Leasehold arrangements.

The management of the Leaseholder flats is spread across a number of work areas and as a result, no one has prime responsibility for the coordination of this service. This includes ensuring that Leaseholders, who are required to pay Service Charges and the cost of certain Capital Investment in their homes, receive a good service. A recent exercise has highlighted that; Leaseholder charges are not always paid regularly and promptly; consultation with Leaseholders is inadequate and the service that they receive is not one that the Council would choose to provide. Another important factor is that the number of flats being purchase under the RTB legislation has increased recently. Taking this into account the Assistant Director of Housing and Regeneration has advised that he requires a Leasehold Officer to oversee Leaseholders and act as a conduit between Leaseholder customers and other aspects of service. For example, to ensure that the leases are correct, that charges are paid, that consultation is carried out and correct procedures are followed regarding any increase in service charges, to ensure that funds can be used for specific activities etc.

Service Policy and Improvement

The Assistant Director of Housing and Regeneration's original intention when establishing the three functional teams was to; drive forward service delivery to help the Housing and Regeneration Service meet their Performance indicator targets as well as undertake regular reviews of the service to ensure that best practice was achieved. The functional structure has indeed improved Housing's focus and attention to performance indicators, which have genuinely been beneficial. However, it has created other issues, such as silo working, as well as staff being pulled into day-to-day issues, which stops them from effecting changes required to ensure that the Service is proactive. For this reason, the Assistant Director of Housing and Regeneration has indicated that he would like to reinvest some of the savings to create policy/improvement officers. These Officers will continue to build on the work conducted by the OR review including; conducting regular reviews of systems and policies to ensure that these are up-to-date as well as examine best practice within the Service. These Officers will work closely with customers to review services and effect change, which in turn is beneficial, cost effective and improves the customer experience.

4.5.3 ICT

Task Centre

During the review Housings Service Development Team implemented Taskcentre. Taskcentre is a business process management suite which can be used to link ICT systems together. An example of this can be seen in the work completed to streamline direct debits. Prior to Taskcentre Customer Services would complete a request from a customer to set up a direct debit. This request would generate an email to the Rent & Money Advice team who would then manually send out a paper mandate to the customer. By using Taskcentre there is no longer a need for human intervention from the Rent & Money Advice team. Once a request is completed via Customers Services, Taskcentre will electronically send out a paper mandate to the customer and record this as an action in QL. Taskcentre is a useful tool for automating systems where integration is either too expensive or not viable. The review would suggest that the implementation team work with the Service

Development team to maximise this solution when implementing the recommendations contained within this report.

Mobile Working

During the review mobile working was implemented into the Estate Management team. The Service Development team has indicated within their ICT action plan that there will be a further roll out of Mobile working across the Housing and Regeneration Service in accordance with the ICT Strategy. The OR review would support this recommendation as it provides high efficiencies as tasks can be completed out in the field and within real time. Findings would suggest that further work around mobile working would be required. For example currently if a request for graffiti or fly tipping is required officers have to manually report this when they return to the office to Customer Services. In this instance Task Centre could be used to electronically notify the relevant sections of the graffiti or fly-tipping.

Electronic Document Management

In 2008 the Council conducted an OR review of Electronic Document Management and the benefits/efficiencies this solution could generate. At that time Cabinet agreed to roll this out across the authority. They agreed that EDM should be implemented as part of the OR programme and that the OR Manager should explore the benefits this would bring to each service when conducting an OR reviews.

Prior to and during the review, Housing worked with Civica to review all of their paper house files and then scan these so they could be kept electronically. Housing currently has a 1 year rolling contract with Civica to scan and hold documents electronically. Inevitably this will have generated the biggest saving for implementing an Electronic Document Management solution.

However there are additional benefits to implementing a full Electronic Document Management Solution as opposed to the Electronic Document Storage system Housing currently have in place. As part of their contract with Civica, Civica manually collect any documents from Housing on a monthly basis to be scanned. Staff are then able to access these documents via a hosting website. As documents are stored for a month within Housing prior to them being scanned, Officers do not have access to this information in real-time. They also have to currently go into a different system to view this information. Implementation of EDM in other sections of the Council has been seamless for staff which means they can access information through their normal case management database.

Ref	Service Recommendations
SR35.	Roll out of mobile working across the three service areas
SR36.	Implement EDM inline with the Council's proffered method for storage of electronic documents

4.5.5 Partnership working

It became clear during the review that whilst Housing have good working relationships with internal colleagues this is sometime clouded as there can be misunderstandings of what Housings role is and the role of other sections and the specific service requirements of Housing and how these should be delivered. An example of this was evident during the meetings with staff; some felt that they were completing the work of others. Another issue is around timescales of work Housing may have a piece of work deemed as urgent, however this may not be deemed a priority for another Service area. By introducing a clear set of service standards this would mitigate this problem and further improve relationships as clear guidelines would be in place.

Ref	Service Recommendations
SR37.	Work with other Service Areas to develop a set of internal service standards for delivery of work related to Landlord Services. For example definitive timescales for completion of work, clarification of roles.

5.0 Project Recommendations

This section provides a summary of recommendations that have been arrived at from the review's findings detailed in Section 4. It does not therefore provide a comprehensive list of savings and efficiencies achieved; instead these are fully detailed within the table in Section 6.

1. Promote and increase online Housing applications and phase out paper applications completely.
2. Explore flexible working arrangements for Housing staff delivering the three services to include early evenings/Saturday mornings. This may require a change to contracts.
3. Develop/Integrate ICT systems, which will stop duplication of work, allow information to be accessed in real – time and provide a more efficient service to Customers. This includes integration between Northgate Front Office system and Housings QL client database system.
4. Restructure the Voids & Allocations, Estate Management and Rent & Money Advice teams from three teams into two with a view to freeing up a cashable resource saving of approximately £235,000 to be reinvested back into the Housing and Regeneration Services (as detailed in section 4.5.2 of this report).
5. Explore the flexibility of creating a customer sign in for Council tenants on the Council's website – As a result, customers will be able to access more services online.
6. Consider applying for paperless accreditation from the bank to allow direct debits to be set up in one transaction and explore flexible working.
7. Empower Customer Services staff to provide a service at first point of contact; to include setting up direct debits, booking/rearranging appointments for Housing staff, providing advice and assistance for Housing applications, bidding and allocations enquiries including assistance with online applications. This will require a resource/cash transfer of 1.5 FTEs.
8. Run a pilot in Customer Services to enable Customer Service staff to talk to customers about their rent account when they contact the council. This includes capturing payments and where appropriate setting up payment arrangements. This will require a resource/cash transfer of 1 FTE.
9. Develop a set of internal service standards for delivery of work related to Landlord Services.
10. Implement the corporate EDM solution within the Landlord Service areas reviewed.

This space left intentionally blank for formatting purposes

6.0 Savings

Based on full year's savings, the following table provides a detailed summary of the likely cashable/resource savings and efficiencies to be gained; it is anticipated commencing within the year starting April 2016 and realised in subsequent years. It is likely that ICT changes will have to be in place prior to a number of recommendations being implemented and for this reason the table has allowed a 24 month period prior to any savings being realised. However, it should also be noted that a number of the savings, are likely to come to fruition before 2016/17.

	Savings/investment (£) (1 ST full year implementation – 2016/17)	Efficiency (£) (1 st full year implementation – 20116/17)	Savings/investment (£) (Subsequent years)	Efficiency (£) (Subsequent years)
<u>Cash/Resource Saving</u>				
<u>Housing Options</u>	£24,260		£48,519	
		£7,750		£15,500
<u>Voids & Allocations</u>	£89,164		£178,329	
		£5,800		£11,600
<u>Estate Management</u>	£19,709		£39,418	
		£5,300		£10,600
<u>Rent & Money Advice</u>	£21,367		£42,734	
		£36,633		£73,265
<u>Additional Savings</u>				
Stationary & Postage	£1,250		£2,500	
Removing paper file systems	£325	£1,650	£650	£3,300
Charge customers for non returned keys	£900		£1,800	
TOTAL			£313,950	
<u>Transfer of Cash/Resources</u>			£73,080	
TOTAL SAVINGS –	£156,975	£57,133	£240,870	£114,265

The OR Manager has engaged with the Housing Service Development team and BTLS during the review in order to confirm, in principle, that all of the recommendations requiring ICT development are achievable. However in order to obtain detailed costings for each recommendation and to satisfy a business case for each initiative, Service Managers will continue to work closely with BTLS to produce a detailed Action plan. Accordingly, a detailed workshop will be arranged for later this month pending Cabinet's approval of the recommendations contained within this report.

This space left intentionally blank for formatting purposes

7.0 Continuous improvement

As with any OR review some findings are either out of scope or alternatively further work needs to be completed before these can be put forward as recommendations. These findings are listed in the bullet points below:-

- Staff advised during the review that the Tenancy Agreement may require reviewing to ensure that it is relevant and up to date. A recommendation would be that a project team should be put in place to review this document to incorporate emerging and future changes to the Service. A budget has been identified to complete this piece of work within the financial year (subject to Council approval).
- Universal Credit is due to be implemented within West Lancashire in September 2014. This will include changes to the way Housing Benefit is paid to tenants. Currently this is paid direct to the Landlord; however Universal Credit will be paid directly into a customer's bank account, 4 weekly in arrears, on any working day of the week. The Council's current direct debit scheme allows two payment dates per month. As a result payments could end up sitting in a customer's bank account waiting for their rent payment to be claimed. This could cause problems for our vulnerable customers who struggle with budget management. Therefore as well as changing processes/roles to conduct more preventative, work the review would suggest that future consideration should be given to developing systems to increase the frequency of direct debit dates. Clearly any solution put in place be electronic and not require any manual input.
- Findings from the review identified that as part of their Digital Inclusion Strategy some Social Housing Providers are providing customers with a smart phone/device at sign up – with the agreement that they will use the device to access Housing Services online. This not only promotes channel shift it also is a way of driving down costs as online transactions are the cheapest way for the Council to deliver services. The cost of these devices are continually reducing with the cheapest one at present costing as little as £30 with connection of costing as little as £2/3 per month.
- Explore the use of Smart apps. - Increase options for payment in an easy and accessible manner.
- Housing is in the process of introducing Royal Mails imail service into the Rent & Money Advice team with a view to rolling it out across the rest of the Housing Service. Imail is a cheaper more efficient way of printing and sending mail. The process is secure and password-protected each user. Documents are securely encrypted before being sent and comply with security and data protection regulations. Future consideration should be given to the benefits imail could bring to the Council as a whole should imail become a corporate solution.
- Explore increasing the use of targeted social media to increase interaction with customers.
- An increasing number of Social Housing Provider's are utilising Rightmove, Zoopla, and other social media to advertise their properties. They are also using these agencies to conduct weekend viewings on their behalf. This could be explored in the future to support the channel shift agenda for online applications.
- Explore everyday tenancies and flexibility within the bidding cycle. Other Social Housing Providers have adopted this approach and as a result have reported they have seen a quicker allocation process for customers, reduced turnaround times for void properties and a reduction in rental income loss.

8.0 Implementation

It is estimated that it will take approximately 24 months to implement the recommendations contained within this report and this will be done over managed stages, each representing a practical approach for delivering the proposed service improvements within a realistic timescale, whilst taking account of the limited resources available from within Housing and Customer Services. A financial resource has been allocated to employ a dedicated project manager due to the scope and scale of this work who will report to the Housing Operations Manager and work with the implementation team to deliver the agreed recommendations.

The quality and achievability of this implementation rests with the implementation team and those participating in the management of the transfer, together with the front/back office staff whom will assume day-to-day responsibility for delivering the practical changes. For clarification, those managing the changes are also those responsible for delivering the service and therefore the overall responsibility will remain within the Housing and Regeneration Service, requiring major input from Customer Services and British Telecom Lancashire Services. The Housings Operations Manager will be responsible for ensuring the agreed recommendations are implemented within the 24 months. However, to allow for flexibility within the implementation it is proposed, therefore, that a more detailed timeline is agreed once this findings report has been agreed by Cabinet.