



Opening options for Edinburgh's tenants

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David Hunter
Manager
The City of Edinburgh Council

Working with BT, the City of Edinburgh Council has introduced an innovative choice-based letting system for social housing

Client

In April 2001 the City of Edinburgh Council formed a strategic partnership with BT to deliver its 'Smart City' vision. The vision is a fifteen-year plan to transform the way in which the Council organises its activities and interacts with citizens. The aim is seamless delivery of public services to the people and businesses of Edinburgh. Having supplied the networked IT services infrastructure to support the Smart City vision, BT is now working on the more visible aspects of the transformation. One such project involves the Council's housing programme.

Challenge

The City of Edinburgh Council has more than 25,000 council house tenants. There was a complex application system, a lengthy waiting list, and fast tenant turnover together with a high refusal rate. The situation was both unsatisfactory and inefficient. The Council recognised that it needed to radically transform the way in which people could seek and choose social housing.

The Council's old housing allocation system was based on a complicated multi-layered points system, where each applicant would be assessed against a wide variety of criteria and allocated points according to their circumstances. Whoever had the most points would move to the top of the waiting list and, once there, would be offered the next available property. The tenant played no part in the selection process and had very little control over where they would be invited to live. As a consequence, many offers were refused. It was clear that the system needed changing.

Solution

Having seen pilot examples of choice-based letting schemes, the Council's housing review team developed a business plan that would transform the allocation of housing within the city and put the citizen at the centre of the process. In addition to this the team recognised that a common housing register, which would bring together the council and social housing providers, was the key. This would enable citizens to choose from all available properties.

Working in partnership, BT and the Council's e-Housing team provided the design and specification for a solution to deliver the Council's vision. Central to this was the migration of the Council's data from old legacy systems onto new Unix-based systems. With the foundations in place, the joint team built a new system based on the iWorld Housing Allocations module provided by Sx3 (now Northgate Information Solutions).

There were two strands to the innovation. First the creation of a single registration process, whereby just one form gave access to housing provided by the Council and each of the 22 partner Registered Social Landlords. This replaced the need to complete 23 different application forms. The second was the removal of the old points system, replacing the complex and expensive administration of the waiting list with a way to engage with active home seekers.

Case study

The City of Edinburgh Council

“Choice based lettings bring benefits for customers, as they are actively involved in decisions as to where they are housed. This has been beneficial to the Council and a major factor helping us to improve the management of empty homes. Many of our Housing Association partners have recognised the potential benefits and intend to adopt Choice from April 2008.”

Craig Hunter
Programme Manager
The City of Edinburgh Council

The new services, known as ‘EdIndex’ and ‘EH – Your Key to Choice’, are available to authorised users Council-wide through the intranet, and to all partner organisations via a secure portal using ISDN and ADSL broadband connections. Citizens can also access the housing database through a secure web portal, to search for suitable properties and register notes of interest. The system has been in place since April 2003 and it has transformed the way the citizens of Edinburgh seek social housing. It has also brought business benefits in terms of reducing the number of council houses that lie empty and has impacted positively upon the sustainability of tenancies.

Offices worldwide

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Registered in England No: 1800000

The new shared application process categorises applicants as ‘starters’ (including the homeless and people who have not previously been housed by the Council) or ‘movers’ (including existing tenants, and owner occupiers). Details of any specific requirements are noted, for example the size of the family. This narrows the field of search, and also enables housing providers to prioritise applicants according to their own criteria. Regular system extracts allow all available properties to be advertised through The Scotsman’s website and in a special supplement of the Edinburgh Evening News.

Registered citizens can then submit a note of interest for up to three advertised properties. If a property receives more than one applicant, it is first offered to the person or family who has been on the waiting list the longest.

Value

Not only is the new system more open and easier to understand, it enables a better match between tenants and property. David Hunter, a manager at the City of Edinburgh Council, says: “We are finding that property that was regularly refused before is now being taken up. Just because the people at the top of the list reject a property doesn’t mean it is unpopular with everyone. The new system means that property is getting filled more quickly.” This leads to better utilisation of available property and less empty housing.

One of the most notable aspects of the transformation has been the number of ‘notes of interest’ that have been submitted in electronic form through the website. In fact up to 80 per cent of notes of interest are now submitted online. As well as improving Council efficiency the transformation means that staff have been freed from administering the complex points system. Results show that as people are offered more choice in the selection of their homes, they will remain in the property for longer and create more stable communities.

Craig Hunter, Programme Manager at the City of Edinburgh Council observed: “Choice based lettings bring benefits for customers, as they are actively involved in decisions as to where they are housed. This has been beneficial to the Council and a major factor helping us to improve the management of empty homes. Many of our Housing Association partners have recognised the potential benefits and intend to adopt Choice from April 2008.”

The success of the new system implemented by the City of Edinburgh Council underlines the essence of eGovernment – using new technology to enable a local authority to transform the way it does business. The partnership approach has not only allowed the City of Edinburgh Council to strip away unnecessary processes, it has radically improved the service to the citizen.

EH – Your Key to Choice and the Edindex Common Housing Register have been operating now for almost five years and in early 2008 important enhancements were made to both services. Around one half of the Council’s Housing Association partners are now moving to a choice-based lettings system, with the remainder merging their allocations policies to reduce the complexities associated with the application form.

Core BT Services

- Consultancy, Systems Integration and Project Management
- Deployment of the iWorld Housing Allocations module provided by product supplier Sx3 (now Northgate Information Solutions)

