



## Report to:

Northwards  
2<sup>nd</sup> July 2019

# 11e

<b>Title:</b>	Voicescape update		
<b>Date:</b>	25 <sup>th</sup> June 2019		
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<b>Confidential:</b>	<b>NO</b>		
<b>For:</b> (Please tick action required)	<b>NOTING</b> ✓	<b>DISCUSSION</b>	<b>APPROVAL</b>
<b>PURPOSE OF REPORT</b>			
An update on the use of Voicescape technology in rents.			
<b>RECOMMENDATION</b>			
Note the report.			
<b>IMPLICATIONS</b>			
<b>Risk Management</b>	CRR-07d Failure to mitigate any negative impact as a result of the Government's welfare reform legislation and changes to benefits.		
<b>Regulatory &amp; legal compliance</b>	None		

### Consultation/Consideration:

	Yes, No or N/A:	Name:	Date:
<b>Sub-Committee:</b>	No		
<b>Task Groups:</b>	No		
<b>Ward Councillors:</b>	No		

## **1.0 Background**

**1.1** Northwards' key business plan objective is to create a "rent first" culture whereby we encourage tenants to prioritise their rent payments and work towards creating stable, debt free tenancies. Whilst rent collection has improved markedly to over 100 % at year end the ongoing challenges remain with a harsh economic environment and the pressures of welfare reform. The most notable of those reforms being the continuing roll out of Universal Credit.

**1.2** As a result of the various challenges we have committed to exploring new methods of working so we can seek to maintain rent collection rates.

## **2.0 Voicescape**

**2.1** To recap Voicescape is a call to collect automated dialling service. Northwards agreed that we would work with Voicescape to set the parameters by which tenants would be contacted. We agreed that this would be tenants from initial stage of arrears through to notice to seek possession stages, i.e. before the legal process begins.

**2.2** The data sent to Voicescape is refreshed on a daily basis and shared through a secure server with Housing Contact Managed Service Platform (HCMP), the software platform that Voicescape use to deliver the service.

**2.3** Tenants are called by an automated service and on answering the call they hear a recorded message informing them that we would like to speak to them. They are asked to press 1 to be put through. The call is then transferred to Northwards staff.

**2.4** If the tenant does not answer the call then the software sends an automated text message informing the tenant what the call is about and giving them the number to call back.

**2.5** We can set the number of times that any one tenant can be contacted so that it does not feel like we are harassing an individual. We have excluded those tenants who are part of our one to one service, other vulnerable tenants, hearing impaired tenants and those who specifically ask to be excluded. In addition, anyone contacted by this method in the past seven days is also excluded. However, those who ask to be excluded will still be contacted via our other methods of collection for rent arrears.

**2.6** We control the software through a dashboard. Calls are only made if staff are available, so no tenant is put on hold if they choose to be connected.

## **3.0 Results so far**

**3.1** We started using Voicescape in January 2019 with the White Moss Road office going live first. We gradually introduced the system to the other teams so we had chance to test things and look at the best times to use the system, staff and tenant response and so on.

**3.2** Since go live Voicescape has provided information that Northwards has generated rent conversations with 1698 unique tenants. The reality though, is that 2888 conversations have taken place, meaning that we have had contact with tenants at multiple parts of the arrears escalation.

**3.3** According to Voicescape Northwards is amongst Voicescape's top performers with a consistent 47% conversation versus caseload rate and over 80% of those who listen to the

message, opting to transfer and speak to a member of the rent team. This is well beyond the expectation from Voicescape that 3 out of 4 tenants will engage (75%).

**3.4** The conclusion from this is that Northwards' data is very clean or regularly cleansed and we are operating the system well as Voicescape have been able to process 89% of Northwards' caseload since go live.

**3.5** In comparison there is only one other North West landlord who performs ahead of Northwards, they have a 61% conversation rate and 81% of those who listen, press 1 to speak to the team. They do however have calls routed into their call centre which we don't and they do send over slightly higher caseloads. Another client of Voicescape who is also an ALMO – experiences an average 35% conversation rate versus their caseload.

#### **4.0 Tenant perspective**

**4.1** Automated calling systems do not have a good reputation with the public. To date we have not received any specific written responses from tenants in relation to the use of call to collect technology. However, we have had requests to remove people from the automated service which we have arranged. We do make it clear though that we will continue to contact tenants in arrears using our normal telephone service.

**4.2** We ensure that only tenants that we need to speak to are contacted. We have publicised the use of Voicescape technology via Facebook and in Northwards Natter.

#### **5.0 Views of the staff**

**5.1** A recent away day with the staff confirmed that staff were comfortable with Voicescape and felt it had positive benefits. The calls help to reinforce a positive message to tenants that we will chase debt, even of a small nature but offer support when tenants need it.

**5.2** We have trialled the software on overtime but we have to be mindful of the times of day that we contact our tenants and also the availability of staff if the tenant calls back later. For now we have concentrated on day time calls.

#### **6.0 Impact to date on rent arrears**

**6.1** Looking at the data we are able to extract from the rent arrears system there are 1693 current tenancies which have the 'Voice' activity code against them. The total balance of these arrears at the end of week 201940 (06/01/19) was £484,213.42, and the balance as at the end of last week (16/06/19) was £478,396.39. This is a reduction of overall arrears for this group of £5,817.03.

**6.2** However, out of these 1693 tenancies that were contacted, 147 have a Universal Credit indicator. The arrears for these 147 have increased from £66,747 to £82,154 within the period. This is in line with a general increase in arrears amongst tenants in receipt of Universal Credit.

**6.3** We are currently working on obtaining a more complete data set and arrears analysis as this figure does not include any voicemails left or texts sent to tenants and their response. This could markedly increase arrears recovery on those cases. This is something we are working to implement with Northwards' IT section.

## **7.0 Conclusion**

**7.1** We continue to have regular meetings with Voicescape and will be reviewing the use of the system in comparison with the reduction in rent arrears on a regular basis. This will enable us to test the ongoing effectiveness or otherwise and value for money of the system.