

Briefing – December 2006

## **Choice based lettings for people with mental health problems**

### Purpose of this briefing

- To set out and build on the key messages for vulnerable groups (including those with mental health problems) accessing Choice based lettings (CBL) as discussed in the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG, formerly the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) publication “Implementing and Developing Choice Based Lettings: A Guide to Key Issues”.<sup>1</sup>
- To increase awareness of CBL amongst health and social care staff to enable those staff to support and assist people with mental health problems to access local CBL schemes.
- To highlight that people with mental health problems may require advice and support to enable them to access their local CBL scheme and health and social care staff involved in care co-ordination should be able to offer support to enable people to do so.
- To encourage partnership working across housing authorities, registered social landlords, and health and social care partners, in developing and enhancing CBL systems and making CBL accessible to people with mental health problems.

### What are Choice Based Lettings?

*“Housing and social services authorities should liaise with each other and both should play an active role in helping the most vulnerable people to exercise their choice of suitable housing with appropriate support services.”<sup>2</sup>*

Choice based letting (CBL) schemes allow people to apply for available social housing accommodation which is openly advertised (for example in local press or inter-active website). Applicants can see the full range of available properties and apply for any home to which they are matched. The successful bidder is the one with the highest priority under the scheme. Authorities provide feedback that helps applicants assess their chances of success in future rounds.

The government is committed to taking forward the choice-based lettings agenda.

*“...allocation policies for social housing should provide choice wherever possible, while continuing to meet housing need...this is the best way to ensure sustainable tenancies and to build settled and stable communities...”<sup>3</sup>*

The CBL policy has its origins in the Housing Green Paper, ‘Quality and Choice – A Decent Home For All’<sup>4</sup>, which proposed a pilot scheme to test out different approaches and resulted in a DCLG (then ODPM) pilot programme covering 27 local authority-led schemes that ran from 2001– 2003. In 2002, a target was set for all housing authorities to have implemented a CBL system by the end

<sup>1</sup> ODPM (2005): Implementing and Developing Choice Based Lettings: A Guide to Key Issues.

<sup>2</sup> ODPM (2005): Implementing and Developing Choice Based Lettings: A Guide to Key Issues.

<sup>3</sup> ODPM (2002): Revision of the Code of Guidance on the Allocation of Accommodation (London) ODPM, paragraph 5.3.

<sup>4</sup> ODPM (2000): Quality and Choice – A Decent Home For All (London) ODPM.

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of 2010. Currently about 32% of local authorities have implemented CBL and a further 56% have plans to do so by 2010.

The government's view is that ideally they wish to see a single comprehensive approach in place that covers all of the local authority stock in an area, and wherever possible all the social rented stock. It should involve collaborative working between a wide range of agencies including local authority housing departments, registered social landlords (RSL's), social services, voluntary sector

bodies, community organisations and other local stakeholders such as health.

A major distinguishing feature between CBL and traditional allocations approaches is that applicants need to be more proactive. It is, therefore, important that the system is straightforward, understandable, explicable, transparent and fair. It is also important that health and social services understand the basics of CBL schemes to enable them to support people with mental health problems who may need help to access the system.

### Positives

The results of the evaluation of the CBL pilots were generally positive with customers welcoming, firstly, the opportunity to exercise relatively greater choice and, secondly, the transparency and openness of this new approach to allocations<sup>5</sup>.

The overall findings from the evaluation of the pilots were also encouraging and highlighted amongst other things:

- Increased understanding of allocations and lettings by applicants.
- Greater relative perceptions of fairness of CBL compared to points systems by applicants.
- Customer support for the transparency of CBL; and
- Importance of targeted advice and support service on choice-based lettings.

A recent research report<sup>6</sup>, carried out for DCLG which builds on the pilot evaluation and assesses the longer-term impacts of CBL, found that in most cases the introduction of CBL is followed by an improvement in tenancy sustainment. This shows that CBL is effective in better matching people to properties and improving satisfaction with letting outcomes. The report disproves concerns that CBL might concentrate certain groups of people in particular types of area. For example, the outcomes for formerly homeless people are largely positive, showing that under CBL they are more likely to be housed in higher demand areas. Case study landlords interviewed for the research recognised the need for active measures to protect the interests of people that could be potentially disadvantaged by the 'active' participation required under CBL, and this support was very much welcomed by applicants/tenants.

### Challenges

There are important lessons that can be learnt and experiences shared from the work undertaken over the last few years within the CBL pilots to ensure that the challenges, such as ensuring that households have access to social housing market information (see table below), are positively addressed.

One of the key issues that emerged from the CBL pilot programme was the initial lack of support for vulnerable households (mainly due to schemes not recognising that this could be an issue until after they had launched). There are a range of actions that can be taken to improve the situation

through, for example, joint working with the health and social care sector. Housing authorities and their partners need to develop innovative approaches to tackle this challenge.

This briefing emphasises the importance of partnership working in developing CBL systems. Housing providers, other statutory agencies (such as health/social care services), voluntary and community organisations, existing and prospective tenants and carers need to be involved in the design and development of CBL schemes.

<sup>5</sup> ODPM (2004): Piloting Choice Based Lettings – An Evaluation (London) ODPM.

<sup>6</sup> DCLG (2006): Monitoring the Longer Term Impact of Choice Based Letting, Heriot Watt University, BMRB, (can be found on [www.communities.gov.uk](http://www.communities.gov.uk)).

<sup>7</sup> ODPM (2005): Implementing and Developing Choice Based Lettings: A Guide to Key Issues (London) page 36.

## Why should health and social care staff get involved with CBL?

People with mental health problems may face a number of difficulties in accessing the local CBL scheme. They may be unaware that the CBL scheme is in operation and may find it difficult to navigate the system or bid for properties, particularly where the CBL systems are heavily IT based. People may also require additional advice and support to exercise choice and adopt a realistic home hunting strategy.

### **Social services**

There is a strong case for involving social services so that the needs of people with mental health problems (and other vulnerable groups) are built into the policies and practices of the CBL system. Involving social (and health) services as partners is also important to ensure that their policies and procedures are integrated with the CBL system, for example dealing with adaptations, care packages in the home, links with care and support networks. Equally important is the recognition of a common agenda between housing and social services on more effectively meeting the needs of people with mental health problems and vulnerable households.

### **Health and social care sector including Community Mental Health Teams (CMHT's), Mental Health Trusts (MHT's) and Primary Care Trusts (PCTs)**

There is a strong case for inclusion of these services in designing systems that meet the needs of people with mental health problems and other vulnerable groups, for example, medical priority, tackling bed-blocking and helping to ensure that people can exercise choice, independence and remain in their own home.

The availability of advice and support for people with mental health problems in accessing CBL is essential. This can, in part be provided through local authority housing advice services, but also needs to involve a wide range of statutory and voluntary organisations to provide advice and support and act as advocates for groups and individual households. A number of CBL schemes have developed collaborative approaches with social services, health agencies and voluntary sector organisations.

**Eastleigh Council and its RSL partners** have established a specialist panel consisting of health, social care and housing representatives, where advice can be sought as part of the individual support needs – referrals can be made by any agency or an individual applicant/carer.<sup>7</sup>

## Other important groups to involve

### **Tenant and community involvement**

As the potential customers of CBL schemes, tenants groups and individuals are essential in developing and monitoring schemes. They are likely to have concerns and ideas on CBL. A key message is that tenants and potential customers should be involved in both strategic and operational development of schemes and that this should take place at an early stage. It is important that housing authorities and their health and social care partners should develop their involvement strategy in line with best practice on tenant participation as well as with

the principles of their tenant compact. Health and social care staff may have a role in supporting people to be involved in consultation, strategy setting, service design and monitoring.

### **Supporting People teams**

These are located in County Councils and Unitary Authorities. The teams develop and deliver policies for specific needs groups such as people with mental health problems and are, therefore, vital in ensuring joined-up thinking between CBL and other housing and support-related services. Supporting People can provide the support

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needed to help applicants understand and participate in CBL through floating and befriending support and can also provide support with moving.

### Voluntary and community sector organisations

Organisations such as Mind, Shelter, citizens advice bureaux (CABs), local race equality organisations and disabled persons housing services are centrally involved in providing

housing advice and support services. Therefore, it is essential that these agencies contribute to the development and running of schemes. It is also important that housing authorities and their partners adopt a comprehensive approach and liaise with organisations working with people with mental health problems and a wide range of vulnerable groups to ensure that they are aware of how the CBL scheme works and what people need to do to access it.

## What practically can health and social staff do to help people access CBL schemes?

People may initially seek advice and information about CBL from social services, but also health services, so an additional barrier can be created to the person being able to access the scheme and exercise choice if staff are unaware of CBL and its operation within the local area.

It is helpful for health and social care staff to have a basic understanding of CBL as a system;

to be aware of who would be the first point of contact for someone wishing to access the local CBL scheme; and also to have knowledge of local advice, support and information services, which a person can be signposted towards. Staff should also be able to, if necessary, support someone through the process of their application to CBL.

### Westminster Council Choice Based Lettings Guidance for Community Mental Health Teams

The guidance aims to give advice on frequently asked questions concerning the choice based lettings scheme within the locality for people who may wish to access the scheme and local health and social care staff.<sup>8</sup>

## How do CBL schemes work?

CBL systems should be inclusive and enable all households to exercise a greater relative degree of choice compared to traditional, bureaucratic, allocations systems.

Within the table<sup>9</sup> showing the seven principles (at top of opposite page), there is particular relevance for enabling people with mental health problems to access the scheme.

CBL requires effective communications between people seeking housing and the organisation(s) running the CBL scheme. CBL schemes need to provide (on a regular basis) essential information on the social housing market, property advertisements, feedback on responses and ensure that advice and support is available for those who need them. Schemes should be able to guarantee that people

who require information, advice and support are able to receive it as and when required. People need to have a system that they trust and that they can access easily and use at a time that is most convenient to them. They need to be able to provide information on their changed personal and housing circumstances, respond to advertisements and receive information and advice.

Feedback is an important aspect of CBL schemes. Most schemes provide basic information on, for example, the number of responses to a specific advert and the key selection criteria (i.e. number of points/band/length of time on the housing waiting list). However, people have requested more personalised feedback and many CBL schemes are now putting in place mechanisms to provide this.

<sup>8</sup> Can be found at [www.socialinclusion.org.uk](http://www.socialinclusion.org.uk) within Housing section.

<sup>9</sup> ODPM (2005): Implementing and Developing Choice Based Lettings: A Guide to Key Issues (London) page 35.

<sup>10</sup> ODPM (2005): Implementing and Developing Choice Based Lettings: A Guide to Key Issues (London) page 47.

<sup>11</sup> ODPM (2005): Implementing and Developing Choice Based Lettings: A Guide to Key Issues (London) page 47.

<b>CBL principles</b>	<b>Meeting the needs of vulnerable and excluded households</b>
Proactive customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advertising housing with support packages.</li> <li>• Individual feedback to customers on bidding.</li> <li>• Specific and highlighted feedback on lettings of adapted properties, sheltered and supported housing etc.</li> </ul>
Social housing market information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information on number/type/location of adapted properties, sheltered housing and lifetime homes.</li> <li>• Policy on and resources for adapting properties.</li> </ul>
Property and neighbourhood information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Property features including degree of adaptation.</li> <li>• Location of health centres and other facilities/services.</li> </ul>
Labelling and selection criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reserving specific types of property (e.g. lifetime homes) for vulnerable groups and selection based on 'best fit on meeting needs' criteria.</li> <li>• Priority system using time-limited cards or bands.</li> <li>• Building in procedures (such as assessment panels) that give sufficient priority to medical conditions.</li> </ul>
Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing information and enabling responses to be made in a form that best suits vulnerable and excluded groups.</li> </ul>
Advice and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help in making choices and submitting bids/responses.</li> <li>• Links to other housing and support options (e.g. social care packages).</li> <li>• Proactive approach for targeting support for households who are not responding to adverts.</li> </ul>

## Selection criteria

**Points systems:** some CBL schemes have retained the traditional points system. When a person registers with the scheme, their personal

circumstances will be taken into consideration to allocate points reflecting their individual situation.

**The Derby Homefinder scheme** has adopted a system based on seven bands that are linked to points. People who join the common housing register are assessed on the basis of needs and are awarded points related to their need band. Applicants can respond up to a maximum of six property advertisements per weekly cycle. The person with the most points will be offered the property.<sup>10</sup>

**Banding:** consists of establishing a number of bands or groups that reflect different broad levels of need. Properties are advertised with a label indicating that priority will be given to households

in a particular band. Within each band, prioritisation can be determined by points and/or time on the housing register.

**The Homefinder Direct scheme** in East Cornwall makes use of four bands: emergency, gold, silver and bronze which denote different levels of need. The emergency band involves making use of a time limited priority card that gives applicants precedence. If an applicant does not make use of the priority card within the time period and suitable properties have been advertised, then the person may be placed in the gold band. If an applicant with an emergency card responds to a suitable advertisement, they will be the first to be offered the property. If there is more than one applicant for an advertised home, the person who has the highest priority band and has been on the Homefinder Housing Register the longest in that band will be selected.<sup>11</sup>

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**Priority card system:** people with specific high levels of need are given a time-limited priority card, which gives them precedence over others if they respond to adverts that they are eligible for.

If no suitable properties are advertised within the time-period, the validity of the priority card will usually be extended.

### Good practice

#### Information, advice and support

Customers often request detailed information and advice on the likelihood of specific types of properties in a local area becoming available, as well as helping to respond to adverts. Housing authorities and their partners need to balance the provision of this information with the need to avoid CBL staff advising applicants on what properties to apply for. **Health and social care staff need to respond to this and support people with mental health problems to access CBL in a meaningful way to exercise choice.**

#### Partnership working

Partnership working between a wide range of stakeholders is essential in designing and delivering an inclusive scheme that meets local requirements. Joint working has many potential advantages:

- 1 Making use of and extending existing partnerships such as housing and health and social care liaison groups.
- 2 Drawing on the skills and expertise of a wide range of organisations such as voluntary sector agencies who work with people with mental health problems.
- 3 Generating innovative ways of tackling specific issues.

#### Availability of information

Health and social care staff can help housing authorities to decide and monitor which methods best meet the needs of customers:

- 1 In-person visits to a housing organisation or one stop shop.
- 2 Post.
- 3 Kiosks in high profile public locations – emphasis on making services easily accessible through kiosks in, for instance, council offices including libraries.
- 4 Call centres/telephone hot lines operating on an extended hours basis.
- 5 Websites.
- 6 Text messaging.

#### Guidance specifically written for people who use the scheme

All CBL schemes provide information for home seekers about their particular scheme. Guidance specifically written for vulnerable groups (including people with mental health problems) would help to address the difficulties that people may experience in accessing local CBL schemes.

#### Marketing Social Housing

**Harborough Home Search** has put together information packs, fact sheets and a video on sheltered and supported housing.<sup>12</sup>

### Agreeing a vision between housing, health and social care

- Providing a fair, transparent and understandable system.
- Making better use of existing rented stock.
- Developing a customer centred approach that enables people to be proactive in addressing their own requirements.
- Improving efficiency in allocations and lettings.

<sup>12</sup>ODPM (2005): Implementing and Developing Choice Based Lettings: A Guide to Key Issues (London) page 20.

<sup>13</sup>See Brown T et al (2004): Has It Worked? – An Evaluation of the First Three Years of Harborough Home Search: Market Harborough, Harborough District Council.

<sup>14</sup>ODPM (2005): Implementing and Developing Choice Based Lettings: A Guide to Key Issues (London).

- Meeting the needs of vulnerable people by providing advice and information.
- Helping to create sustainable communities and community cohesion.
- Link in with relevant housing strategy for vulnerable people.

CBL schemes which do not help vulnerable groups are unsatisfactory. It is imperative that housing, health and social care services work together to put in place arrangements and procedures to enable people with mental health problems to participate effectively in CBL.

## Monitoring and evaluation

Involving customers and tenants is an important part of the monitoring and evaluation process. Not only should customers be provided with

information and feedback on how the system is working, they should also be able to provide an input into the review process.

**Harborough Home Search** carries out an annual customer survey as well as obtaining information from satisfaction surveys that are carried out within two months of a new tenancy. It has also commissioned specific research to investigate particular issues such as whether the scheme meets the needs of vulnerable groups and homeless households.<sup>13</sup> Information on how the scheme is operating is provided in a quarterly newsletter to customers, and there is an advisory group that includes tenants, which meets quarterly.<sup>14</sup>

## IT

The development of CBL systems that make extensive use of websites and the internet for advertising properties, receiving responses and providing feedback will disadvantage customers and communities who are unable to access

or make use of this technology. Health and social services may be able to offer assistance with this issue, through use of Day Centre resources or local colleges.

## CBL checklist

- Is there a CBL scheme operating in your local area?
- Who is the first point of contact within the local housing authority for CBL enquiries?
- How does the local CBL scheme work?
- How are applicants prioritised within the local area?
- What different methods are there for someone to register with the CBL scheme, to see properties advertised and to place a bid?
- What sort of information is provided about properties, the surrounding area and what feedback is given?
- What written guidance is available, in what languages and formats?
- What further sources of advice and support are available?

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### How the National Social Inclusion Programme will develop good practice

The National Social Inclusion Programme (NSIP) has responsibility for coordinating the implementation of the Social Exclusion and Mental Health reports action points. The action points relating to housing and homelessness include the reference to vulnerable people in the DCLG guidance on Improving the Effectiveness of Rent Arrears Management, Choice Based Lettings and Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities. Other actions include improved mental health awareness training for housing professionals and the production of good practice guidance to overcome the barriers for homeless people accessing mental health services.

NSIP are supported in the implementation of these action points by a Reference Group which comprises a range of voluntary and statutory organisations and Government officials across housing and health departments. Further information on membership can be found at the [www.socialinclusion.org.uk](http://www.socialinclusion.org.uk) website. NSIP also works with other Housing Leads across the Care Services Improvement Partnership ([www.csip.org.uk](http://www.csip.org.uk)) to ensure joined up working.

### Where to go for more information

#### Housing

- Audit Commission:  
[www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk)
- Chartered Institute for Housing:  
[www.cih.org.uk](http://www.cih.org.uk)
- National Housing Federation:  
[www.housing.org.uk](http://www.housing.org.uk)
- Housing Corporation:  
[www.housingcorp.org.uk](http://www.housingcorp.org.uk)

#### Government Departments

- Department for Communities and Local Government (formerly the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister):  
[www.communities.gov.uk](http://www.communities.gov.uk)
- Department for Work and Pensions:  
[www.dwp.gov.uk](http://www.dwp.gov.uk)
- Social Exclusion Unit:  
[www.socialexclusion.gov.uk](http://www.socialexclusion.gov.uk)
- Department of Health:  
[www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk)

#### Mental Health

- NIMHE:  
[www.nimhe.csip.org.uk](http://www.nimhe.csip.org.uk)
- National Social Inclusion Programme:  
[www.socialinclusion.org.uk](http://www.socialinclusion.org.uk)
- Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health:  
[www.scmh.org.uk](http://www.scmh.org.uk)
- Mind:  
[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

#### Advice

- Citizens Advice:  
[www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)
- Shelter advice line:  
[www.shelter.org.uk](http://www.shelter.org.uk) / tel: 0808 800 4444
- Local Authority housing advice:  
[www.\\*\\*\\*\\*\\*\(insert your town name\).gov.uk](http://www.*****(insert your town name).gov.uk)
- National Debt Line:  
[www.nationdebtline.co.uk](http://www.nationdebtline.co.uk)