

The impact of Choice Based Lettings on the access of vulnerable adults to social housing

This paper is the outcome of a brief study undertaken in the course of 2008. The study was intended to be broader than those already completed that have focused on the experience of a particular user group. However it did not aspire to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the operation of Choice Based Lettings.

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1. PRELIMINARIES

The study

This paper is the outcome of a brief study undertaken in the course of 2008. The study was intended to be broader than those already completed that have focused on the experience of a particular user group. However it did not aspire to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the operation of Choice Based Lettings.

The questions we have sought to answer

- What might give rise to the anxiety that Choice Based Lettings might disadvantage vulnerable adults?
- How have those promoting Choice Based Lettings tried to prevent such disadvantage?
- What evidence is there that these measures have been effective?
- What have the consequences been: for vulnerable adults, for other applicants, for housing providers, for other agencies?
- Do the views of applicants and tenants validate the conclusions drawn by professionals?

What we have done

We have gathered information using established contacts, others provided by the commissioners and by soliciting information through the Department of Health's Housing Learning and Improvement Network. We identified five case study locations that represent different stages of development and experience, geographical spread and a variety working arrangements:

- The City of Westminster
- South Gloucestershire UA
- Calderdale Metropolitan Authority/ Pennine 2000 HA
- The City of Liverpool
- The City of Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Visits were undertaken that included interviews with key professional stakeholders: local authority officers, housing providers, support agencies and with a variety of applicants and tenants.

In addition, we have been contacted and provided with information by a number of individuals and organisations: ADASS, local authorities, Primary Care Trusts, Housing Associations, agencies providing support to specific groups and organisations operating CBL systems on behalf of local authorities.

2. KEY LEARNING POINTS & CONCLUSION

- There is a need for support to be available to help people navigate the system and to provide advice and support. The nature of this support will vary according to the circumstances of the individual but may range from helping overcome the limited literacy of potential applicants, through facilitating application by the provision of access to the internet to providing prompting to those whose chaotic lifestyle militates against the meeting of deadlines.
- The impact of Choice Based Lettings on the circumstances of vulnerable adults will be further enhanced when it is connected to efforts to move “upstream” in supporting vulnerable tenants and preventing the breakdown of current housing arrangements.
- The policies and protocols for operating the system need to be developed in ways that ensure ownership by all partner agencies.
- Systems need to emerge out of the engagement of partners, reflecting local realities and priorities. Access to the system is improved where systems are “co-produced” with users and partners rather than being imported with only limited modification.
- There are a number of possible tensions between need, choice and supply. For example, someone who is experiencing mobility problems who needs to move may not want the area where the authority can identify an adapted property. The question, then, for the authority is the extent to which the adaptations policy needs to take into account the choice agenda.
- It is important that there is a proper balance between choice and need and that the desire to provide choice does not become an excuse for not meeting the needs and aspirations of vulnerable people.
- To ensure that bidders have the information they need to make an informed choice there is a need to use a range of media such as mailouts, newsletters, shop-fronts and interactive websites.
- Authorities need systems to monitor who is bidding – or more importantly who is not – so that they can take action to ensure that the reasons for this are investigated.
- Some authorities expressed concern that Choice Based Lettings could lead to an over concentration of vulnerable people in areas that already have high numbers of people who are excluded. There is a need to explore whether there are better ways to deal with issues of community cohesion
- There is a need to mainstream the “pathway approach”¹ where there is a framework for enabling people to move from supported housing to mainstream housing and to plan for more than one move. This has the ability to address the needs of people from all vulnerable groups.

¹ “Care Pathway” is a term well-established in Social Care usage and familiar to most housing practitioners that describes the route an individual takes on a step-by-step basis following their first contact with health and social care services. To achieve successful outcomes for Vulnerable Adults the operation of the Choice Based Lettings system needs to be embedded within a Care Pathway that addresses not only the housing but also the support and care needs of the individual.

- Some people will not be able to cope with a move that takes them directly from their existing situation to a long-term housing solution. They may need multiple access to the system so there is a need to ensure that people can plan several moves (e.g. from Supported Housing to mainstream housing) or access Homebuy and other forms of home ownership as their income increases or their experience of household management improves. Some systems may not encourage or facilitate such multiple moves. The need for a flexible approach to circumstances of this kind is well established in relation to homelessness but not everywhere reflected in the provision of housing for other vulnerable adults.

Our conclusion is that the good practice examples that we have identified illustrate a system which is advantageous to vulnerable adults, delivering better and more consistent outcomes for them than previous application and allocation systems.

Among those groups of applicants who are not vulnerable adults we have identified two groups in particular who may feel disadvantaged because they are no longer benefitting from an assumption about their level of need based on their belonging to a particular group:

- people in early old age;
- single homeless people who have no other presenting need.

3. AN INTRODUCTION TO CHOICE BASED LETTINGS

The Government has signalled a desire to see social housing being more responsive to its customers. A key part of this has been the way that residents and applicants gain access to housing. Choice Based Lettings is the term used to describe a system of housing allocation based on customers bidding for properties that have been advertised by housing providers as being available for rent. The perceived advantage of this system is that the customer has been more engaged in the process by virtue of actively choosing the property they want rather than it being chosen for them.

CBL was initially developed in the Netherlands in the 1980's. In the United Kingdom 2000 saw the trialling of CBL in Caerphilly (by Charter Housing Association) and in Mansfield (by Leicester Housing Association) and the first authority wide scheme in Harborough. In 2001, the Government Green Paper on housing ² highlighted the Harborough Home Search scheme as an example of an innovative approach to allocation. This led to the provision of £13m to fund 27 pilot CBL Schemes that ran from 2001 to 2003.

These pilot schemes were evaluated in 2004 and the outcomes were identified as:

- There had been an increase in the numbers of households registering in almost all pilot areas;
- The schemes were perceived to be more open and transparent by applicants;
- Most applicants felt that there were benefits flowing to them in return for the extra effort involved in bidding;
- There were improvements in void periods and refusal rates;

² DETR and DSS (2000) Quality and Choice – A Decent Home for All. London : SO.

- The schemes could be made to work for people from BME communities and those from vulnerable groups.

Key Elements of CBL

There are a number of key principles that were seen to be common to all CBL schemes. These were summarised by the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2002 and are set out in Figure 1. As can be seen these take forward the concept of a more responsive, more transparent system where applicants are the active participants in the search for a home rather than the passive recipients of an offer.

Figure 1 : Key Principles of Choice Based Lettings

Key Principles

Customer Centred : The initiative to apply for a property is taken by the customer rather than being the passive recipient of the offer of a property;

Providing the Customer with Market Information : Customers receive details about what properties are available and who can apply. Information is also provided on the popularity of particular types of property and the chances of a bid being successful.

Property and Neighbourhood Information :The information provided gives more detail about property features such as central heating, energy efficiency, location, schools, garden etc and offers 'real choice' as in the private owner occupied sector.

Support for Vulnerable Groups : A banding system based on 'levels of need' are used to protect vulnerable people and ensure that people in the most urgent need can be supported. It should lead to improved housing opportunities for vulnerable people.

Selection Criteria : Straightforward and transparent eligibility criteria are applied for those looking for accommodation and who wish to go onto the Housing Register. There is a simple and easy to understand system for establishing someone's priority for a particular property.

Communications : The quality of communications between landlords and applicants is central to the system. The adoption of a range of techniques to advertise properties including regular mailings, telephone and personal response to callers, use of information technology and property shops.

Source : Brown, Dearling, Hunt, Richardson and Yates (2002)³

There is no one single model of CBL however there are some common elements that can be identified in most schemes :

- Schemes cover all of the landlords stock and includes transfer as well as new applicants;
- A range of methods are used to advertise properties to ensure that people are aware of what properties are available;
- As much information about the property is made available and this usually includes a full description of the property, a photograph of the property as well as information about the social infrastructure;

³ Brown, Dearling, Richardson and Yates (2002) Allocate or Let – Your Choice. Coventry and York. CIH and JRF.

- Applicants bid for the property of their choice and there are simple rules covering how to bid including bidding by post, telephone, text messaging or via the website;
- Advocacy and support is available to help those who find it difficult to navigate the system;
- There is clear feedback given about how the successful bidder met the property criteria;
- Each local authority will have additional systems such as a points system or bandings to help them deliver policy outcomes such as controlling the number of successful bidders from groups who may be less popular with the electorate or who, it is felt, are over represented in the local population.

CBL and Vulnerable Groups

From the outset the need to provide support for vulnerable groups has been a key principle of CBL and the bidding guidance issued by the then DETR (now the Department of Communities and Local Government) stated that authorities should set out how they would assess the support needs of people from vulnerable groups and how they would make special arrangements to ensure that vulnerable, difficult or excluded applicants would be assisted to negotiate the process⁴.

In the report on the evaluation of these pilots (Piloting Choice Based Lettings : An Evaluation⁵) there was an emphasis on the need to provide equal access to the system for people from vulnerable groups. It said: "strategies for protecting vulnerable and excluded groups involve ensuring that information on vacancies and processes is available in appropriate formats, including minority languages, that bidding mechanisms are accessible to all, and that systems are set up to provide assistance to those who would struggle to participate in the CBL procession on their own".

A key issue that this raised is the extent to which the participation of someone from a vulnerable group is the landlord's responsibility and the extent to which it is reasonable for the applicant to do so. Overall the evaluation found that the lack of support for vulnerable groups was an area of concern. The extent to which the principle of customer empowerment and meaningful choice for vulnerable people had been effectively delivered was open to question. This was specifically addressed in the later longer term impacts study. This found that it was standard practice to maintain lists of applicants in need of special assistance; and to send 'assisted list' applicants vacancy advert listings by direct mail. In some instances such applicants were periodically contacted to notify them of 'potentially suitable' vacancies and to offer to make proxy bids on their behalf as well as facilitating the effective role of advocates through briefing and outreach work with voluntary agencies, caring professionals and others to raise awareness of scheme rules and processes.

There has always been a balance to be struck between meeting need and enabling choice. The Code of Guidance on the allocation of accommodation subsequently issued by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (now the Department of Communities and Local Government) in 2002⁶ said that local authorities must

⁴ DETR (2000) Choice Based Lettings – Bidding Guidance. London : DETR.

⁵ Piloting Choice Based Lettings : An Evaluation (Full Report)

⁶ ODPM (2002) Allocation of Accommodation – Code of Guidance for Local Housing Authorities. ODPM : London.

consider whether they should frame their allocation scheme to give additional preference to those “ who fall within the reasonable preference categories and who have urgent needs” The examples given include those who have to move because they have an urgent medical reason or who are experiencing threats of violence. As Brown, Hunt and Richardson say “the precise policies and procedures for determining, for example, who has an urgent medical reason to move will vary between areas”⁷. As they go on to say, “there is no national consensus on what constitutes ‘need’ and allocations policies reflect a combination of factors reflecting the state of the local housing market and local political considerations. This will partly be to do with the definition applied to qualitative concepts and that what constitutes “need” may vary between LA districts.

In order to balance need and choice schemes have developed a number of ways of explaining how they prioritise bidders. Some schemes use points as a way of indicating levels of need – as in a typical traditional system. Other schemes use banding – three or four bands is a typical model – as a way of delivering different policy objectives. In this system properties may be advertised as being primarily for someone from within a given band either to ensure the equitable allocation of property across the year or because a particular property is particularly suited to older people or unsuited to people who have children⁸.

There are a number of possible tensions between need and choice. For example, someone who is experiencing mobility problems who needs to move. The applicant may want to live in a particular area. The authority may want to encourage them to choose a property in a different area that has already been adapted. The question arises of whether the applicant should be ‘allocated’ an adapted property or whether the applicant should be encouraged to exercise choice and then have adaptations fitted to their chosen property. A traditional points based allocation system may be regarded as paternalistic but there is an equal concern that a system based on bidding may disadvantage some. For example, someone with learning difficulties or mental health problems may slip through the system unnoticed. Ultimately, it is important that there is a proper balance between choice and need and that the desire to provide choice does not become an alternative to meeting the needs and aspirations of vulnerable people.

To ensure that bidders have the information they need to make an informed choice a number of different methods have been tried. These have included mailouts to all households, newsletters for those on the housing register, shop-fronts and interactive websites. All media need to be compliant with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act. A key question for authorities is the extent to which they then go on to provide additional support to people from vulnerable groups without giving them an advantage.

The learning from the 27 pilots was that it is possible to develop CBL systems that meet the needs of vulnerable people. For the most part those from vulnerable groups like the transparency and equity that CBL introduced and that they can navigate the system. Most authorities have recognised the need to put in place systems to monitor who is bidding – or more importantly who is not – so that they can take action to ensure that the reasons for this are investigated. This has largely been addressed by providing them with the necessary support to navigate the system. However, it also

⁷ Brown, T Hunt, R and Richardson J (2003) Any Choice for Vulnerable Households ? Lessons from Choice Based Lettings. York : HAS.

⁸ Housing Corporation (2005) Choice Based Lettings. Good Practice Note 12. Housing Corporation : London.

proved to be important that there are strong links to agencies that can provide advice and support to provide information to applicants and bidders and to provide feedback on what customers want and, as Grannum says, that landlords contract with voluntary agencies for this to be provided⁹.

4. OUR FINDINGS

We have structured the findings of our study by the five key questions that we set out to address:

1. What might give rise to the anxiety that Choice Based Lettings might disadvantage vulnerable adults?

This project was initiated out of a concern that people from so-called vulnerable groups were disadvantaged by the introduction of Choice Based Lettings. There had been early experience of vulnerable adults being disadvantaged; for example by “first past the post” systems, the lack of adequate arrangements for support to vulnerable adult applicants and the use of limited media operating the system.

The review carried out by Shelter showed that people who were vulnerable too often slipped through the net and would only come to peoples’ attention at a point of crisis. Certainly, several of the respondents reported that there was a sense that people were passive in the old system and at risk of being lost.

"We had one resident on the waiting list who had points because they had a medical condition. They were being supported by their partner. Their partner died but they didn't tell anybody. It was only when they were due to be discharged from hospital that their change in circumstances was picked up".

These problems seem to have been overcome by more sophisticated practice. Authorities have developed a number of mechanisms to enable equity of access and better outcomes for people from vulnerable groups. Nonetheless, all the authorities contacted as part of this review retain a concern to ensure that people are not lost to the system or within it.

2. How have those promoting Choice Based Lettings tried to prevent such disadvantage?

A range of methods are now used to enable better access to housing for vulnerable people through the Choice Based Lettings. Key to this is the way in which both policy and processes are developed and implemented and the active engagement of all stakeholders in the process. This is designed to ensure that there was a real understanding of the underlying problems and that everybody was involved in developing the new system.

Several authorities emphasised the importance of placing a system, such as Choice Based Lettings, in the context of a desired policy outcome. In South Gloucestershire the desired outcome is better access to housing and the

⁹ Grannum, C (2005) A Question of Choice. Shelter : London.

authority has worked to engage everyone in the development of policy as much as the new CBL system.

Newcastle has adopted a 'whole pathway' approach to independent living for people from vulnerable groups. The aim has been to keep the process as simple as possible whilst keeping focused on the desired outcome - the successful sustaining of a tenancy. This has involved ensuring that there are clear protocols in place and work on prevention of eviction and homeless prevention.

"The 'pathway' approach that the authority has adopted is designed to ensure that there is a framework for enabling people to move from supported housing to mainstream housing and to plan for more than one move".

Processes and outcomes need to be transparent, and this includes transparency about judgements as well as mechanisms. In Westminster, Housing Options Officers will explore as many avenues as possible in terms of assessing which banding someone should be in. All homeless applicants are interviewed. Anyone with mental health needs is referred to the joint mental health assessment service. Those for Band S are visited at home and are referred to the joint assessment panel for older people.

In Calderdale the engagement of potential applicants with a Support Provider gives preferential status within the system. This not only assists the access of individuals to housing, it also reinforces their engagement with appropriate support services. To ensure that the system is accessible to all they will use mail-outs and other prompts. As a back-stop they will employ an "auto bid" system on the applicant's behalf.

"There had been a growing recognition that the points system wasn't working. The system was confusing, there was a degree of points chasing and people could be suspicious of the housing officer's role".

Several authorities use a 'Priority Card' system. In some authorities applicants will qualify for a Priority Card if by staying in their existing accommodation puts them at risk of serious harm, they are being made homeless by redevelopment and there is no alternative accommodation available or you are about to be discharged from hospital but you cannot return home.

"Engagement with support agencies gives people whose chaotic lifestyles might otherwise disadvantage them a fast track access to housing. Working with the Young People's Advisory Service, for example, unlocks Silver Banding".

Typically authorities talk of there being opportunities to bid on-line (either from home or from elsewhere), by phone, in person at a one-stop shop with the support of a housing officer or from some sort of floating support worker. Authorities publish information designed to help people to manage their expectations and several authorities have similar ways of making this information available.

For the future, authorities recognise a need to refine systems and processes and to monitor the desired outcomes. Some authorities have moved towards

quotas and are providing more information for providers. They are monitoring bidding and work to identify vulnerable people who fall outside the traditional Supporting People groups.

3. What evidence is there that these measures have been effective?

Authorities were confident that there was now more information available to applicants and partners alike. This meant that bidders were able to make decisions about what area to look at or whether to start looking for accommodation in a particular area. There is a recognition that systems need to be capable of picking up vulnerable adults who are not already receiving services and therefore not identified within the system: this may be through trigger questions in applications and through identifying “non-bidders” within the system.

“The old system worked against vulnerable adults who were looking for independent accommodation. In most cases they did not have enough points and we had to put them through a panel; a slow and bureaucratic process.”

“Most people prefer bidding. You are part of the process. Pre-choice people were very focussed on just one area, now they are more willing to look at a neighbouring area”.

The basis upon which priority within the system for vulnerable adults is to be operated may vary but there is a recognition that this needs to be clearly understood and its impact on the access of other applicants modelled. Authorities gave good examples of how they review lettings on an annual basis to ensure that they are achieving their policy objectives and that there is equity of access. “Access Liverpool” undertake mapping exercises and trend analysis as well as providing support to providers on risk assessment. Some authorities had introduced quotas into the different bands so that they could ensure that there was the desired throughput of people from different bands.

In Calderdale the support workers spoke not only of improved access for clients but also of a new sense of reality in the situation for those they were working with. As one tenant expressed it: “You can see just how much, or how little, property is on the list. Previously you only knew about the property you were offered and you might suspect there were better properties they were holding back from you. Now you see the whole picture and it helps you make realistic decisions. You have more control, you can hold back and wait for the area or the property you want.”

This is particularly important where there is a threat to the social cohesion of a particular area. Authorities were concerned that low demand areas are often low demand areas because of the levels of deprivation. There is an issue about their capacity to respond positively to high levels of people from vulnerable groups moving into the area. As a result, authorities would sometimes encourage applications from people from low priority groups in order to ensure that there is not an over preponderance of people with support needs, on benefits or low incomes that may compromise the wider policy aim of community sustainability.

4. What have the consequences been: for vulnerable adults, for other applicants, for housing providers, for other agencies?

As we said earlier in this paper there are a number of principles underpinning Choice Based Letting systems. These are that:

- It is customer centred,
- It provides the customer with market information,
- Information about the property and the neighbourhood are provided,
- There is support for people from vulnerable groups,
- There are selection criteria, and
- There are good levels of communication.

It is these principles that should inform any assessment of the effectiveness of CBL.

There does seem to be a strong view that housing allocations policies and processes are now more consistent with outcomes in other policy areas. Partners need to adopt robust shared understandings of the realities of the situations that will arise: for example, that some people will not have reached a point of being ready for independent living and should not be set up to fail. Whilst support may be provided through a range of different partners it needs to be operated in a way that connects to other patterns of support: education, employment, life skills, and others that contribute to a viable pattern of independent living.

"There is much more synergy between what our service is trying to do for people with learning disabilities and the housing allocation system".

Residual reservations from some agencies seem to reflect anxieties among professionals about the shift of power that Choice Based Lettings may represent from professionals toward their clients. It was clear in a number of the interviews that we carried out that agency workers had developed a number of relationships over the years as a way of ensuring access to housing for their clients. Some felt that the introduction of CBL had removed their ability to advocate for someone to be allocated a property in a particular area or to their ability to sustain a tenancy. There was a concern in some areas (such as care pathways) that these relationships have not been re-established and that this can have a negative impact on the person's ability to sustain their tenancy.

"Previously, people could be given keys without checking their ability to manage the tenancy. That doesn't happen now. However, it is important that this system does not squeeze out the need to care for people".

Good preparation and the involvement of all stakeholders in the development and review of systems is key to success. Effort in preparation and piloting that leads to the capacity to "get it right first time" when the system goes live makes a huge contribution to credibility and acceptance by colleagues, agencies and bidders alike. Even when all partners have been involved, training needs to be thorough and reach down into organisations. In Westminster they have found

cascade systems to be of limited value and, for a range of reasons not least high turnover of staff in agencies, put a lot of effort into provider information about the how the system works to staff in partner organisations.

"It's really important to design the system you need and not to adapt your system to what's available off the shelf".

Authorities have developed a range of mechanisms for informing applicants about properties and the neighbourhood as well as how popular it is likely to be. Low demand properties can now be advertised and targeted at applicants who have expressed an interest in that area. The system is more transparent in terms of who was successful in bidding for a property and how long they had waited. This takes away any sense of 'discretion' on the part of housing officers.

"It is much more positive, because people know what's available and how long they are likely to have to wait".

It is clear that there are issues around the allocation of specialist housing (such as sheltered housing) for older people through the Choice Based Lettings system but these are connected to broader issues about the future role of sheltered housing and what constitutes appropriate allocation to it. There are also issues about the type of property that certain groups can bid for. In two authorities there had been pressure from single homeless people to be allowed to bid for one bedroom properties rather than just bedsits.

5. Do the views of applicants and tenants validate the conclusions drawn by professionals?

All the authorities we contacted had undertaken a service review and this had included the views of current and potential applicants. In South Gloucestershire, 4,000 questionnaires were distributed to existing waiting list registrants. Of these 1,800 were returned. Concerned that the vast majority of these were from the active elderly they telephoned 100 people including single people, general needs homeless, people with learning difficulties and travellers. They also went out and spoke to 20 different local groups working with vulnerable people.

This to a larger or lesser extent has been replicated in all authorities. Over all population groups the findings from these reviews indicate a degree of consistency. The main themes are:

1. That there needs to be a number of ways of getting information about bids. Bidders are concerned about only being able to bid on-line;
2. That support should be provided to people from vulnerable groups and that this needs to include a range of tenancy support services and especially help getting to appointments and with furniture - especially for those with more chaotic lifestyles;
3. There needs to be a recognition that some people will need help with decision making;
4. Bidders want there to be some way of taking into account the length of time they have been waiting.
5. Language and issues such as visual impairment remain a barrier.

Our own interviews with tenants and applicants demonstrated the effectiveness of the system as they had experienced it. The following three vignettes illustrate their experiences:

Angela

Angela previously lived with her husband and daughter in poor accommodation provided by a private landlord. She has a moderate level of learning disability and a history of mental health issues. Her fourteen year old daughter, who is "statemented", lives with her. Moving her to more suitable accommodation had proved difficult in the past because of her chaotic lifestyle, difficulty in engaging, and ownership of three dogs.

Apart from the poor quality of her existing accommodation she needed to be re-housed as a consequence of Domestic Violence, allegations of abuse of her daughter by the father and persistent disputes with neighbours.

Support Workers had tried to help with issues around housing and initially helped her move on a temporary basis to a hostel style unit in a de-commissioned sheltered housing scheme. The Community Support Team continued to support her in liaison with the Homelessness Team. Angela then moved to a temporary placement in a flat that was more conveniently located for her daughter's school.

The Choice Based Lettings system gave Angela hope of achieving a more satisfactory long-term solution to her housing needs. With help from her support workers she placed a bid on a property at the end of January and moved in early in March

Angela currently receives daily support from the Community Support Team. She has a history of engagement and disengagement with the Support Service but partnership working means that housing staff will encourage her if she started to disengage. The Support Staff believe that Angela has achieved a more appropriate housing solution more quickly and with greater chance of being sustainable than would have been the case without Choice Based Lettings.

Kylie

Mum and Dad split up when Kylie was sixteen years of age. Dad evicted Mum, Kylie and her little brother from the family home. Mum could only get accommodation sufficient for herself and Kylie's younger brother. For a while Kylie was living where she could, sleeping on the couch in a friend's house and then having to move on.

The Homelessness Team placed her in a flat on a short term basis. Here she suffered a break-in but she also allowed a friend to stay who let all sorts of other people come into the flat and property was taken. She was, by her own admission, mixing with a very destructive crowd of friends. The arrangement only lasted a month.

At this time Kylie blamed her Mum for her situation and was estranged from her. She moved into a hostel but there were many people there with chaotic lifestyles and she found it impossible to study. She moved to live with her grandparents for a while but this didn't work as she was unused to living with rules. She ended up in Bed and Breakfast accommodation.

On leaving school Kylie got a job and was placed in a flat but financially she was worse off than before. At this time she was pregnant and the baby was found not to be growing at the desirable rate as Kylie could not afford to eat properly.

Her relationship with the child's father has been on and off, she has lived with him but that did not work. He left when Kylie was three months pregnant. They were drawn back together when the baby was born, although they do not live together and the relationship appears to the Support Worker to work, even if it is a little unusual.

Through this period she was living in a flat but with a good deal of harassment. The situation was seen to be unsatisfactory and would become more so when the baby was born.

Kylie bid on a property and was allocated it but there was a delay of several months before she could take possession. This delay is the only blemish in the process through which she now has a two bedroom house with a large garden, set in a quiet cul-de-sac and surrounded by friendly neighbours.

Kylie is now enrolled in a college course, receives a high but reducing level of support from her Support Worker as she turns her life around. Access to an appropriate housing situation has been crucial in achieving this progress.

Jerry

Jerry was homeless from age of sixteen. Initially he was placed in a hostel where he lived for six and a half months. Whilst living there he made a housing application but found it difficult to engage with the system and felt he had no hope of being allocated a property. For an extended period he lived on friends' couches.

When Choice Based Letting was introduced he made an application in the first week of its operation. Although unsuccessful in his first application, with the assistance of the Young People's Advisory Service, in the second week he bid successfully, having been moved up to Silver Banding.

Jerry is living in a high rise block near the town centre. He had to wait a few weeks after allocation for the flat to be made ready for him but feels that this wasn't a big deal: "after four years of waiting what's a couple of weeks". His neighbours are ok and keep themselves to themselves. Jerry feels that he knows the area well and has a few mates there. He previously had various problems, hanging around with "wrong crowd", but says that there is no way he would invite those people back to the flat because they would trash the place! The flat has a second bedroom which his Mum can use when she visits.

Jerry receives a range of assistance and support from the Young People's Advisory Service and appreciates that the housing officers send messages of congratulation as well as warnings about infringements of tenancy conditions! Choice Based Letting has, after four years of homelessness and rootlessness provided Jerry with: "Somewhere I can call home – somewhere to build on."

5. THE CASE STUDY AREAS

SOUTH GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Four years ago the authority initiated a project looking at how to improve access to housing across the authority and in all tenures. Better Access to Housing was intended to look at all aspects of service access. A key part of this was to review how those who were vulnerable in some way or who had support needs could be identified, be picked up and retained by the system. Choice Based Lettings is one element of this and was scheduled to go 'live' in Summer 2008.

Under the old system there was a concern that people could get lost or slip through the net. People could fail to respond to letters, could fail to report changes of circumstances, and get separated from sources of support. Also, people who were low priority got referred to unpopular areas. This could lead to high turnover and poor social cohesion – the worst situation for someone who is vulnerable.

There had been a growing recognition that the points system wasn't working. The system was confusing, there was a degree of points chasing and people could be suspicious of the housing officer's role, which could undermine the relationship.

In shifting to a CBL system, S. Gloucestershire are proposing to use a banding system. There are three main bands:

- A. Significant health or welfare issues where housing will alleviate the problem; Priority homeless; Care Leavers; Statutory overcrowding; Composite needs
- B. Health and Welfare but less severe.
- C. Anybody else.

This will be augmented by a simple time weighted system. So, on all correspondence people will get their registration number, their banding and the length of time they have been waiting. There is a panel whose role it is to award priority cards and to hear requested banding reviews.

Applicants will qualify for a Priority Card if staying in their existing accommodation puts them at risk of serious harm, they are being made homeless by redevelopment and there is no alternative accommodation available or they are about to be discharged from hospital but cannot return home.

In order to establish applicant's views of the new system 4,000 questionnaires were distributed to existing waiting list registrants. Of these 1,800 were returned. The vast majority of these were from the active elderly. So, in order to reach a broader cross section they telephoned 100 people including single people, general needs homeless, people with learning difficulties and travellers. They went out and spoke to 20 different local groups working with vulnerable people. Over all population groups the results showed a high degree of consistency of view. The main themes are:

- That there needs to be a number of ways of getting information about bids and to make bids – especially for those who do not have access to the internet;
- That support should be provided to people from vulnerable groups.
- The length of time waiting should be taken into account.

- Immigrants/asylum seekers/pregnant women should not be given priority.¹⁰

Ensuring Participation by Vulnerable People

A strategy to involve vulnerable people has been produced. Rather than segmenting vulnerable people into traditional groupings it has sought to take an approach that looks at the potential barriers to access and then identified what can be done to mitigate them. This avoids labelling people who may not identify themselves as vulnerable.

The barriers are grouped under three headings:

Accessing Information: Literacy, language, isolation, visual impairment etc.

Accessing Bidding: Chaotic lifestyles, illness, technology.

Decision Making: Life skills, confidence, illness etc.

There are then a number of ways in which these issues will be addressed:

1. They are proposing to move towards quotas for each band;
2. The new application form gives providers, especially RSLs, critical information about support needs;
3. They will seek to spread the net wider in terms of identifying vulnerable people.
4. They will keep the bidding profile "under constant review".
5. They will try to preserve the policy of no penalties for refusal.

Key Points

- You can't do too much groundwork with vulnerable groups;
- Build policy from consultation not the other way round;
- Build system around what your need is rather than what can be provided.

WESTMINSTER CITY COUNCIL

Prior to 2004 WCC allocated all rented accommodation to priority households on the housing register on a direct offer basis. CBL was introduced as a pilot scheme for older applicants in September 2002 and allowed applicants to bid for the property of their choice with the successful bidder being the one with the highest priority (i.e. number of points). The scheme went live for all priority households in November 2004.

The Process

All applicants accepted for re-housing receive an information pack on CBL. This tells them how to bid, their ID and PIN numbers. They are also informed of their priority and band.

¹⁰ It is of course the case that the groups mentioned are given particular priority but we report the findings of the survey

The bands are:

- Band A: Cash Incentive scheme; Homeless with extra medical/welfare priority; Statutory overcrowded households; Category 'A' medical priority; Decants/major works transfers; Community Care.
- Band B: Tenant Transfers and the Family Quota.
- Band C: Homeless.
- Band S: Sheltered and supported accommodation for older people

Band A has priority over bands B and C. Band S competes in a different type of property pool. Housing Options Officers work out a quota for the year across bed sizes and bands. When they first went live they ended up with a log-jam so they are trying to manage it through the year.

Housing Options Officers will explore as many avenues as possible in terms of assessing which banding someone should be in. All homeless applicants are interviewed. Anyone with mental health needs is referred to the joint mental health assessment service. Those for Band S are visited at home and are referred to the joint assessment panel for older people.

Available properties are advertised every week. People can bid between Wednesdays and Sundays. The Housing Options Service looks at the bids and takes out the top five. They will contact everybody until they've got three 'yes' responses. Viewings take place on a Tuesday. They are all told what priority they are for their chosen property. There is information about previous lettings results which shows people how many points they are likely to need to successfully bid for a particular property.

For people who may need help negotiating the process there is a 'help with bidding' video. Tell them how to get a flyer, how to bid on the internet and by phone. If someone needs help housing officers can come down to the shop front. They have also commissioned floating support service workers who will support and help people to bid. In exceptional circumstances applicants can be re-housed through a direct offer such as for urgent decant or hospital discharge cases.

Service Review

After twelve months it was decided to undertake a review. This would look at the outcomes of the scheme, analyse bidding behaviour, identify trends, identify gaps and recommend improvements. A series of interviews were carried out with key internal stakeholders, (Race Equality Manager, Councillors, HOS etc); 18 external organisations and 400 survey forms were sent to non-participants, participants and successful bidders. There was a response rate of 84 (or 25%). A number of issues emerged:

- 62% of respondents said that they understood the scheme;
- 48% of respondents said that the area and location of the property influenced their bidding;
- Of those who had not made a bid (18) 6 were waiting for a particular area. However, there were 3 who had not made a bid because they didn't understand the scheme.

In terms of assessing the specific experience of vulnerable people:

- Single households were only allowed to bid for bed-sits or in some circumstances one-bedroom flats. There was a lot of demand for these properties and agencies reported that clients got very frustrated.
- Care Managers reported that viewings were offered at quite short notice and that it could be difficult to organise for those that need support.
- Most households across all ethnic groups are bidding on the internet or the telephone (IVR) service.

What is Working Well ?

The main advantages of CBL for people from vulnerable groups are :-

- that it has put people more in control;
- people have much more choice over where they want to live;
- people can suspend the process until they are ready – but they can still accrue points.
- people who live in supported housing are in a better position because of the quotas.
- people can choose whether or not to have an offer – with the agreement of a case worker.
- people in arrears can't bid so they are more proactive in sorting their arrears out.

What is Working Less Well ?

There are some disadvantages that have been identified :

- some customers feel that we are over-loading responsibility onto them;
- some customers have a perception that there was one list before and that the list is now segmented because they now have more information about the process;
- initially viewings were organised too quickly and so people now are warned that it can be fast.
- Some people are given an offer very quickly and decide whether to accept it very quickly and this can lead to problems. To meet the conditions of the offer some people have been required to move in without furniture. Whilst this is a problem that has considerable precedent, whatever the method of allocation, it is a particular issue in relation to vulnerable adults and those who may be supporting them.

Key Points

- CBL links well to other programmes seeking to empower vulnerable adults;
- Support needs to be available through the whole process and include support in obtaining furniture;

- There needs to be monitoring to ensure that there is a response to those from lower priority groups who are disadvantaged by CBL.

LIVERPOOL CITY COUNCIL

Choice Based Lettings went live Citywide on 4th May 2004. Choice is available to all eligible applicants although restrictions are imposed when applicants have a history of anti social behaviour or are in arrears. The authority has 6 priority bands which are:

- Band A** Homeless
- Band B** Decant
- Band C** Specific Need
- Band D** Medical
- Band E** Overcrowded
- Band F** General Need

A quota for each band is set and published annually and this is designed to give applicants an indication of how long they may expect to wait for an offer. The scheme is internet based. Customers can access the system either by logging onto the web site www.propertypool.org.uk or by visiting one of the One Stop Shops or the offices of the participating RSL's. They can see what properties are available each week, what properties they are eligible for and where they will be ranked for any property, before making a bid. This is designed to help applicants make an informed decision about how likely an application would be to succeed. Adapted housing, supported housing and sheltered housing doesn't go through the CBL system.

This case study has been developed with the help of the Supporting People Team in the City. A workshop was held with representatives from a range of agencies who work with vulnerable people across the City.

What Works Well ?

Applicants are much better informed about what is available and can have confidence that they have access to the vacant properties of all of the participating landlords. They are provided with the opportunity to select a property and landlord of their choice and to register with any of the landlords, if not currently registered. They can also access information about what other services are available locally.

People can be part of the process and they are much better informed about what is available. This means that they can get a good feel for their options and the how long they may have to wait for a particular type of property or area. Hence, they can gauge the competition for certain properties and the how realistic it is to make a particular choice.

Low demand properties can now be advertised and targeted at applicants who have expressed an interest in that area. The system is more transparent in terms of who was successful in bidding for a property and how long they had waited. This takes away any sense of 'discretion' on the part of housing officers.

What Works Less Well ?

Agencies felt that they had lost the ability to advocate for people. Examples given included the ability to advocate for someone to be allocated a property in a particular area (back to an area where they had problems with drugs) or the ability to explain that although someone was in arrears they had lived successfully in supported housing for two years.

There can be a disconnect between care planning and moving home. The systems were integrated before particularly where the provision of new housing was part of the care pathway. These relationships have not been re-established. For example, where an agency is working with an ex-offender there is a need to build trust with the housing provider, provide assurance that the tenant will be supported through the transition and that the tenancy has a real chance of being sustained. The CBL process doesn't allow for information on vulnerability, such as CPN reports, to be shared. These problems have been overcome in other areas that we have looked at and a failure to make and maintain these connections may impact adversely on the capacity of the tenant to successfully take up and maintain their tenancy.

There are concerns that although vulnerable people can register there is an assumption that they have access to IT and that they understand the need to bid. There is a need to fund more support to help people navigate the system and to provide advice and support. As one respondent said, "there is a lack of care in the system".

Key Points

- CBL gives confidence to applicants that they have access to what housing there is available;
- Support and advising relationships have not yet fully been established;
- There needs to be someone at the heart of the system providing advice and support.

NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE CITY COUNCIL

Context

Newcastle was an early implementer of Choice Based Lettings, starting in 2000. The authority saw benefits in placing the customer at the heart of the process and in having a transparent way of showing people that there is equity of access. They try to ensure access to advice and support in entering a bid and, in extremis, someone can bid on the applicant's behalf.

Newcastle has adopted what they describe as a 'whole pathway' approach to independent living for people from vulnerable groups. The aim has been to keep the process as simple as possible whilst keeping focused on the desired outcome - the successful sustaining of a tenancy. This has involved ensuring that there are clear protocols in place and work on prevention of eviction, homeless prevention and tenancy sustainment.

Meeting the Needs of Vulnerable People

There are number of ways in which the process has been added to to meet the specific needs of particular groups. An example of this is the Pathway Project that will support young people into independence. Pathway Officers check that work has gone on to help prepare the young person for independence and to help sustain the tenancy. There are a number of triggers that could initiate further support at a later stage such as a pattern of arrears, anti-social behaviour or other issues.

As with all systems it is the available supply that is the crux of the issue. People can get frustrated if they make bids and are unsuccessful.

People are shown a 'prospects sheet' which helps them to manage their choices and their expectations. There are also two sessions a year where the process and the service available to potential applicants is explained, together with what expectations applicants should have in terms of the type of accommodation that is available at the time they make their application. As one respondent put it, "Choice Based Lettings provides the information and the means for someone who is non-priority to choose to go for a low demand housing area where they stand a higher chance of being successful".

What Works Well

There are a number of themes:

- CBL is more customer focused;
- Helps people on the path to a sustainable tenancy;
- People who are low priority stand a better chance of being housed;
- There is a good level of support available for those from vulnerable groups.

What Works Less Well

A number of themes emerged :

- There are still some negative perceptions of CBL - especially from those in low priority groups;
- There are still some improvements that can be made to ensure that the pathways are right for all groups;
- There is a need to reduce the number of no-shows through CBL.

PENNINE HOUSING 2000

Background

Pennine Housing 2000 was created by a Large Scale Voluntary Transfer of housing stock from Calderdale Council and is the largest provider of social rented housing in the area covered by the Calderdale Council. Within a partnership between the local authority and the Housing Association Pennine Housing 2000 took the lead role. The partners in Calderdale (Pennine Housing and Calderdale Council) were able to learn from other areas where pilots had been carried out. Within the small project group

there was a high level of commitment to making Choice Based Lettings work for vulnerable people.

The organisations providing support had been in earlier schemes in two neighbouring metropolitan authorities where they felt their clients had been disadvantaged under CBL. The Choice Based Letting system in use in Calderdale gives “reasonable preference” to vulnerable adults.

Pennine Housing made the appointment of a Support Officer to work with Support Providers and other stakeholders and early priority and this provided one point of access.

The Support Officer is carrying out training with stakeholders such as advice givers, social service teams, and hospital staff to ensure that their understanding of the scheme and how it may be accessed is constantly refreshed and reinforced.

To ensure balance within communities the system is moderated by Housing Officers who will review the impact on the sustainability of the community of the pattern of bidding that emerges. This doesn’t happen at a central level but is carried out by Housing Officer at the patch level. This “moderation” happens after a person has come to top of the list for a property and before the offer is made.

In reviewing the working of the scheme they are giving attention to how those with restricted mobility or other problems may access the system on an equal basis with others. Such applicants may be mailed out a list, or an advocate or family members can bid on their behalf. As a last resort they will use an “auto-bid” system. This waits until the last day of bidding to enter a bid.

The perceived benefits of the scheme

The success of the Pennine scheme is attributed above all to good partnership working, which involves more than goodwill but also sound, jointly developed procedures. These have ensured the full flow of information on applicants and tenants which is essential if the scheme is to work to the advantage of vulnerable people. The Pennine scheme achieves this through the assessments undertaken by support providers, the key points of which are fed into the CBL process.

One of the reasons that the scheme is perceived to work well is that people who just needed independent accommodation and might therefore not have accrued many points under the old system are fast-tracked through the preference system. Previously they had to be put through a panel, which was a slow and bureaucratic process. Once they are working with a support organisation that is a partner in the CBL scheme they access the preference route.

One example of the way in which the new system is allowing better housing outcomes for challenging groups is the operation of “Firm Foundations” within the Choice Based Lettings system. “Firm Foundations” is a stretch target in Local Area Agreement intended to get more ex-offenders into stable housing. They were previously placed in private sector rented accommodation, now some are being placed with Registered Social Landlords. Under the West Yorkshire prison release protocol Pennine 2000 HA have arrangements for coping with MAPA cases and POPPO. They are working with a support provider offering specialist support to ex-offenders. The operation of CBL means that they no longer work on a quota of properties but give access to a wider stock.

Choice Based Lettings also have a role in managing tenant expectations: there are only the number of properties there are, that is a couple of dozen in a week. A thousand new tenancies are created in a year with 4,000 on the waiting list.

The system also allows greater transparency and realism in consulting with tenants about the future use of stock. For example, in properties where there is an age restriction (e.g. 50+) and the system produces no eligible bids the management can go back to tenants and show them that if the block is to remain viable they will need to remove the age restriction.

Clearly the system works for vulnerable adults. Not only has it increased the likelihood and speed of their access to appropriate housing it has also reinforced their engagement with support services. Applicants can go to support providers to help make a bid and that gives them contact with support staff and support from peers.

Pennine2000 HA didn't have a significant problem with voids but CBL has allowed the harder to let properties to be dealt with quickly where before they would have needed to make multiple offers to get them filled.

The elements that are not working so well

In theory applicants can also access the system through public libraries but that is not working at present as well as it should be.

The initial success of Choice Based Letting led to difficulties in preparing properties for new tenants with some examples of a thirteen week delay between winning the property and being able to move in. This problem has largely been resolved but should have been foreseen and the capacity to respond to that level of demand anticipated.

There is a continuing problem that if a tenant is offered accommodation on Wednesday they will be expected to move in on Monday and starting claiming Housing Benefit and pay rent. That is not always practicable. Getting the furniture and a "starter pack" together can be a problem for those previously homeless or in very insecure accommodation.

In conclusion

The new system reassures housing officers that vulnerable tenants will be adequately supported and come into the property with a support relationship already in place. The Housing Officers admit that under the old points system they would have cherry picked and avoided vulnerable tenants because "who wants problems when you can avoid them".

Choice Based Letting leads to a more informed choice but not open choice!

For the provider it has great advantages in assessing current demand: the old style waiting list is, at best, latent demand but CBL tells you exactly what demand is because this is real time exercise.

Key learning points

- The foundation for success is good partnership working, which involves more than goodwill but also sound, jointly developed procedures.
- Choice Based Lettings can also have a role in managing tenant expectations by exposing them to reality.
- Not only has CBL increased the likelihood and speed of the access of vulnerable adults to appropriate housing it has also reinforced their engagement with support services.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the time and co-operation of the following people:

Kirsty Eastham	Home Choice Project Manager (S. Gloucestershire)
Cindy Fletcher	Accommodation Manager - Learning Disabilities (Westminster)
Elaine Hull	Commissioning Manager - Mental Health (Westminster)
Sue Lewis	Head of Supported Housing Services (Pennine Housing 2000)
Stephen Batley	Operations Manager (Pennine Housing 2000)
Gillian West	Housing Options Manager (Calderdale MBC)
Emma Lucker	Merlin Housing Association
Julie Markham	Housing Strategy (Newcastle)
Sally Nott	Housing Options Service (Westminster)
Sarah O'Driscoll	Knightstone Housing Association
Beverley Race	Your Homes Newcastle (Newcastle)
Debra Sheil	Housing Advice Centre (Newcastle)
Hazel Summers	Supporting People (Liverpool)
John Urwin	Your Choice Homes (Newcastle)

We also wish to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of those applicants and tenants who spoke to us under the condition that they would not be individually identified.

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<http://www.socialinclusion.org.uk>

Nigel Appleton and Peter Molyneux are researchers and consultants with long experience of the housing and support needs of vulnerable adults. They combine an appreciation of policy with experience of the practical issues that arise in delivering services. Recent publications include “Connecting Housing to the Health and Social Care Agenda: a person centred approach”, September 2007 for the Housing LIN, and “More Choice Greater Voice: a toolkit for producing a strategy for accommodation with care for older people”, February 2008, for CLG & Housing LIN. They may be contacted through office@contactconsulting.co.uk

Housing LIN Reports available at www.networks.csip.org.uk/housing :

- **Yorkshire & the Humber Region - Extra Care Housing Regional Assessment Study (Report and Executive Summary)**
Regional analysis for Extra Care Housing in the Yorkshire and Humber region. This report identifies the supply and demand of Extra Care Housing over the next 10 years and sets out a number of recommendations to support the development of Extra Care Housing in the region.
- **Preventative Care: the Role of Sheltered/Retirement Housing**
This paper by the Sussex Gerontology Network at the Uni. of Sussex makes the case for seeing sheltered/retirement housing in the context of the growing interest in the “preventative” agenda.
- **Developing Extra Care Housing for BME Elders**
This report focuses on issues around providing specific Extra Care Housing to BME elders as well as improving access more generally.
- **New Initiatives for People with Learning Disabilities: extra care housing models and similar provision**
This report explores the role of Extra Care Housing models and similar provision of housing, care and support for adults of all ages with learning disabilities.
- **Dignity in Housing**
This report and accompanying checklist takes a detailed look at policy and practice in relation to achieving dignity in a housing setting.
- **Enhancing Housing Choices for People with a Learning Disability**
This paper explains the range of accommodation options for people with a learning disability. It is aimed at workers who advise and support people with a learning disability to identify and extend their housing choices.
- **Essex County Council Older Person’s Housing Strategy**
This study provides an example of how key data on the household characteristics of older people can inform and underpin local planning strategies and documents.
- **Switched on to Telecare: Providing Health & Care Support through Home-based Telecare Monitoring in the UK & the US**
An invited conference session at the World Multi-Conference on Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics, July 16-19, 2006, Orlando, Florida, USA
- **Older People’s Services & Individual Budgets**
This paper aims to identify and share ideas and examples of good practice currently being undertaken by the pilot sites implementing Individual Budgets for older people’s services.
- **Healthy Hostels**
Healthy lifestyles for hostel residents: a guide to improve the health and well-being of homeless and vulnerable people.
- **Remodelling Sheltered Housing and Residential Care Homes to Extra Care Housing - Advice to Housing and Care Providers**
This advice is based on the findings of the project “Remodelling Sheltered Housing and Residential Care Homes to Extra Care Housing”, carried out by a multi-disciplinary team of two social gerontologists, two architects, a rehabilitation engineer, an occupational therapist and an economist.
- **Whose Market? Understanding the demand for Extra Care Housing: A Strategic Approach**
This paper highlights the findings from a recent Housing Learning and Improvement Network questionnaire and draws out some of the implications for commissioners, developers, funders and providers of extra care housing. We hope that the findings will be of interest to private sector developers and will provide a stimulus to local authorities to review the extent to which their strategies facilitate private sector development of extra care housing models.