

## **REPORT**

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To: Supporting People in Kent Commissioning Body

18 December 2008

**Subject: Choice Based Lettings**

**Classification: Unrestricted**

### **For Information**

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**Summary: This report outlines the position of the Kent Supporting People Programme towards Choice Based Lettings as a mechanism of gaining access to Supporting People funded accommodation-based services.**

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#### **1.0 Introduction**

1.1 Choice Based Lettings (CBL) is a new approach to letting homes which aims to make lettings arrangements more transparent. The intention is to make it easier for tenants and residents to apply for housing owned and managed by the relevant Council or Housing Associations in a district/borough. It is also part of central government's drive to give individuals more choice and control over where they live. Rather than the council allocating properties, the Choice Based Lettings scheme enables tenants and new housing applicants to bid for the properties they are interested in. All available properties will be advertised through a variety of media throughout districts and boroughs. Individuals will still have to apply to join the local housing register and their eligibility will still be assessed. However, once individuals have been accorded their appropriate priority, they can then bid for properties advertised under the scheme.

1.2 As stated above the Choice Based Lettings scheme is part of the government's drive to modernise the delivery of public services in order to give people choice and has its origins in the Housing Green Paper, *Quality and Choice - A Decent Home For All*, published by the

government in April 2000. This resulted in a pilot programme covering 27 schemes that ran from 2001-2003. The Government's five year housing plan, "Sustainable Communities: Homes for All", published in January 2005, set out plans for taking forward its Choice Based Lettings (CBL) policy and sets the target for all English local authorities to adopt CBL by 2010.

- 1.3 Since then the allocation legislation (Part 6 of the Housing Act 1996 as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002) has been revised to make it more conducive to the introduction of CBL. It is intended for CBL to cover not only Local Authority and Housing Association properties, but also low cost home ownership and properties to rent from private landlords.
- 1.4 The Kent districts/boroughs worked together to develop the Kent scheme known as 'Home Choice' on a sub-regional basis. The districts/boroughs are introducing the scheme in phases over 2008-09, with Canterbury and Thanet being first in introducing the scheme in summer 2008. In order to encourage mobility, up to 10% of lettings will be available to individuals applying from outside of a district/borough area. However, districts/boroughs will continue operating their own lettings policies.

## **2.0 Context**

- 2.1 Within the context of CBL, there is clearly a role for Supporting People in ensuring that the programme is part of a coherent relationship between CBL and housing related support services.
- 2.3 The Department of Local Government and Communities (CLG) acknowledges that the need for vulnerable groups for assistance in participating in CBL has to be built into the policies and practices of the system. From a CBL perspective, vulnerable households may be excluded or have difficulties participating in the CBL process because, for example, they are:
  - unaware of information about the social housing market and property/ neighbourhoods;
  - unable to make use of the bidding/response mechanism to advertisements; and
  - lacking the support to exercise choice and adopt a realistic home hunting strategy.

2.3 Therefore, availability of advice and support for vulnerable and excluded groups is essential. The 1996 Housing Act provides that any necessary assistance in making a housing application is available free of charge to people who are likely to have difficulty in doing so without assistance. This can, in part be provided through local authority housing advice services. However, the Kent districts and boroughs have also worked on a collaborative approach to providing advice and support to applicants. “Opportunities and Inclusion for All” was developed under the lead of the Joint Policy and Planning Board (Housing) by a range of stakeholders, including Supporting People, and sets out strategic guidance for meeting the needs of vulnerable people within the process of CBL. In addition to housing staff, providers of supported housing funded by Supporting People are expected to enable and support service users who are seeking to move on through the CBL bidding process.

### **3.0 CBL and Accommodation-Based Supported Housing**

3.1 CLG suggests that supported accommodation should be included in CBL as long as the necessary safeguards are in place to ensure applicants with special needs are not excluded from the process. This means that:

- Just because some individuals have vulnerabilities and may have difficulties in making an application, they should not be excluded from exercising choice and control over where they live; and
- Choosing where to live should not be limited to general needs housing but also supported housing.

The Supporting People Team has held discussions with members of the Kent CBL Project Board to discuss how to take the issue forward.

### **3.2 Long-term Supported Accommodation**

3.2.1 Before the meeting, the Supporting People team consulted with 37 providers of long-term supported accommodation. Many providers expressed positive views about CBL that can be summarised as follows;

- making supported accommodation more accessible to a wider pool of vulnerable individuals is a positive. For example, currently some services restrict referrals to care managers but under Choice Based Lettings referrals can come from a wide range of sources
- vulnerable people are being given more choice and control about where they live
- CBL will make it easier for providers to advertise and fill vacancies

3.2.2 However, other providers expressed concerns as follows;

- that focused on a perceived loss of control over ensuring that individuals meet the eligibility criteria of services
- time delays in filling voids
- some people falling through the net because they do not have support to bid
- Jeopardising the fine balancing act required in shared housing to ensure individuals are compatible.

3.2.3 The Supporting People Team was given assurances that the inclusion of any accommodation in CBL does not preclude other conditions being attached to the property. For example, for long-term supported housing there would be an expectation that there would be a stipulation that bidders must meet the support needs criteria that apply to that property. Providers will continue determining the eligibility criteria in cooperation with the Supporting People Programme and will select the successful bidder.

3.2.4 In light of these assurances and because promoting choice and independence are key principles underpinning the Supporting People Programme, it has been agreed to promote the use of CBL for long-term supported accommodation. We believe that this new lettings scheme will provide more choice to a greater number of vulnerable people. The Supporting People programme intends to monitor the take up of vacancies under the new system through the monitoring system provided by the agency managing the Choice Based Lettings scheme in Kent and will review the position in due course.

### 3.3 Short-term Supported Accommodation

3.3.1 However, with regard to short-term accommodation-based supported housing, the Supporting People Programme takes the view that the inclusion of such housing funded by Supporting People in CBL is not appropriate because:

- The vast majority access such accommodation in crisis, for example women fleeing domestic abuse or single homeless people with support needs. People in crisis situations cannot be expected to first apply to housing registers.
- Whilst districts/boroughs can, to some extent, through Choice Based Lettings impose local connection policies, this would be in breach of grant conditions where short-term services are concerned.

- Whilst Choice Based Lettings includes people aged 18 and over, short-term supported accommodation is also available to young people aged 16 and 17 and age restrictions cannot be applied.

3.3.2 The Choice Based Lettings Project Board accepts that short-term and emergency accommodation is not appropriate for the scheme.

#### **4.0 Service User Consultation**

Service users were not directly consulted about CBL. However, during consultation as part of the recently carried out strategic review of long-term supported accommodation many service users expressed the view that they wanted more choice and control over where they lived.

#### **5.0 Equality Impact Assessment**

An initial screening of CBL has been carried out and found that, with the right safeguards in place to support vulnerable people to participate in the lettings scheme, CBL has no adverse impact on the different groups of service users.

#### **6.0 Financial Impact Assessment**

There is a cost related to Supporting People acquiring the facility to monitor the scheme. Supporting People, as all other stakeholders, would be required to access the data base. The cost has yet to be confirmed.

#### **7.0 Conclusion**

7.1 Following detailed appraisal of CBL and discussion with the Kent Project Board, the Kent Supporting People Programme has agreed to promote the inclusion of long-term supported accommodation in CBL.

7.2 Vulnerable service users will be supported by a range of agencies, including housing options and allocation teams and the Supporting People Programme to make an application.

7.3 Short-term supported accommodation is not considered appropriate for CBL.

7.4 The Core Strategy Development Group noted the contents of the report on 11 November 2008 and agreed its submission to the Commissioning Body. However, the group added that there should be a planned series of monitoring reports, quarterly with the performance report.

## **8.0 Recommendation**

It is recommended that the Commissioning Body:

- (i) Note the contents of the report on CBL in relation to Supporting People
- (ii) Ask the Supporting People team to submit a further report once the cost of access to the data base is known.

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### **Background Information:**

*Quality and Choice - A Decent Home for All, 2000*

*Sustainable Communities: Homes for All, 2005*

*Opportunities and Inclusion for All, Strategic Guidance for Meeting the Needs of Vulnerable People, 2008*

### **Appendix One: CBL Process Flow Chart**

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Applicant in housing need applies to go on the Housing Register using the application form.



**Housing Authority writes to the applicant confirming that the application has been registered and advising the date of registration, which band the applicant is in, and what size home applicant is eligible to apply for.**



**Vacant properties advertised and labelled with the details of the property age, size, location, rent, facilities, banding, local connection, and so on.**



**Applicant bids on property, all bids are shortlisted**



**If more than one applicant in the same band applies for a property, the applicant who has been registered the longest, or any applicant using a priority will be selected for the property.**



**A formal offer of accommodation is made (Details of applicant and eligibility are thoroughly checked before formal offer is made).**



**Tenancy agreement signed**