



GATEWAY TO HOMECHOICE

Ensuring Participation in Choice Based Lettings

A strategy to ensure participation by vulnerable people

Gateway to Homechoice is a sub-regional choice based lettings scheme which will be operated by seven local authorities in the Greater Haven Gateway – Babergh, Braintree, Colchester, Ipswich, Maldon, Mid-Suffolk and Suffolk Coastal and the participating registered social landlords in their districts.

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Background

Seven Councils in the Greater Haven Gateway – Babergh, Braintree, Colchester, Ipswich, Maldon, Mid Suffolk and Suffolk Coastal Council will be implementing a Choice Based Lettings Scheme from March 2009. The scheme will be called Gateway to Homechoice.

In all areas, except Colchester where they have been running a choice based lettings scheme since November 2005, it will be a complete change from the previous allocations scheme. Previously, applicants would apply to the housing register, and then wait to be made an offer. Being a region of high demand for social housing, 80% of people on the register are unlikely to be offered a property and so therefore would be waiting for years with no realistic prospect of being housed.

Under choice based lettings we will advertise vacant council and housing association properties. Applicants on the housing register will be able to express an interest in properties which they feel will fit their needs. These applicants will then be prioritised according to their housing need, with the top applicants being invited to a viewing of the property. In most cases there will be no penalties for refusals.

This means applicants will have to be much more active, looking for vacancies, deciding whether the homes match their requirements, and then expressing their interest in those properties. To ensure the success and fairness of Gateway to Homechoice, all possible barriers to full participation must be considered, and solutions devised.

Due to the high demand in the Greater Haven Gateway, all we can look at is ensuring fair access to take part in the scheme; we cannot ensure housing unless an applicant is in high housing need. Even though some applicants may be classed as ‘vulnerable’ under choice based lettings and needing support to take part, this will not necessarily reflect a high level of current housing need. Therefore, in reality, they may not have a high chance of securing a property.

We will however endeavour to include other housing options in our choice based lettings scheme such as shared ownership properties, mutual exchange and private rented accommodation which may offer alternative solutions to those people who have a relatively low need on the housing register.

Purpose

This strategy sets out how we will:

- Include solutions to barriers in our set-up of the system
- Ensure information on vacant properties is accessible as possible
- Ensure support is available to applicants who may need it

This strategy links with the respective Council's

Sub-regional housing strategy
Strategic plans

Housing strategies
Homelessness strategies
Statements of Community Involvement

Aim of strategy

The aim of the strategy is to ensure that the benefits of choice based lettings are accessible to all applicants. We aim to empower people to make their own choices and decisions and provide support to enable people to do so. We have aimed to integrate all our applicants' needs and aspirations into our every day housing activities- choice based lettings being one part.

Defining vulnerability

Available research on the subject of vulnerability under choice based lettings flags up three areas:

- Access to information on housing information and options
- Access to a bidding method
- Capacity to make decisions and strategy for bidding

The usual way to view this issue is to suggest categories of people who may be 'vulnerable' to not accessing the choice based lettings system. Suggestions are wide and inclusive: older people, people with learning difficulties or mental health problems, homeless households, younger people, people with drug or alcohol problems, people leaving rehab or prison, care leavers, people with medical needs, people with English as a second language, people with literacy problems, gypsies and travellers.

Although some applicants may be classed as 'vulnerable' under choice based lettings and needing support to take part; this classification of vulnerability will not necessarily reflect a high level of current housing need, nor an acceptance under homelessness legislation as having a priority need due to vulnerability.

The problem with this approach of looking at categories of people who may experience difficulties is that it does not consider what barriers may be, and therefore any solutions tend to rely on a vague 'support' oriented approach.

The other issue with looking at issues of vulnerability is there could be different barriers applicable to individuals depending on where they are in relation to the system. For example, before the launch of Gateway to Homechoice, everyone will be 'vulnerable' because they will not know about the system, and so our proposed solution to this is to provide training and information. We will then need to look at people who could still be vulnerable depending on the format of the information given, and solutions could be information in various languages and formats. Maybe we will need to then look at access points to that information and so on.

Individuals may also appear in many of the above groups, and many of the groups have harder 'vulnerabilities', for example, mobility issues preventing them from coming to a town centre shop, and also 'softer' vulnerabilities, for example, a lack of decision making skills exacerbated by a chaotic lifestyle.

We will focus on possible barriers, allowing us to tackle individual's multiple barriers. We can also avoid classing people as 'vulnerable' when they may not recognise it as applying to themselves, or is wholly inappropriate, for example, active retired people.

Barriers to choice based lettings

We have looked at the three main steps of choice based lettings: accessing information, bidding, and decision making. We have listed the 'harder' and 'softer' barriers for each. These are based on issues highlighted by customers, information gained from the existing Colchester scheme and we also consulted representatives from local agencies.

Accessing information:

Literacy
Speakers of other languages
Chaotic lifestyles
Perceptions of service and likely outcomes
Lack of knowledge
Visual impairments
Learning difficulties
Mobility issues
Geographical isolation- rural communities
Currently housed outside the district
Mental health issues
Profoundly deaf

Accessing bidding:

Chaotic lifestyles
Learning difficulties
Visual or hearing impairment
Geographical isolation
Mental health issues
Literacy
Speakers of other languages

Decision making:

Life skills
Confidence
Chaotic lifestyles
Learning disability
Mental health issues

This list is not intended to be exhaustive, but it can be seen that many of the 'softer' barriers are clustered in the area of decision making.

Diversity and Inclusion

The aims of valuing diversity and inclusion run through this strategy. We need to ensure that people engage with our services in the first place.

An issue which was highlighted in research by the Essex Equality and Diversity Project 'Facing the Facts' was that many BME community members do not approach their local council for help with housing issues because of perceptions about the service on offer. They may think that services may be discriminatory, or that we only help certain groups of

people. We hope that the rebranding of Council services under Gateway to Homechoice will encourage customers to reconsider the services we can offer. In other areas applications from BME members have risen after the introduction of choice based lettings. We would view this as a positive impact.

Research from TACMEP suggests that the main reason people from BME communities do not access services is due to language problems. We need to publicise the availability of language line.

An equalities impact assessment will be carried out on the choice based lettings scheme and monitored and reviewed after one year.

Allocations Policy

Gateway to Homechoice will operate one common allocations policy across all seven Councils. An applicant will need only to apply once to one of the Councils but be able to be considered for housing in any of the seven areas. The allocations policy prioritises people on the basis of their current housing need. It is a banding system of five bands with band A and B generally being people with a high housing need, and/ or in a reasonable preference category. We also include some people the council need to house within a fixed timescale, for example, people moving out of supported housing schemes where nominations have been agreed with the Council. These two bands also include people who are willing to move to a smaller property which is a reflection of our aim to make the best use of our stock. Generally, though, bands A and B reflect high housing need and some level of vulnerability, for example, homeless households. This gives these applicants a higher chance of being housed quickly, limiting the amount of time they will need to engage with the system. There is also a facility to directly let properties, outside of choice based lettings to enable people in severe danger to life and limb to be rehoused very quickly as they will take priority over all other categories of applicants.

Multiple needs are covered in the allocations policy. If an applicant has two or more housing needs in Band B they will be moved to Band A. If they have four or more housing needs in Band C they will move to Band B.

The new banding system was developed because many applicants found points system difficult to understand. Applicants can easily see where they fit into the banding structure and with choice based lettings can more easily see their chances of how long it is likely to take to be housed.

Inbuilt Solutions

In devising the choice based lettings system we have tried to consider solutions to some of the barriers. We have looked at the three main steps of choice based lettings: accessing information, bidding, and decision making. Some of the 'softer' barriers suggested above will be dealt with by support provision which is detailed in sections following.

Access to information

There will be a variety of ways to see property information: website, newsletter available at local offices and available to be posted out to applicants in high priority who are unable to access the website or visit the Council. The newsletter will also be emailed to all housing associations or agencies that request this so they are able to print out this to help their own customers. The staff will be able to explain information to people who may be visually impaired, with literacy issues, or who may need guidance to bid or make decisions.

The application form to complete to join the housing register will be an on-line form. Research has shown in other areas that more than 80% of people are now applying for housing on-line. Phone help will be available in each of the authorities should an applicant not have access to a computer or have difficulty completing the form on-line.

There will be clear notices in the shop and in the windows on who is eligible to join the housing register, how to apply, how to take part in Gateway to Homechoice.

The website and free sheet will make use of symbols designed to aid understanding on the facilities of the property and who the property is suitable for.

The website will conform to the W3C's WAI AA standards for website accessibility. It has also been carefully designed to meet RNIB accessibility guidelines.

Parish councils and rural members are aware of the choice based lettings system and will be trained on the system. Advert freesheets will be sent out to the Parish councils if requested.

We will make sure the weekly bidding cycle is publicised and is very clear to avoid confusion.

We will also collect and distribute information on IT facilities available in each area , their opening hours, and further IT training for those who may like to learn further skills.

Access to bidding

For applicants who may not be able to bid at all the system can place an automatic bid for properties they are eligible for. One method to identify people needing this service will be the existing medical and welfare panels.

Advocacy bidding will be allowed on an informal basis to make use of existing networks of informal support from family, friends, and neighbours. To bid, they will only need the person's application reference number. As there will be no penalties for refusals, there should not be any resulting problems, unless it is one of decision making (see below). Obviously, if we are required to give information, there is a formal procedure to ensure confidentiality.

People who apply for sheltered housing are assessed by a member of the sheltered housing team. If they will not be able to bid, there will either be an automatic bid set up, or the sheltered team will bid on their behalf.

There is a range of methods to bid: website, automated telephone, direct contact with the Councils (in person, by letter, email, telephone) and we have included text bidding.

Training on how to bid will be available for customers in each Council and help sheets will be produced. Existing customers at Colchester rate the system very easy to use. Customers will be encouraged to make use of all the bidding options available to them, so if their circumstances change so one method will no longer be available to them, they will be able to use another. For example, if an applicant goes abroad on holiday, they may not want to use the automated telephone line as usual, but will be able to make a bid through the website.

Each Council will provide contact numbers of staff who will be available to help those people who are having trouble engaging with choice based lettings and will be able to provide support, by identifying suitable properties, and encouraging participation.

Decision making

For those who cannot exercise choice, there is the automatic bidding facility. We have also reserved a direct offer facility for those in high priority who do not engage. There are the safeguards of a rigorous appeal procedure and a complaint policy.

Generally it must also be noted an intensive publicity and training program is planned to Council, ALMO, RSL and agency staff and customers. Library staff are praised as useful information resources by BME community members, so we will plan an outreach programme. This is planned to be ongoing after the launch of the scheme to ensure that users who join the register after the launch will also be included.

In the areas of decision making and being able to exercise choice it was decided a support strategy was needed to tackle these areas and this is detailed below.

Support strategy

We need to be able to identify the barriers an applicant can face. Gateway to Homechoice staff can do this by:

- Direct contact
- Difficulty in completing the application form. This will trigger contact to see if there any barriers
- Support agency notified on application form
- A referral or expression of concern from an agency
- Risk assessment built into application form to identify those people who may need support
- Then monitoring of bidding- not bidding will trigger a further assessment.

This is a way of identifying potential barriers for new applicants. However, agencies will be able to refer clients for help at any point. Monitoring of bidding will also be able to flag up a change to non-bidding.

During consultation with agencies it was identified that we need to tell agencies and advocates what information would be useful for a person's application. They would also be willing to help their clients by attending case conferences to ensure we have all relevant information.

As we are aware of the time constraints and pressures our colleagues are under, support agencies will not be identified as a sole source of bidding help unless the applicant is unable or unwilling to engage with CBC staff, and has issues that an agency would also be able to help them with.

We will develop a robust referral procedure to facilitate information sharing with other agencies and to ensure people do not get 'lost in the system'.

Confidentiality

To ensure people have trust in approaching us for support we have a confidentiality policy. All personal information is held securely, and staff have a duty to not disclose information on applicants. We will not share information without an applicant's permission.

Monitoring

We have developed rigorous monitoring procedures to check whether people from certain categories who are expected to encounter barriers are able to achieve:

- similar or improved outcomes under choice based lettings
- similar properties and quality of properties
- similar or higher levels of customer satisfaction

To ensure our service is available to all sections of the community we will also monitor rates of access by different groups.

To ensure that people are able to take part in choice based lettings we will monitor bidding patterns. This will not only be non-bidding, but also a negative change in bidding.

If non-bidding is identified, we will contact the applicant concerned if they could reasonably be expected to be a successful participant (for example, in bands A or B, or seeking non-general needs accommodation). The reasons for their non-bidding will be discussed with them and they will be helped to identify solutions.

Future service improvements

We want to consider issues of raised expectations. This may impact on some groups who are encouraged to access the system, but do not have enough priority to be housed. Some applicants may find this more difficult than others, and may lack the knowledge or capacity to find other solutions to their housing need.

As previously detailed, we will set up a system of review of Gateway to Homechoice. This strategy will also be kept under review, being reviewed shortly after Gateway to Homechoice's launch to take into account developments in the system and future plans.

Considering Impacts

Although choice based lettings does involve considering issues of access for groups, it is important to bear in mind the positive impacts choice based lettings has had in other areas, or is expected to bring. ODPM (now CLG) research reveals that customers recognise the extra input they have to make in choice based lettings, but most consider the increased choice and control worth it. There will be no penalties for refusing properties, so people will be able to choose a property suitable for their needs. We will no longer be making people go to an area they don't want to live in. It is hoped that it will contribute to community stability when people live where they want to live.

Sources:

Brighton and Hove- 'Meeting Needs of Vulnerable People Strategy'

Mark McGoogan- results of survey of 11 social services department on choice based lettings

CIH Briefing Paper- 'Offering Communities Real Choice- Lettings and Community Cohesion'

Shelter- 'A question of Choice- Good Practice and issues in choice based lettings'

Essex Equality and Diversity Project- 'Facing the Facts- A base-line study of the housing and related needs of the black and minority ethnic community in Essex'

TACMEP- 'A Needs Analysis of the Minority Ethnic Communities Living in Tendring and Colchester (draft)

Tim Brown, Ros Hunt and Jo Richardson- 'Any choice for vulnerable households- lessons from choice based lettings'

ODPM- Piloting Choice Based Lettings- an evaluation

ODPM- Implementing and Developing Choice Based Lettings

Colchester's CBL Vulnerable People Strategy

Subject	Task	Who	By when	Intended Outcome
Strategy	Complete first version of Participation strategy to Procedures Group	Diane Foley	12 Aug 08	Identified solutions to ensuring access to all to Gateway to Homechoice benefits
Strategy	Present to workshop	Diane Foley	25 Sept 08	Consultation
Strategy	Review after comments and sent out to agencies, RSLs for comment	Diane Foley	29 Sept 08	Consultation
Strategy	Review strategy after Consultation	Project Board	5 Nov 08	Sign off strategy
Strategy	Review strategy after six months of operation	Gateway to Homechoice Manager	September 09	To ensure the strategy is a comprehensive document and it reflects the procedures of Gateway to Homechoice
Access	Use of symbols on website	Diane Foley	Jan 09	Ensuring access for BME communities and people with literacy issues
Access	Publicise availability of Language Line in Council offices	Project Board	Jan 09	Ensuring access for BME communities
Access	Minicom available in Council offices	Project Board	Jan 09	Ensuring access by disabled community
Access	Investigate speech software for website	Diane Foley	Jan 09	Browse Aloud will be enabled for the website.
Access	Set up distribution list for freesheets	Gateway to Homechoice Manager	March 09	To ensure access to advertisements
Access	Provide posters and notices in offices detailing: Who is eligible How to apply How to take part in Homechoice	Project Board	March 09	To increase applicants to register
Assessment	Cross reference those people applying on line with existing registrations to ensure that people have re-registered	All Councils	By Jan 09	To ensure that existing applicants are able to access register
Assessment	Identify role of support officer in each authority	Project Board	March 09	To provide support of people through the Gateway to Homechoice process
Partnership working	Training programme to agencies, staff, RSLs, customers	Diane Foley and Project Board	Dec 08 and ongoing	To ensure ability to participate
Partnership	Refresher training programme to	Gateway to	September	To ensure ability to participate

working	agencies, staff, RSLs, customers	Homechoice Manager	09	
Partnership working	Refresher training programme to agencies, staff, RSLs, customers	Gateway to Homechoice Manager	January 10	To ensure ability to participate
Partnership working	Publicise to agencies how they can help their clients, for example, what information they could provide to support someone's application to the housing needs register	Diane Foley and Project Board	November 08	To ensure correct assessment of applicants
Partnership working	Review Gateway to Homechoice with agencies on 6 monthly basis	Gateway to Homechoice Manager	September 09	To ensure that agencies' clients are able to access Homechoice and ensure close working.