Choice-based lettings, potentially disadvantaged groups and accessible housing registers: a positive practice guide
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Purpose and scope of the guide

1.1 This guide is aimed primarily at social landlords in England operating choice-based lettings. It may also be of interest to voluntary sector organisations with assisting service users in accessing affordable housing. The document is positive practice guidance. It is not statutory guidance.

1.2 Choice-based lettings is the term used in the UK for a lettings model used by social landlords where properties available for letting are advertised or made known to potential applicants and where the onus in matching applicants and vacancies lies with the homeseeker rather than the landlord. The choice-based lettings model was originally developed in the Netherlands in the early 1990s. Since 2000, however, the Government has strongly advocated the adoption of the model by all social landlords across England.1 In 2002 the Department established a target for choice-based lettings to be rolled out across every local authority area in the country by 2010. In terms of its policy context, choice-based lettings could be seen as sitting within the broader agenda of promoting the ‘personalisation’ of public services2. Partly in response to official encouragement, many choice-based lettings schemes involve multi-landlord partnerships where one organisation (usually a local authority) takes lead responsibility for managing the associated administration on behalf of the consortium. These agencies are referred to in this report as ‘scheme lead organisations’.

1.3 By comparison with the traditional approach to lettings, choice-based letting requires a more active engagement on the part of homeseekers. Consequently, it is widely acknowledged that some people could be potentially disadvantaged by the proactive nature of the system. Particularly given the ‘safety net’ role of social housing, it is clearly important that steps are taken to ensure that this does not happen. Choice-based lettings landlords generally appreciate that members of specific groups could need active help to engage with the system. However, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) recognised that more detailed advice was required than the recommended checklist of ‘user friendly’

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2 See, for example, relevant Department of Health webpages and links at: http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/SocialCare/Socialcarereform/Personalisation/DH_079379
features and the advice on engagement provided in the existing statutory choice-based lettings Code of Guidance\(^3\) (‘the choice-based lettings Code’).

1.4 Historically, some local authorities have established disabled persons housing registers or accessible housing registers (accessible housing registers) to facilitate appropriate housing moves for people needing accessible or adapted housing and, at the same time, to ensure that best use is made of appropriate housing stock. Lettings involving accessible or adapted properties may be operated in parallel with choice-based lettings or, alternatively, a choice-based lettings scheme may fully integrate the letting of such properties alongside mainstream stock.

1.5 This guide has two main aims. First, to stimulate landlord thinking on how to ensure that vulnerable people are not disadvantaged by choice-based lettings. Second, to highlight ways that this can be achieved. Here, we draw on what are seen as effective tools, techniques and procedures already incorporated within some choice-based lettings schemes to identify and support potentially disadvantaged homeseekers in accessing social housing.

Positive practice sources

1.6 The guide is largely based on research commissioned by DCLG in 2008/09, which examined existing literature and nine case study choice-based lettings schemes for good practice in assisting homeseekers from potentially disadvantaged groups to engage with choice-based lettings. The research objectives, the list of case studies and the limitations of the project are set out in Annex 1.

1.7 Existing sources of advice and good practice to which reference is made in this guide, including internet links, is provided at the end in the References section.

1.8 A key channel for official messages on how choice-based lettings schemes should be operated is the Audit Commission’s Key Lines of Enquiry (KLoE) for allocations and lettings, identified in Annex 2.

1.9 Also relevant here will be the Tenant Services Authority’s new regulatory framework for social housing in England which is due to come into force in April 2010.

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Structure of the guide

1.10 The guide is structured as follows. Chapter 2 discusses the policy and equalities context for choice-based lettings schemes and sets out some general principles for positive practice.

1.11 Each of the following chapters then focuses on a particular area of activity and is structured to look at the nature of the activity, specific issues and conclusions or key messages.

1.12 This guide includes examples intended to highlight the range of positive practice approaches schemes have taken to assist potentially disadvantaged homeseekers to engage effectively with choice-based lettings. It should, however, be acknowledged that the research undertaken to underpin this guide was relatively small in scale. Consequently, it was not feasible to validate as ‘effective’ all the examples cited by choice-based lettings scheme providers and others and described as such.
Chapter 2
Policy context and positive practice principles

Key messages

- To the maximum extent possible, access to social housing for potentially disadvantaged homeseekers should be encompassed within choice-based lettings systems (rather than being handled through ‘direct lets’ which preclude applicant choice).

- There is a range of important legal obligations which require choice-based lettings scheme provider organisations to configure provision appropriately for potentially disadvantaged groups.

- Identifying potential barriers to participation in choice-based lettings can provide a crucial initial step in devising the range of techniques and approaches needed to maximise participation by potentially disadvantaged groups.

Policy context of choice-based lettings

2.1. From the outset, it has been officially recognised that landlords adopting a choice-based lettings approach would need to pay particular attention to engaging people who could be potentially disadvantaged by the user-led nature of the model. The 2000 housing green paper (para 9.33) stated that:

Housing and social services authorities should …play an active role in helping the most vulnerable people to exercise their choice of suitable housing with appropriate support services being provided where necessary.

2.2. The choice-based lettings Code also stresses that choice-based lettings procedures should be configured to accommodate the needs of disabled people and others potentially disadvantaged by the customer-led ethos of the model. Importantly, the Code emphasises the Government’s view that to the maximum extent possible, access to social housing for potentially disadvantaged homeseekers should be encompassed within choice-based lettings systems rather than being managed under separate arrangements (see paras 2.9-2.12 below). The closely related issue of how supported housing should be accessed is discussed below.
Equalities context of choice-based lettings

2.3. There are currently three separate public sector equality duties for race, disability and gender. In the Equality Bill 2009 these duties are to be brought into one new duty (subject to Parliamentary approval), covering the seven equality strands: age, disability, gender, gender identity, race, religion or belief and sexual orientation\(^4\). Tackling socioeconomic inequalities is included as a new public sector duty in the Equality Bill.

2.4. In addition, the Human Rights Act (HRA) 1998 applies to public bodies, including local authorities and arms length management organisations (ALMOs) and, in terms of good practice, to housing associations\(^5\). The HRA 1998 enables human rights under the European Convention on Human Rights to be invoked\(^6\).

2.5. All housing organisations are legally required not to discriminate in the provision of services, including in lettings policies and practices. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) (as amended by the Disability Discrimination Act 2005) provides a disability equality duty applicable to public bodies. In the choice-based lettings context, this obliges housing authorities to identify where disabled people may be disadvantaged and make reasonable adjustments for disabled people to facilitate their full participation in choice-based lettings.

2.6. The DDA (section 1)\(^7\) defines a disabled person as someone who has:

\[\text{a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities}\]

The definition includes: physically disabled people, including sight or hearing disabled people; people with learning difficulties; and people with mental health conditions and mental illness\(^8\).

2.7. To ensure that equality duties are fully met across the equality strands, an equality impact assessment (EIA)\(^9\) should be undertaken as the choice-

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\(^5\) Although following the recent case of Weaver v London & Quadrant, housing associations may now be considered as public bodies for Human Rights Act purposes.

\(^6\) Chartered Institute of Housing (2009) Equality, Diversity and Good Relations in Housing, Coventry: CIH


\(^8\) Disability Discrimination Act: Guidance on matters to be taken into account in determining questions relating to the definition of disability http://83.137.212.42/sitearchive/DRC/pdf/DefnOfDisability.pdf
based lettings scheme policies and procedures are developed, followed up by a further EIA once the scheme has been established, as part of an overall scrutiny review (see para 6.17).

Choice-based lettings scheme scope and structures

2.8. DCLG guidance (para 3.1) states that:

*Where housing authorities adopt a policy of offering a choice of accommodation, the policy should, as far as possible, extend to all applicants and to all available accommodation. Policies which restrict choice to certain categories of applicant or certain types of dwelling are likely to be more difficult for applicants to understand, and may be regarded as less open and transparent.*

2.9. In practice, most choice-based lettings landlords exclude from the system at least a small proportion of lettings – tenancies allocated as direct lets\(^9\) (or managed lets) for what are considered exceptional categories – e.g. decants, emergency management transfers, witness protection cases.

2.10. While appreciating that a small minority of homeseekers could require intensive assistance to engage fully, DCLG sees empowerment via choice-based lettings as a fundamental objective for all service users capable of being helped to participate. The practicalities of maximising the scope of a choice-based lettings scheme can be addressed through innovative tools and techniques, as described in later chapters.

Supported housing

2.11. The term ‘supported housing’ (SH) refers to accommodation in clusters or blocks designated for occupancy by members of a defined group (e.g. frail, older people) where the landlord (or specialist support agency) provides special help, assistance and support to tenants on a long term basis. For letting homes in supported housing schemes choice-based lettings will often be a suitable method. This is very clearly the case for projects accommodating groups such as older people with moderate or low support needs and those with sensory or physical disabilities. Lettings in supported housing can also be differentiated according to whether they are open-ended or time-limited. It is in relation to permanent (assured tenancy) SH lettings that the case for choice-based lettings is strongest.

2.12. In practice, not all choice-based lettings schemes incorporate SH lettings of any kind. According to CORE returns, some 27 per cent of 2008/09 assured

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\(^10\) As used here, the term “direct let” refers to tenancies created under a traditional allocations approach – i.e. where matching property and applicant is retained by the landlord rather than being devolved to the applicant.
tenancy (or otherwise permanent) supported housing lets were made via choice-based lettings. Where supported housing is let outside the choice-based lettings framework, this can encourage a mistaken belief that people with moderate learning difficulties or physical disabilities, for example, cannot be accommodated in mainstream housing (provided appropriate support is made available).

Inclusive approaches to choice-based lettings

Tower Hamlets Homeseekers includes all accessible housing and sheltered accommodation in the choice-based lettings scheme, integrating an accessible housing register into the scheme and providing full assessments of support and accommodation needs for all applicants over 60 years, through the Client Support Team.

Solihull Home Options have agreed with supported housing providers that the 50 per cent of vacancies subject to nomination rights will be included in the choice-based lettings scheme. This formula is aimed at easing landlord concerns by demonstrating the feasibility of letting supported housing via a choice approach, with the hope of eventually reconciling all parties to the full inclusion of supported housing within the system.

Where supported housing vacancies are advertised, a scheme provider organisation should devise an appropriate way of labelling them so that they are easily recognisable as such. This is not necessarily straightforward – it would probably be unacceptable to state, for instance, that ‘only people with learning difficulties may apply’. In working around this issue, one choice-based lettings scheme uses the phrase ‘people needing a level of support’ as a proxy for ‘suitable for people with serious mental health problems’.

Accessible housing

There is considerable variation in whether or not accessible housing (including adapted and adaptable properties) is advertised within choice-based lettings schemes. However, there is little justification for retaining an officer-led matching process for accessible housing alongside a choice-based lettings system, since there are ways to ensure that accessible housing is prioritised for disabled applicants within choice-based lettings and that best use is made of accessible stock. Accordingly, where choice-based lettings schemes exclude accessible housing from their scheme, they should provide a reasoned justification for doing so. These issues are more fully discussed in Chapter 8.

Defining who will need assistance in engaging with choice-based lettings

There are two distinct approaches to defining people who may be disadvantaged by the requirements of choice-based lettings. The first concentrates on the groups who could be affected while the second focuses
primarily on the barriers which may prevent individuals from using choice-based lettings effectively. We look at each of these in turn.

Groups potentially disadvantaged by choice-based lettings

2.16. Within the social housing context, groups considered vulnerable usually include older people, people owed a homelessness duty, people with learning difficulties, people with mental health problems, physically disabled people, care leavers, people with HIV/AIDS and their carers, people suffering domestic violence, people with drug and alcohol problems, Gypsy/Travellers and ex-offenders. Some members of all such groups might face particular challenges in engaging with choice-based lettings, given the system’s requirement for active participation on the part of homeseekers.

2.17. Choice-based lettings potentially creates additional inequalities in that, for example, people with literacy difficulties or visual impairment could be disadvantaged by over-reliance on paper and text-based information. Deaf people could face specific challenges because of the emphasis of the system on communication between service provider and service user. Similarly, dependence on information and communication technology (ICT) could exclude people lacking relevant skills or unable to access such equipment. Recent migrants and others with limited command of English could be disadvantaged by lack of information and advice in first languages.

2.18. The term vulnerable also has a specific meaning in relation to homelessness. Therefore, to avoid ambiguity, rather than referring to the implications for vulnerable people of choice-based lettings, this guide uses the term ‘potentially disadvantaged groups’.

2.19. What proportion of people seeking social housing might need assistance in the choice-based lettings context? Little hard information is available about the numbers of individuals who are likely to require such support. One earlier study saw such numbers as 'likely to be very low'; another estimated that they amounted to approximately one-fifth of people seeking social housing. By and large, choice-based lettings staff interviewed in the research underpinning this guidance estimated the proportion of people seeking social housing and needing special help at 5-10 per cent of the total

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http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/implementingdeveloping

http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/monitoringlonger

http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/pilotingchoicebasedlettings

caseload. However, such estimates need to be seen as informed speculation only, as few, if any, rested on any statistical evidence.

2.20. It also needs to be recognised that even if those needing direct assistance to use choice-based lettings represent only a small percentage of all those registered to bid, this does not detract from the need to devote the necessary resources to underpin such provision.

**Potential barriers to choice-based lettings participation by potentially disadvantaged groups**

2.21. Potential barriers to choice-based lettings participation can involve several factors:

- visibility of the service and ease of registration
- lack of access to information about vacant properties
- lack of access to mechanisms for bidding
- the inability to understand written material (either through language or literacy difficulties)
- the inability to comprehend the basic requirements of the scheme and to exercise informed choice
- the inability to make or articulate choices and adopt an appropriate bidding strategy
- the inability to participate actively in choice-based lettings over a sustained period as a result of ongoing health problems or debilitating illnesses, particularly mental ill health.

2.22. The advantage of an approach which concentrates on the barriers to active participation in choice-based lettings is that it helps to indicate the sort of strategies that can be adopted to overcome these obstacles. In other words, the above issues can be used by social landlords as a checklist against which to rate their own choice-based lettings scheme and its features designed to maximise participation. For example, the better choice-based lettings schemes do not require a general expectation of literacy but use images, symbols and simple English.

2.23. A less tractable obstacle is lack of understanding of the choice-based lettings system. While commonly described as a transparent model, many

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lettngs staff acknowledge that a significant proportion of housing applicants may remain ill-informed about the system's essential features even years after its introduction (even having received numerous information mailings). Applicants may wrongly perceive choice-based lettings participation as akin to lottery bidding where outcomes are determined solely by chance. Significant numbers still wait to be contacted when a suitable vacancy arises.

2.24. There are wider concerns connected with the low literacy rates which remain common among some sections of the community. While applicants can make lettings-related enquiries by telephone or in person at housing offices, some choice-based lettings systems appear to incorporate a general expectation of literacy at a level well beyond that of many people potentially in need of public services. Limited literacy is the kind of problem which people may be reluctant to acknowledge or admit. A similar case might be made for people with mental health problems or a ‘chaotic lifestyle’.

2.25. It is also important to recognise that the choice-based lettings requirement for active participation by service users is likely to present challenges for anyone from an institutional background. For example, someone experiencing segregated special school education might well lack the confidence to exercise choice and control in the same way as someone who has experienced a more mainstream existence. Support from choice-based lettings staff and/or voluntary sector agencies could help to alleviate this.

2.26. Some potentially disadvantaged homeseekers may be protected thanks to their links with support workers or agencies; and choice-based lettings systems often incorporate mechanisms to identify those most in need of assistance (see Chapter 3). On this argument, those at greatest risk of losing out under choice-based lettings may not be the most “vulnerable” but those who can just about cope (e.g. in terms of literacy) and who, consequently, do not immediately stand out as requiring direct assistance.

2.27. More broadly, there is a need for more effective education of lower priority applicants as to their realistic prospects of being accommodated in social housing. This implies a need for counselling and advice to also be targeted on the homeseekers with only low or moderate housing need. Such thinking is in line with that underpinning DCLG’s Enhanced Housing Options model.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{15} Department for Communities & Local Government (2008) \textit{Expanding Choice: Addressing Need}; London: DCLG
http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/expandingchoice
Chapter 3
Identifying people needing help in navigating choice-based lettings

Key messages

- Information on applicants’ needs for support to engage with choice-based lettings should be routinely collected and proactively sought by choice-based lettings schemes.

- Trigger questions in application forms should be used to collect information to enable identification of people who are likely to need personalised advice or direct assistance.

- Particular demographic groups can be identified as likely to need support, such as people aged under 18 or above a very elderly age threshold.

- Support should be routinely considered for applicants originating from specific access routes, such as young people leaving care or ex-offenders being released from prison.

Introduction

3.1. It is accepted that there is a minority of social housing applicants who cannot be expected to participate effectively in the choice-based lettings process without some form of support or assistance (see paras 2.17-2.23). What form such support or assistance can take is explored in Chapter 5. However, in order to provide help of this kind it is first necessary to identify who needs it.

The utility of housing application forms

3.2. The housing application form, which under most (if not all) choice-based lettings schemes homeseekers are required to complete before they are eligible to bid for an advertised property, is often a key source of information for identifying people needing help to participate in the system. This includes information drawn from three distinctly different types of question:

(a) questions with a bearing on an applicant’s future housing needs – e.g. where a disabled person needs an ‘accessible dwelling’
(b) questions with a bearing on an applicant’s housing priority – e.g. aspects of current health or mobility making the current dwelling inappropriate

(c) questions directly relevant to the applicant’s ability to engage with choice-based lettings – e.g. about literacy or language

3.3. It is particularly important that under a choice-based lettings approach housing application forms must include questions under category (c) above. Exclusive reliance on questions in categories (a) and (b) may have been adequate under a traditional allocations model but such a model would be deficient within the choice-based lettings context. While direct probes about whether an applicant sees him/herself as needing assistance to participate in choice-based lettings can be useful, it is important to recognise that some applicants may be understandably reticent about disclosing certain personal factors which could potentially affect their capacity to participate in choice-based lettings – e.g. mental ill health, HIV status or other hidden impairment. Where such information is sought, it is important that the relevance of the request (both in terms of the applicant’s need for assistance as well as their housing priority) is made clear.

Blyth Valley Homefinder (BVH) application form

As well as factual questions (e.g. what is your first language?) the BVH application form contains scope for expression of preferences (e.g. do you need translation into another language when we get in touch with you?). Critically, the form also asks applicants:

*Do you understand how to find out about homes available for letting and how to put in a bid when they are advertised? If no, is there someone who can do this on your behalf?*

In addition, applicants are asked:

*Do you get any help from any organisation like social services, probation service or a professional support worker?*

3.4. Questions about existing support arrangements, in combination with information about applicants’ needs for assistance with choice-based lettings, should make it possible to identify not just those with certain attributes making them potentially at a disadvantage under choice-based lettings (e.g. being partially sighted), but also those within such groups who have no existing support provision.
3.5. Lack of familiarity with English could also potentially be a disadvantage for someone trying to engage with choice-based lettings and it is advisable that housing application forms seek information on this. This may be a sensitive issue to address, and building-up trust with minority ethnic communities will be part of positive practice for choice-based lettings scheme provider agencies.

Wiltshire’s Home4Wiltshire application form

The application form for the Homes4Wiltshire sub-regional choice-based lettings scheme asks applicants trigger questions at several points on the form. At an early point applicants are asked if anyone listed in the household is ‘getting support from Social Services, the probation service or any other organisation at the moment?’

Under Additional Information, applicants are asked whether they:

(a) experience ‘difficulties with reading or writing’

(b) need further information about choice-based lettings

(c) need help with bidding?

Also, on the final Declaration, applicants are asked if someone other than the applicant has completed the form on their behalf, requesting reasons for this, the name and their relationship to the applicant.

http://www.homes4wiltshire.co.uk/Data/Pub/StreamTemp/c3aoymdc.pdf

Responses to these questions could also prompt a more formal assessment of medical and support issues.

3.6. Applicants registering for sheltered housing under the Hammersmith & Fulham/Locata West London choice-based lettings scheme are asked directly ‘have you got a support worker?’ and ‘do you want help with bidding?’

3.7. Even where potentially disadvantaged applicants are in existing support relationships, choice-based lettings scheme provider agencies should not necessarily assume that such individuals require no help from their own staff, as external support providers may not be available at the right times to help their clients bid for advertised properties.

3.8. Routinely collecting such information about applicants is only a first step towards systematically targeting them for support. The extent to which this will be possible will depend on the design and/or sophistication of a scheme’s ICT system. This should facilitate not only identification of those within a particular category (e.g. applicants with learning difficulties) but also applications where particular combinations of data are present (e.g. applicants with learning difficulties and with no support in place).
Responsive and proactive identification of need for support

3.9. In addition to information collected via application forms, several other methods can be used to identify people potentially in need of support:

- in relation to the type of household concerned
- in relation to the source of a referral
- through monitoring bidding activity (or the lack of it) by ‘high priority’ applicants
- in response to a contact initiated by the applicant.

3.10. Everyone within a particular group generally classed as ‘vulnerable’ (see paras 2.17-2.23) or in a particular demographic group may be identified as potentially in need of support to participate in choice-based lettings. At Your Choice Homes (Newcastle), for example, all applicants aged under 18 are routinely offered direct assistance. Similarly, Tower Hamlets Homeseekers fully assesses every applicant applying for sheltered housing in relation to whether they might require direct assistance with bidding.

3.11. Personal advice and assistance should be routinely offered to applicants originating from specific access routes such as those specified under housing protocols – e.g. young people leaving care; people seeking to move out of supported housing; or vacating a long stay hospital bed.

3.12. Periodic monitoring of bidding activity of high priority applicants should be routine: to identify inactive households – i.e. those having failed to enter eligible bids in the recent past. While it is recognised that, even for a high priority applicant, bidding inactivity may simply reflect an applicant view that vacancies being advertised are unattractive, where high priority applicants fail to bid, this still calls for investigation.

3.13. Support should be provided in a proactive way – choice-based lettings scheme providers should not assume that homeseekers in need of help will necessarily take the initiative by actively seeking it. Provider agencies should cultivate a wider ethic whereby frontline staff see it as routine to ask all applicants whether they need help, whether they appear to need assistance or not.

3.14. Ensuring identification of all applicants needing support would be in keeping with the spirit of the Government’s Enhanced Housing Options model currently being rolled out across England and which seeks to broaden the scope of housing advice well beyond those in urgent need of housing16.

http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/expandingchoice
Chapter 4
Information dissemination

Key messages

- Both general and more specific information about the choice-based lettings scheme policies and procedures should be provided in a wide range of accessible formats.

- Properties should be advertised across a range of media, such as websites, print media, direct mailings, telephone services, digital TV, TV screens and local radio; and at a range of locations, housing offices, other public buildings (e.g. libraries and leisure centres), through partner and support agencies.

- Ensuring that choice-based lettings information is provided in accessible format and via media which are accessible to all should be addressed via an equality impact assessment.

- Innovative tools and techniques, such as symbols, Browsealoud and Typetalk should be used.

- Consideration should be given to working with specialists, including disabled people, to develop the design and content of media and materials.

- Information about the accessibility of the neighbourhood as well as the property advertised should be available for applicants with access needs.

Introduction

4.1. In the context of choice-based lettings, understanding how the system works is fundamental to the ability to participate effectively\(^{17}\). Homeseekers who are better informed about scheme rules and processes are more likely to get a property suitable for their requirements. For groups potentially disadvantaged by choice-based lettings, the key to addressing this disadvantage lies in the quality of information about choice-based lettings and how it is made available by the scheme provider organisation and partner agencies.

4.2. Ensuring that choice-based lettings information is provided in accessible formats and via media which are accessible to all should be addressed via an equality impact assessment (see Chapter 2). In addition, training all frontline staff to offer information in alternative formats when appropriate is an important and ongoing requirement.

4.3. Choice-based lettings-related information of value to scheme users and other interested parties can be classified into three categories:

- information promoting awareness of the existence of choice-based lettings across the community as a whole
- choice-based lettings scheme procedures and rules
- the periodic (usually weekly or fortnightly) publication of information on available properties.

4.4. Critical in promoting awareness of a choice-based lettings scheme’s existence is ensuring that local support agencies (both statutory and third sector) and caring professionals understand that social housing is (or is about to be) let under a system where the onus is on the homeseeker rather than the local authority or housing association concerned. Importantly, support agencies (including social services departments) need to be made aware of their potentially crucial role in assisting service users seeking social housing. Because they are intimately connected with the ways that scheme providers involve support agencies and caring professionals, activities of this kind are discussed mainly in Chapter 6.

**Scheme guides**

4.5. The term ‘scheme guide’ is used here to describe the general information routinely provided to potential choice-based lettings service users about the way the system works. Such guides are normally made available via the scheme website. Hard copy versions are generally made available in housing offices. They commonly cover:

- the scope of the scheme – which landlords participate and which (if any) of their lettings are routinely excluded
- the ways that properties are advertised
- how and where available to let property information can be viewed
- bidding rules – e.g. criteria specifying who can bid for certain types of property, number of bids which can be entered per cycle
- how feedback about lettings outcomes is provided.
To meet their duties under the Disability Discrimination Act, such documents should be produced in a variety of formats to ensure that they can be understood by the full range of people likely to be seeking social housing in the locality.

4.6. Under the Housing Act 1996 s168(2) a local authority is, in any case, obliged to publish details of its allocations scheme and to make this available free of charge to any member of the public who requests it. Many choice-based lettings websites include FAQ pages listing responses to frequently asked questions. While this should certainly be commended as good practice, scheme guides should also make clear how an applicant can obtain further information or direct assistance. Again, relevant here are the legal obligations placed on local authorities (under s.166 of the 1996 Act) to secure that advice and information is available (free of charge) about the right to apply for social housing and to secure that assistance is available (also free of charge) in making such an application to anyone who needs such assistance.

4.7. Whether it relates to the ways that a choice-based lettings scheme works or the features of available-to-let properties, it is obviously vital that information about choice-based lettings is accessible to individuals regardless of language skill, literacy or visual acuity. The materials that support choice-based lettings are critical in this respect and schemes should use a variety of media to communicate such information – e.g. webpages, leaflets, audio-guides, literature translated into appropriate languages.

4.8. It is not only the format of information that is important, but also the style. A number of schemes have been commended by the Audit Commission for their use of plain English – among these, the user guide produced by Your Choice Homes (Newcastle) 18.

4.9. A guide to choice-based lettings has been developed for people with learning difficulties, using pictures and text, on behalf of the Valuing People Support Team and the Care Services Improvement Partnership 19.

4.10. Apart from fulfilling a landlord’s equal opportunities obligations, the benefit of easy to read and easy to understand information is that it should help to cut down the number of queries needing to be addressed by lettings staff.

4.11. However, another point to consider here is that the more formats that are used the greater the cost of any change. There is a trade off. While more formats are desirable it may be that some of the translated or, for example, Makaton guides are not maintained as processes or policies change.

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Having fewer formats from the start may make it more feasible to keep them all up to date. Choice-based lettings scheme managers should have a strategy for change control that recognises what types of change will require editing of existing information materials.

**Formats for communicating information about the choice-based lettings scheme**

- **Large print forms and brochures and Braille:** Blyth Valley Homefinder provides sight-impaired applicants with a magnifying sheet to facilitate comprehension of printed material. Using size 14 font as standard in brochures, adverts and forms will mean that material is accessible to a greater number of people, and will reduce the need for large print versions.

- The use of Makaton in documentary material can be a helpful way of engaging with people with learning difficulties. However, as Makaton is not understood by many people, design of leaflets and the like should make reference to Mencap’s guide to the design and content of such material\(^{20}\).

- **DVD (or CD) format** can overcome language and literacy issues ([East London Lettings Company](http://www.eastlondonlettingscompany.co.uk) and [Homechoice Colchester](http://www.homechoice.com)) and can also include, on DVD, a British Sign Language option. Offering many languages on a single disk contributes to cost-effectiveness and provides useful resources for advice agencies catering for people from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

- **YouTube** – as used by Blyth Valley Homefinder for scheme guide information\(^{21}\).

- Scheme guide information can be provided in other ways including, minicom, text messaging, video and speech.

- As a translation facility some choice-based lettings websites make use of the Babelfish service. However, it is important to ensure that Babelfish enabled sites do, indeed, function in all the minority languages advertised as available.

- Translation of printed and electronic text into minority languages is often fairly limited in extent – sometimes simply informing the reader that a translation service may be available on request.

http://november5th.net/resources/Mencap/Making-Myself-Clear.pdf

\(^{21}\) Blyth Valley Housing Homefinder Service http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8IJ6izqDME

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http://november5th.net/resources/Mencap/Making-Myself-Clear.pdf

\(^{21}\) Blyth Valley Housing Homefinder Service http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8IJ6izqDME
scheme guide in 17 minority languages22.

○ Herefordshire Council’s HomePoint website has a ‘talking brochures’ facility in six languages including British Sign Language.

The longer-established ‘talking heads’ facility on the award-winning website of the East London Lettings Company (Newham Council) has been commended as an imaginative way of addressing both literacy and language barriers23.

Dissemination of information about available properties

4.12. One of the central elements of choice-based lettings is the advertisement of available-to-let properties. As with other choice-based lettings information, a key element of positive practice is using a variety of media to promote the accessibility of such information to homeseekers with diverse needs. Typically these include:

- websites
- listings displayed in housing offices and in other public buildings (e.g. libraries) – as printed materials and on plasma TV screens
- listings carried in print media – local newspapers and/or council newsletters
- listings sent to certain registered applicants via direct mail
- automated telephone lines listing currently available properties.

Websites

4.13. Choice-based lettings websites are among the top destinations among local government web pages24. Such pages are often seen as embodying good

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practice in e-government, but in relation to choice-based lettings and potentially disadvantaged groups it is important that web pages are made accessible to those with limited literacy or without English as a first language, as well as those with visual impairments.

4.14. Increasingly, it has become standard for choice-based lettings websites to facilitate online bidding, as well as simply enabling potential applicants to view details of available properties. Research evidence suggests that viewing and bidding for properties online is becoming increasingly dominant under many choice-based lettings schemes. Within the Greater Norwich scheme, for example, over 90 per cent of bids recorded during the scheme’s first year (2007-08) were submitted via the web. Overwhelming internet dominance might indicate under-representation of groups without easy access to the web, and calls for monitoring and analysis of bidder characteristics to ensure that this is not so.

4.15. Choice-based lettings websites that allow available properties to be browsed only by registered scheme users should be avoided as this creates an unnecessary barrier to people who might be interested in registering if they were able to find out what was available. Perhaps of more importance in the context of this guidance, the ability to view available properties can be useful for family members or other advocates of vulnerable people needing accommodation (see Chapter 6).

4.16. Translation issues have already been discussed above. Another technique addressing both translation and literacy issues in relation to property adverts is the use of symbols to convey information about a property’s features and who is eligible to bid for it. This is particularly important for people with learning difficulties\(^{25}\), and is illustrated in Figure 4.1.

### Figure 4.1 – Property advert symbols used by East London Lettings Company (www.ellcchoicehomes.org.uk)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>Property has been assessed as being accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheltered Property</td>
<td>Sheltered Property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lift</td>
<td>Property has a lift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specified Age Group</td>
<td>Specified Age Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Lift</td>
<td>Property has no lift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property has personal assistance alarm</td>
<td>Property has personal assistance alarm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stairs</td>
<td>Property has stairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property has a warden or concierge</td>
<td>Property has a warden or concierge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shops/Transport</td>
<td>Property close to shops/transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Door Entry Phone</td>
<td>Property has a door entry phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Association Property</td>
<td>Housing association property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own Garden</td>
<td>Property has own garden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newly Built Property</td>
<td>Newly built property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Garden</td>
<td>Property has a shared garden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double Glazing</td>
<td>Property has double glazing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Garden</td>
<td>Property has no garden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Worker</td>
<td>Property to be allocated to key worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Housing Benefit Accepted</td>
<td>No housing benefit accepted - for private landlords properties only</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.17. As regards visual impairment, many schemes offer speech enabled web pages using Browsealoud or an equivalent.
Browsealoud and alternatives to support people with impaired vision

Browsealoud reads websites for people with difficulties reading text on screen because of language, literacy or visual impairment. The Browsealoud reader is free for individual users, but involves a subscription cost for website owners. **Blyth Valley’s Homefinder** choice-based lettings site for example is ‘hearing enabled’ using Browsealoud. Careful labelling of images is important as text embedded in images cannot by read by this technology.

As an alternative, **Liverpool’s Propertypool** website (accessed via a One Stop Shop kiosk) supported BT’s Texthelp system which also provides text to speech support.

The **East London Lettings Company** (ELLC) commissioned the RNIB to audit and advise on the ELLC website in relation to their ‘See it Right’ standard which aims to ensure that such information is accessible to blind and partially sighted people (see RNIB website).

Beyond being enabled with Browsealoud or equivalent technology, many choice-based lettings web pages allow users to change font size, colour, screen resolution and even language.

4.18. Whether we are talking about property adverts on the web or in print media (see below) their design and content is very important. There is a strong case for choice-based lettings schemes to commission graphic designers with relevant expertise to help create templates for both online and printed material. In addition, valuable feedback can be obtained from disabled people testing materials for accessibility (as in **Wychavon**).

4.19. Potential applicants need sufficient information about the property and the location in order to make informed judgements about whether to enter a bid. The absence of information ‘beyond the front door’ is one of the main failings of choice-based lettings for disabled people26. In addition to providing information about the property itself, applicants also need information about the neighbourhood and its accessibility as well as the distance from the dwelling to key services.

4.20. Many choice-based lettings schemes (e.g. **Blyth Valley**) use their websites to link specific adverts to neighbourhood information including maps. This is useful for applicants able to access information online, but scheme-lead


http://83.137.212.42/sitearchive/DRC/library/policy/access_to_services/briefing_housing_a_contempor.html
organisations need to be aware that others may need personal help in accessing such information (e.g. guided access to relevant web-pages using a public access terminal situated in a housing office).

**Advertising via print media**

4.21. Advertising vacancies via the print media appears to be becoming less common, probably because of the high cost of space in local newspapers. Even where they have been retained (e.g. by Tower Hamlets Homeseekers) adverts carried in the print media sometimes convey only limited information about available to let properties (additional details are available on websites and/or in listings on display in housing offices etc.)

4.22. Given the apparent trend away from newspaper advertising, it is important that choice-based lettings schemes ensure that the range of techniques used to disseminate property information remains adequate to ensure fair treatment of people without home internet access and complies with the requirements of the DDA.

4.23. Distinct from commercial newspapers or council newsletters are dedicated choice-based lettings magazines and freesheets, which provide lettings managers with greater editorial control and potentially faster turnaround times. A potential advantage of the latter is managerial control over the design especially in ensuring that the material is easily readable for people with vision impairment. However, production, printing and distribution costs for such products are likely to be quite substantial.

**Direct mail**

4.24. A choice-based lettings scheme not including publicly available print media may be seen as disadvantaging disabled people and those without access to the internet. One means of addressing this criticism is dissemination of listings via direct mail. Under some schemes this is normal practice for certain groups of applicants.

**Direct mailing**

In Hammersmith & Fulham property listings are routinely sent to all 400 households registered as seeking sheltered housing. Tower Hamlets Homeseekers listings are routinely sent to all homeless households in temporary accommodation beyond borough boundaries.

Also recommended is the inclusion of key local agencies on available-to-let property direct mail circulation lists. This could appropriately include GP surgeries, social services offices, probation offices, Citizens Advice Bureaux, other advice agencies, day centres (for all groups), local community groups, local MIND office etc.

Some more advanced ICT systems can output personalised property sheets for direct mailing where listed properties are limited to those for which a particular applicant is entitled to bid
(e.g. where the property size matches the applicant’s need). This can simplify the system for applicants liable to find it confusing. **East Cambridgeshire Council** sends personalised listings to all registered applicants aged over 65.

4.25. Many choice-based lettings schemes have ‘assisted lists’ made up of applicants defined as requiring some form of assistance. Usually, assistance simply involves receiving property listings via direct mail. Identifying whether an applicant qualifies for inclusion on the assisted list usually relies on factual information about an applicant’s needs and circumstances – e.g. whether or not they are housebound.

4.26. Some schemes offer an option of receiving listings by post in return for a small charge. Along with the premium rate tariff applicable to some choice-based lettings helplines, such charges are controversial and potentially in breach of the requirement in the Housing Act 1996 to ensure that necessary assistance for people who may have difficulty applying for housing is available free of charge. Alternative tariffs (such as 03 numbers) should be used wherever possible.

4.27. Some choice-based lettings schemes tailor the content of direct mailing to meet the expressed preferences of the applicant (see box adjacent to para 4.23). While such personalisation makes the service simpler by filtering out what applicants might otherwise regard as irrelevant clutter, there is a risk that it could restrict choice to the applicant’s detriment, and needs to be used sensitively. So for example, where an applicant has expressed a preference for certain specified areas, properties that are in other areas but which are otherwise particularly suited to the applicant’s needs should not necessarily be excluded from the direct mailing.

**Dissemination of property details by phone**

4.28. Under some schemes, listings of available to let properties can be accessed via automated telephone systems. Although setup costs are involved, such systems may be seen as highly cost-effective in terms of ongoing running costs and the ability to make efficient use of staff time. They offer a useful channel of information dissemination for people with visual impairment or those living remotely and unable to access the web, but will be problematic for people with hearing impairment.

**Telephone services**

The **Great Yarmouth and Waveney** choice-based lettings scheme offers spoken property advertisements over the telephone.

Devised by the Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID), Typetalk connects people who cannot speak or hear on the phone, with other people using a telephone, by providing a text-to-voice and voice-to-text relay service. Typetalk facilities are provided by **Your Choice Homes (Newcastle)**, and 40 staff have been trained
Other property information dissemination methods

4.29. A few choice-based lettings schemes have adopted additional means of advertising current vacancies. Pembrokeshire choice-based lettings uses local radio to advertise vacancies\(^28\); a useful technique in rural areas and for individuals with limited literacy. Given the priority attached to engaging minority communities, there could be scope for this approach in the context of ethnic groups served by specialist radio stations. Solihull Community Housing use plasma TV screens in public offices to display information about the choice-based lettings scheme and to advertise properties.

4.30. Digital TV is also used by some schemes\(^29\). However, a shortcoming of this approach is that (at least, at present) access requires not only a digital TV but also a subscription to a paid-for satellite or cable TV service. In any case, such technologies should not be relied upon to the exclusion of information dissemination channels accessible to people without access to the relevant equipment or skills.

Digital TV services

The Greater Norwich scheme uses DigiTV as an additional medium for dissemination of information about available-to-let properties. Symbols are seen as important in communicating information about property features, as well as about bidder eligibility requirements. Applicants accessing property adverts via DigiTV or online can also see the number of electronically submitted bids so far entered for each property. The vast majority of bids are, in fact, placed online. Direct mail is another option.

To overcome the disadvantage faced by applicants without access to a PC or web skills, Wychavon launched a service to allow users to view properties (and to make bids) using the Looking Local facility on their digital TV\(^30\). As more homes in the area have digital TV, more homes will become eligible for this.

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TVs than PCs, this is potentially an important new option for choice-based lettings users in the area. The initiative was a nominee for the national e-gov awards in 2007.
Chapter 5
Bidding, post-bidding procedures and the organisation of support

Key messages

- A range of mechanisms should be used to support the bidding process, including online through websites and digital TV, 24-hour telephone services and in person at a local office.

- While applicants increasingly use online systems, procedures should nonetheless be put in place to support access to PCs and in making bids for people less familiar with computers and websites.

- Feedback should be provided in a range of media and formats, together with appropriate support and guidance where necessary, to assist applicants to be more effective in bidding.

- Mechanisms for assisted, automatic or proxy bidding should be widely advertised to ensure that people who need this support are aware of these services, yet be carefully used to continue to support the choice ethos.

- Post bid procedures, such as viewing and time to decide, should be used sensitively to encourage informed and supported decisions on offers.

- The organisation of support should ensure consistency and reliability between partner organisations, delivered by well trained staff, whether in generic or specialist roles.

Introduction

5.1. Previous chapters have looked at the ways that vulnerable people needing special help with choice-based lettings might be identified and at the ways that information dissemination can be organised to address the specific needs of certain groups. This chapter focuses mainly on the active ways that choice-based lettings schemes can help potentially disadvantaged applicants engage with the process of bidding for advertised properties, and to participate in post-bid procedures.
Bidding for properties

Bid channels

5.2. In line with the need to provide information in a variety of formats and through a range of media, choice-based lettings schemes should offer a range of ways for people to make bids for (or express interest in) properties which are advertised.

5.3. Most choice-based lettings schemes do make provision for bids to be submitted in a variety of ways. Typically, bids may be entered online (either from a private PC or with the help of a housing officer at a housing office) or by telephone (either by speaking to an operator or via an automated system using the phone keypad). Less universal are systems which allow bids by coupon, by text message or DigiTV.

5.4. As noted in Chapter 4, evidence shows that increasingly, applicants have been choosing to submit their expressions of interest electronically, with bids over the web often accounting for over 70 per cent of total expressions of interest.

Public access PCs

To facilitate online bids many choice-based lettings schemes provide public access PCs in reception areas of housing offices. Staff can demonstrate how an applicant can search and bid for suitable properties – with the hope that the individual is then enabled to undertake these activities independently. Public access PCs are nowadays also widely provided at libraries.

In Hammersmith & Fulham, housing applicants can make use of 10 PCs provided in a town centre shopfront office which houses a multi-service reception.

In Tower Hamlets, public access PCs were intensively staffed at local offices over a number of weeks, with the aim of encouraging and supporting applicants to use the PCs for their bids.

Early evaluation evidence demonstrated that kiosk/touch screen systems were found beneficial by service users with visual impairments31.

5.5. From a managerial perspective, one of the attractions of online bidding is the negligible marginal costs associated. Similarly, telephone bidding – particularly useful for people with visual impairment or lack of access to the internet – can be an entirely automated process. At Hammersmith &

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**Fulham**, the **Locata West London** ICT system enables applicants to bid by phone, using the keypad to submit their reference number and date of birth, as well as the code for the chosen property. As noted earlier, such services should not involve premium rate call charges.

5.6. At least in the early days of choice-based lettings, coupon bidding was a feature of many choice-based lettings schemes. This enables a local newspaper reader to cut out and complete an expression of interest form, which is then mailed or otherwise delivered to the scheme provider organisation before close of bidding. However, the costs and inflexibility associated with coupon bidding have led some landlords to consider dropping this option. Before dropping coupon bidding housing organisations should satisfy themselves that appropriate alternative methods of bidding are available for applicants who cannot make online bids, for example, by providing for telephone bidding or for staff to submit bids on line on an applicant’s behalf.

5.7. Many choice-based lettings providers enable bidding by text. The potential disadvantages of limited interactivity may be addressed via two way texting. The **East London Lettings Company** responds to text bids with a text response confirming whether the bid has been accepted and with the applicant’s live ranking position at that point in time. As in telephone or web bidding such a technique is to be welcomed in helping applicants avoid ineligible bids.

5.8. Offering scope for 24 hour bidding by phone line, web site, text or digital TV is particularly important for certain groups; for example a mother caring for an autistic son is able to view and bid for properties in the early hours of the morning. These types of services can also work well for second language English speakers, as it is possible to offer other language options using these technologies.

5.9. In terms of the rules about the properties for which a homeseeker may legitimately bid, there may be a case for allowing bids for properties with fewer bedrooms than the number the household is assessed as ‘needing’, particularly where properties are capable of being adapted to improve liveability (e.g. by putting in additional toilets or wash basins, or room partitions). Relevant here is the serious shortage of larger family dwellings in many parts of the country.

**Feedback information**

5.10. Certain choice-based lettings ICT systems have the facility to reject inappropriate bids and to inform the bidder of the reason their attempted bid has been rejected. This can be useful in informing future bidding strategies. Some schemes that reject ‘non-matching bids’ and offer live feedback do so regardless of whether the bid is placed by phone, internet or text. Similarly,

certain choice-based lettings ICT systems have the facility to inform bidders where they are in the ranking for any advertised vacancy. This enables a limited allowable number of bids to be more effectively used and preferences adjusted (i.e. applicants can move their bids around during the bidding period). Using such a facility effectively requires, as well as interactive access to the internet, quite a sophisticated level of understanding and ability. Accordingly, the role of choice-based lettings staff, support agencies, or advocates in helping applicants to use such a facility – and ensuring that they are not disadvantaged by their lack of understanding/ability - will be crucial in some instances.

5.11. Irrespective of the medium used for bidding, people seeking accommodation via a choice-based lettings scheme need to be made aware of the relative availability of different types of housing in different places. Simple information on the location and type of dwellings recently let, marked to show the priority status of the successful applicant, should be available. This, in turn, should inform bidding behaviour. It is also a key aspect of the transparent accountability of the system. However, it is important to recognise that a significant proportion of people seeking social housing will need one-to-one guidance to help them interpret such information. This is especially true of certain potentially disadvantaged groups, such as applicants with poor literacy or learning difficulties.

5.12. While publication of such feedback information certainly represents positive practice, it needs to be supplemented by basic information about the relative availability of housing of different kinds, the typical waiting times or priority levels for properties of certain sizes in specific areas.

**Assisted or automated bidding**

5.13. Choice-based lettings staff can help applicants by notifying them (or their advocates) about potentially suitable properties, making contact via phone or email. Certain applicants cannot be expected to bid independently, or – at least – cannot be relied on to bid for every suitable property advertised. There are two ways of addressing this issue: staff can make proxy bids on an applicant’s behalf; or, bids can be entered automatically under ‘autobid’ procedures.

5.14. Rather than responding to an applicant’s request for help, a systematic, formalised, advertised approach to staff bidding on behalf of applicants is to be encouraged to counter the exclusion of people unaware that such help may be available.

**Autobidding**

**At Blyth Valley Homefinder**, a dedicated support officer manages an ‘assisted list’ comprising people judged as needing such help (numbering around 60 in autumn 2008). These are individuals who have requested such help in the course of the application process.
(by ticking the appropriate box) and:

(a) who were judged as having a genuine ongoing need for assistance with bidding (rather than simply a one-off consultation to explain the system and how to use it), and

(b) who lacked any connection with a support group, relative or friend who could help with viewing and bidding for available properties.

More sophisticated choice-based lettings ICT systems can be programmed with an autobid facility to submit a kind of proxy bid on an applicant’s behalf.

5.15. Provided that ICT systems are able to support this, eligible applicants can be offered the option of having bids made on their behalf via an autobid facility. In setting up autobid procedures, provision needs to be made for the possibility that, in any given advertising cycle, there may be more properties for which an applicant is eligible than the maximum number for which a bidder can express interest in a single cycle. Where the allowable number of bids per cycle is limited, it may be possible to programme autobid systems to ensure that bids placed in this way are shuffled at the end of the bidding cycle to those matching properties where they would have the highest ranking.

5.16. There is some concern among landlords that autobidding – because the applicant has not chosen to bid on their own behalf – may lead to high offer refusal rates. There are also more principled objections to autobidding on the ground that this conflicts with the basic aim of choice-based lettings to delegate responsibility for decision-making to the service user. However, some argue that if applicants are able to choose a passive option (e.g. an autobid option), then this need not undermine the integrity of the system.

Post-bid procedures

5.17. Once a bidding round has closed, the top-ranked two or three applicants may be invited to view the property for which they have been shortlisted. It would be unfair to expect anyone to accept a tenancy offer without having first seen the property.


Viewing the property

Individuals who require support to visit a property or area may find it difficult to fit in with the viewing time stipulated in an offer, particularly where there is little notice given.

The Peterborough choice-based lettings scheme includes the viewing date in property advertisements, at least giving bidders maximum notice of viewing arrangements.

The format of viewings may also be difficult for some individuals. Common viewings offer no privacy to discuss personal issues and may invoke feelings of guilt, resentment or sympathy towards the other shortlisted bidders. This can be difficult for people with learning difficulties.  

5.18. Any requirement to make an on-the-spot decision about accepting a tenancy offer is undesirable, particularly for those (such as, people with learning difficulties) who may have special reasons for needing time to reflect and discuss issues with support workers, friends and family. Extra time may be needed to visit a property again, such as with an occupational therapist for people requiring adaptations.

5.19. Choice-based lettings schemes incorporating penalties for applicants refusing a tenancy offer raise the stakes significantly and mean that people may need support to visit a neighbourhood before bidding. This can place a considerable burden on support workers, family and friends.

Housing and safety: information about the neighbourhood

Information about the safety of a neighbourhood can be a particular concern for certain applicants, including those with

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36 Training and awareness raising for lettings officers on trans issues is helpful in order to understand the unique needs of trans people and help minimise the tenants risk of experiencing transphobia in the vicinity of their new home.

learning difficulties and mental health problems, lesbians/gays and trans-gender individuals\textsuperscript{36}, who may experience aggression and harassment from their neighbours.\textsuperscript{37}

It should, in any case, be standard practice to explain such information to all property viewers.

### The organisation of support

5.20. There are various ways in which support provision can be organised within the choice-based lettings context. There are pros and cons of making support provision a specialist function within (or alongside) a lettings team. On the one hand, it could be seen as absolving mainstream lettings staff of responsibility for adopting a helpful and sympathetic approach. On the other hand, the supportive role may be taken more seriously and delivered more professionally when it is a staff member’s central responsibility. For this reason, such a model is seen as having significant advantages.

#### Organising support

One approach is to designate responsibility to lettings staff whose primary role is the administration of the lettings process, as under the Greater Norwich choice-based lettings scheme. In Sheffield, supporting vulnerable people to engage with choice-based lettings is the function of the Sheffield Homes Homefinders team.

Particularly when it is undertaken as part of a generic lettings role, it will be important to ensure that staff are appropriately selected and trained, including in communication skills.

Alternatively, responsibility for supporting vulnerable applicants can be assigned to designated, specialist staff. In Blyth Valley, a specialist role is played by the Homefinder Support Officer, a full-time staff member within the lettings team. Research undertaken to underpin this guide found this approach to be highly valued by a local voluntary agency representing people with mental health problems.

5.21. Another issue related to the organisation of support concerns consistency and reliability, particularly where schemes involve two or more partner landlords and scheme-wide standards and practice are required. Especially in multi-landlord choice-based lettings schemes it is essential that there are well-defined responsibilities for the identification of support needs as well as the provision of support.
5.22. However, where support is made a specialist function, schemes should ensure that all frontline staff have disability awareness and communication training so that they are able to work comfortably and confidently with all applicants they are likely to encounter.
Chapter 6
Joint working

Key messages

• In supporting members of potentially disadvantaged groups to navigate the choice-based lettings system, there is substantial scope for inter-organisational collaboration. Choice-based lettings schemes are encouraged to develop an access strategy with their external partner agencies, which details specific objectives and designates clearly defined roles.

• Regular liaison, working group or forum meetings between partners and stakeholders help to maintain contact and provide opportunities for updating, review and improvement to choice-based lettings systems.

• Planned ongoing training programmes for choice-based lettings partner and support agency staff are required to allow for staff turnover and new volunteer recruitment.

• Plan for regular community events, annual open days, to raise awareness of choice-based lettings.

Introduction

6.1. This chapter looks at joint working between social landlords and other individuals and organisations where this aims to help potentially disadvantaged applicants participate in choice-based lettings. Effective consultation and joint working with partners is essential early in the design phase of a choice-based lettings system.

6.2. The choice-based lettings Code identifies a wide range of statutory and voluntary organisations with which effective consultation is essential. ‘Organisations and individuals who provide advice and support to applicants will be crucial to the success of a choice based lettings scheme’\(^{38}\). The choice-based lettings Code (para 5.4) also advocates the involvement of service users to help design and test aspects of the scheme and supporting technologies to ensure effective communications for: ‘people with visual impairment, those with learning difficulties, or those who cannot understand

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or speak English well, as well as people with poor literacy and computing skills.

6.3. There are many potential mechanisms and arrangements for effective joint working in the context of choice-based lettings and potentially disadvantaged groups. This chapter considers examples of good practice from two broad areas of activity:

- arrangements with third party organisations to assist potentially disadvantaged applicants to engage with choice-based lettings at specific points in the process (such as on application, medical or health assessments, understanding the choice-based lettings scheme, strategies for bidding and decisions on accepting the property); and

- arrangements with partners, statutory and voluntary organisations, applicants and their carers and family or friends for communication, consultation and review of the choice-based lettings scheme itself (such as through forums, working groups, surveys, training and information events).

Supporting individuals to engage and use choice-based lettings effectively

6.4. Agencies and individuals potentially contributing to assisting disadvantaged groups in engaging with choice-based lettings include:

- statutory agencies such as social services, primary care trusts, hospitals, prisons, and probation

- voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) representing potentially disadvantaged groups and individuals. This includes VCOs representing the equalities groups, such as ethnic minorities, older people, physically disabled people, people with learning difficulties and those with mental health problems. However, it is particularly important to include VCOs representing hard to reach groups or those who may not wish to engage with statutory agencies, such as people with drug and alcohol dependency, gypsies and travellers, victims of domestic violence

- relatives, friends or carers

6.5. Social services departments provide a key role in supporting people seeking to access social housing via choice-based lettings, especially so in areas with few third sector support agencies. Non-statutory agencies may be the key support agencies in other areas.

6.6. The involvement of the individuals and agencies listed in para 6.4 can be highly beneficial given the trusting relationships which will often exist between them and the homeseekers needing their help. Knowledge of the individual homeseeker’s circumstances, needs and preferences will facilitate
appropriate advice about accommodation choices (rather than assistance being limited to the purely mechanical business of entering bids for advertised vacancies).

6.7. A related good practice recommendation is the collaborative development of an access strategy – see Box below. Support agencies having participated in this process should then be invited to make a formal commitment to the agreed approach.

The Cambridgeshire sub-regional choice-based lettings partnership ‘Home Link’ strategy

The strategy adopted by the Cambridgeshire Partnership acknowledges that choice-based lettings could disadvantage certain groups and lists a number of those who could be affected in this way.

It specifies an objective of ensuring that members of such groups achieve lettings outcomes at least as good as those resulting from the traditional allocations model and defines the forms of support which might be required in order to achieve desired objectives.

The potential contribution of support agencies and advocates is detailed and could include:

- Demonstrating how to bid for available homes
- Supporting their customers to bid for available homes
- Reviewing their customers’ choices to ensure they are bidding for appropriate homes
- Bidding on their customers’ behalf via proxy bidding
- Advocating on their customers' behalf
- Having copies of the property magazine displayed in customer access points
- Providing or arranging for ongoing support for the customer in a new tenancy where possible.

It is important that the choice-based lettings scheme takes responsibility for enabling partner agencies to play the roles defined above.

6.8. The potential disadvantages of the choice-based lettings approach for ex-offenders is identified, in a good practice toolkit published, by the National
Choice-based lettings and support for offenders and ex-offenders to access accommodation

The NOMS SW toolkit identifies the specific difficulties for offenders in accessing accommodation through choice-based lettings, whether because they are in prison away from their home area, seeking accommodation in a new area or arising from illiteracy, lack of computing skills and access to ICT.

Good practice is identified in Bath and North East Somerset:

‘…where offenders are allowed to register on the system for 6 months prior to release, and are allowed to then bid for properties from prison, one month prior to release’.

Key considerations for local authorities are outlined in the NOMS toolkit including:

- The need to consult with the probation and prison services on how prisoners will access the choice-based lettings system
- Clear strategies and policies in place for supporting offenders, reducing barriers and exclusion
- Ensuring expertise in dealing with offenders and bridging links with probation and voluntary organisations working with offenders
- Advertising vacancies through prisons, probation and other services
- Information and training for offenders and services on using the web based systems
- Actively seeking registrations from offenders in prison
- Robust arrangements for the safe placement of high risk offenders

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39 Ministry of Justice, NOMS South West (2009) Choice-Based Lettings & Local Housing Allowance Project: Toolkit
Supporting People funding for supportive activities

6.9. The role of support providers can be critical in enabling people to engage with choice-based lettings and Supporting People (SP) funding has been used in some areas to enable this to take place. At Tower Hamlets Homes, the choice-based lettings scheme has an integrated client support team, partly funded by SP, which assesses applicants for sheltered accommodation and assists disabled applicants with health assessments forms, through home visits.

6.10. Agencies funded under SP in Hammersmith and Fulham have a contractual condition to commit to providing choice-based lettings support for their service users, in particular agencies managing supported housing, especially where this is planned as transitional accommodation from which residents will need ‘move on’ opportunities.

Communication and consultation

6.11. A wide range of organisations and individuals needs to be involved in developing the choice-based lettings scheme, launching it, reviewing and improving it. Ensuring that the right mechanisms are put in place to communicate and consult with these organisations and individuals will be crucial to the success of the choice-based lettings scheme.

6.12. The choice-based lettings provider organisation needs to ensure that partner landlords, statutory and voluntary agencies, users and carers and family members who currently provide care and support are all included in consultation on developing the scheme. It is important that those who are going to use the choice-based lettings scheme (including support agencies as well as users and carers) are involved in developing the policies and procedures, but they also need to be actively involved in testing out the systems, such as the ICT and the forms, before the scheme is launched.

6.13. In addition to more formal consultation processes and events, communication and involvement can be achieved through regular forums and focus groups during the development phase – see the box to paragraph (6.15) below.

Consultations

Liverpool City Council commissioned a review of the allocations policy prior to the creation of Liverpool Mutual Homes, including a consultation exercise with key partners in 2007. Participants included housing associations, as well as homeless and Supporting People staff and ACCESS Liverpool (charged with accessible housing register administration).
6.14. In seeking to maximise the contribution of external agencies and individuals in advising and assisting potentially disadvantaged homeseekers, choice-based lettings schemes should consider staging an open day timed to coincide with the scheme launch for all those who have been involved in developing the scheme.

Review

6.15. Organising a regular forum or working group of interested organisations and individuals can be a good way to review service effectiveness and discuss possible improvements to policy and procedures.

Forums: Greater Norwich Accessible Home Options Group

A quarterly forum for support agencies and service providers has been set up alongside the Greater Norwich choice-based lettings scheme. The Accessible Home Options Group includes social services, probation, homelessness staff, hostel providers and representatives from voluntary organisations (including for people with learning difficulties, mental health issues, visual impairment, ex-offenders and the Polish community).

The group plans to set up focus groups as a vehicle for service user feedback on the choice-based lettings scheme.

6.16. In addition to regular forums or working groups, consultations or surveys may be used to involve a wider range of parties in reviewing specific aspects of a choice-based lettings scheme.

Consultations

Having launched their Accessible Housing Register in 2006, the Tower Hamlets accessible housing register project team sought feedback from disabled people on perceived strengths and weaknesses of the system. All disabled housing applicants, local disability groups and people on the council’s ‘Getting Involved’ register were invited to a consultation workshop. Direct contact was made with 18 of the 19 disability groups in Tower Hamlets, for further consultation, covering a wide range of needs and interests.

6.17. Scrutiny reviews provide for more comprehensive and formal mechanisms for an overview of established schemes.
Scrutiny reviews

The London boroughs of **Tower Hamlets** and **Hammersmith & Fulham** are among authorities to have undertaken scrutiny panel reviews of established choice-based lettings schemes.

The aim of **Tower Hamlets** 2008 scrutiny Review was ‘to look at the accessibility and effectiveness of the scheme focusing on the needs of elderly and disabled residents’. The scrutiny working group comprised LBTH councillors and staff, five partner housing associations, the primary care trust and a neighbouring sub-regional scheme, the **East London Lettings Company**. Contributions to services user and provider focus groups were made by six organisations, including some of their service users. **Tower Hamlets** also plans a choice-based lettings Equality Impact Assessment in 2009/10, including the scheme’s impact on community cohesion40.

The scrutiny review in **Hammersmith & Fulham** was also triggered by concerns about how vulnerable people could be ‘supported to participate in a system that requires a high level of engagement as people themselves are empowered to manage their own decisions’. Following Scrutiny Panel recommendations **Hammersmith & Fulham** produced an equality impact assessment on choice-based lettings, which described choice-based lettings as shifting influence from housing staff to service users, and so reducing the scope for racial (or other) discrimination in terms of allocations41.

Training and information

6.18. Training and information events are required for relevant staff of statutory and voluntary partner agencies, for users, carers and family members. It is not enough to arrange such sessions simply on a one-off basis to coincide with scheme launch. Rather, it is important for events of this kind to be repeated periodically to update on changes to scheme rules and procedures as well as to provide for staff and applicant turnover.

6.19. Choice-based lettings scheme staff may also need to be provided with ongoing training and information about choice-based lettings. A mystery shopping exercise can be a useful way to find out how your staff are

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41 LB Hammersmith & Fulham (September 2007) Review of Choice-based Lettings; Housing Scrutiny Panel
performing and whether there are any gaps or shortcomings in the service they provide which could be turned around through the provision of training or information. A study on choice-based lettings services for people with learning difficulties carried out for the Department of Health used a mystery shopping exercise and identified one local authority (of the six choice-based lettings schemes reviewed in the study) where staff failed to provide accurate information about local services to help with applications and bidding, even though the research team knew that a good support service was available in the area42.

Information events

**Tower Hamlet Homes** runs regular information events for the wider community. Choice-based lettings staff visit primary schools at the start of the day to speak to parents, timed when they are dropping children off at school. The visits are organised by the social services and education departments.

In addition, Open Days, initially held quarterly, are held at a central location on a weekday early evening, are widely-advertised and open for all residents to discuss their housing options and choice-based lettings.

Having identified a large proportion of older applicants amongst non-bidders from a survey, **Greater Norwich** choice-based lettings worked with Age Concern on a poster campaign and presentations at lunch clubs to raise awareness about how choice-based lettings worked and how to bid. A good example of clearly targeted events.

6.20. Some social landlords who have introduced choice-based lettings have seen a rising proportion of their properties being let to minority ethnic households43. Nonetheless, underrepresentation of some minority ethnic communities among choice-based lettings users may remain an issue in certain areas. This can be addressed through the training and development of individual members of minority ethnic communities: to act as advocates and confidence-builders within their communities; and, to encourage others to participate in choice-based lettings.

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Chapter 7
Monitoring effectiveness

Key messages

- Scheme provider organisations should commission periodic non-bidder surveys to improve understanding of the factors involved (particularly for those applicants assessed as having a substantial need).

- Although one-off exercises such as scrutiny reviews and customer surveys are useful, these are no substitute for routine monitoring of potentially disadvantaged applicants, in terms of registration, engagement in the bidding process and successful housing outcomes.

- In monitoring the effectiveness of policies to maximise engagement by members of potentially disadvantaged groups there is a key role for equality impact assessments.

Introduction

7.1. Earlier chapters have detailed a range of policies and procedures aimed at protecting the interests of potentially disadvantaged groups under choice-based lettings. Good practice examples have been provided to illustrate some of these. However, assessing their effectiveness is no easy task.

7.2. National statistical frameworks such as the CORE lettings log are useful in facilitating lettings analysis by ethnic group or homelessness status. CORE did not until recently collect ‘tenant characteristics’ data in sufficient detail to analyse lettings by type of disability. However, with effect from April 2009, CORE does now collect information on type of disability or accessibility requirement. In addition DCLG is working with the Tenant Services Authority to link the tenant needs data from CORE with information from the National Register of Social Housing (NROSH see para 8.14), on the accessibility of the dwelling so that the suitability of lettings can be monitored.

7.3. Other than in relation to those assessed as homeless, nationally collected data on the characteristics of people applying for social housing are very sparse.

7.4. As discussed in Chapter 3, a considerable volume of data about applicants’ circumstances and characteristics is collected through choice-based lettings registration forms, including information about medical problems or disabilities.
7.5. The extent to which such information can be used to inform statistical analysis also depends on the capabilities of ICT systems. The need for ICT systems to facilitate full use of collected data to analyse relationships between applicant characteristics and bidding activity should be specified by choice-based lettings scheme provider organisations at the initial procurement stage. This should help to minimise later frustration at the inflexibility or fundamental limitations of purchased software.

7.6. As noted in para 2.8, there is a vital role for equality impact assessments in assessing the effectiveness of policies and procedures designed to promote engagement with choice-based lettings by members of potentially disadvantaged groups.

Monitoring bidding activity and housing outcomes

7.7. Routine, periodic (e.g. two-monthly) monitoring of bidding activity focused primarily on inactive applicants with high priority can be used to trigger action by the scheme provider organisation. At a minimum, this might involve telephone calls to identified high priority non-bidders to establish the factors involved and whether any assistance is required.

7.8. Occasional monitoring of bidding such as in the course of a scheme-wide review and customer surveys can identify potential problems with engagement. In one such instance identified in our research, 37 per cent of registered applicants had never entered a bid in the four years of a scheme’s existence. However, such findings need to be interpreted in context – for example, some applicants may register only as a long term ‘insurance policy’ rather than because of an active need to move in the immediate future. Regular (at least annual) reviews of the register should be undertaken to remove the non-bidders who have resolved their housing needs since their original registration.

7.9. Ideally, monitoring systems should facilitate periodic analyses of lettings outcomes in terms of both quantity and quality. On quantity, there is a need to enumerate both the numbers of active bidders and those awarded tenancies in terms of the proportion of those involved who are members of potentially disadvantaged groups. A broad brush measure of whether these groups are receiving their fair share of lettings is to compare the proportion of lettings going to, say, people with limited literacy or BME households, against the proportion of the entire housing register accounted for by the relevant group. For example, if people with limited literacy account for 40 per cent of all lettings, but only 20 per cent of lettings, questions are raised about whether enough is being done to empower this group to participate in the system.

7.10. In relation to the quality of housing outcomes, there is a need to analyse the extent to which members of potentially disadvantaged groups are receiving a proportionate share of more desirable properties. For example, if people with limited literacy account for 20 per cent of all lettings, but only 10 per
cent of lettings involving houses (rather than flats) it may be that more
needs to be done to help such applicants in targeting their bids.

Customer surveys and scrutiny reviews

7.11. Choice-based lettings customer surveys have been undertaken within the
context of system reviews (such as scrutiny reviews, see Chapter 6) and as
separate exercises. In two such surveys identified in the course of our
research it was reported that many applicants were unaware of how to
participate in choice-based lettings.

7.12. Telephone interviews are a better method for probing customer perceptions
and experiences than are self-completion questionnaires. Other techniques
for investigating choice-based lettings service quality include mystery
shopping and tenant-led inspections.

7.13. Although sometimes reliant on rather limited statistical evidence, scrutiny
panel and similar system reviews can usefully identify problems and
possible solutions to these. One such report identified through our research,
acknowledged as valid an assertion by voluntary groups that lettings staff
needed awareness training in relation to the needs of people with mental
health problems and learning difficulties.
Chapter 8
Accessible housing and choice for disabled people

Key messages

• The case for accessible housing registers (accessible housing register) in the context of choice-based lettings rests mainly on the strategic value of establishing a comprehensive database of accessible housing; and in particular to inform needs analysis in the context of housing investment planning. However, the identification of accessible dwellings in the course of the void inspection process can also be effective in making best use of this limited resource.

• Whichever system is used to identify and categorise accessible housing, it is essential that information about accessible housing is fully maintained and kept up-to-date.

• The recommended model for an accessible housing register within the context of choice based lettings is an integrated approach, where accessible (and otherwise adapted) homes are advertised alongside mainstream housing and also let through the choice system. For this to work, it is essential that choice-based lettings schemes are designed so that priority for accessible/adapted properties is given to people with an assessed need for that accommodation.

• Choice-based lettings landlords should consider what procedures are needed to maximise the chances that an accessible home will be let to a person requiring such a dwelling where a lack of suitable bidders means this cannot be initially achieved. Such procedures might include holding properties vacant pending re-advertisement.

Introduction

8.1. Nationally, over six million households (or 31 per cent of all households) contain one or more people with a serious medical condition or who are disabled. In the social rented sector the equivalent proportion is no less than 49 per cent. The Survey of English Housing suggests that, nationally, over 300,000 households containing disabled people were living in

44 See para 2.6 (Chapter 2) for the Disability Discrimination Act definition of a ‘disabled person’.
unsuitable accommodation in 2006/07. Of these, an estimated 143,000 were living in social rented housing\textsuperscript{45}.

8.2. A small proportion of more recently built or refurbished social housing embodies accessible housing standards and some homes are otherwise adapted (e.g. fitted with ramps, grab rails and stair lifts) to make them more suitable for people with various forms of physical impairment. The term ‘accessible housing’ is often used as shorthand for properties suitable for disabled people. Both to improve quality of life for disabled people in unsuitable housing and to make the most effective use of this limited resource, it is essential that there are effective ways of matching accessible homes with people needing such accommodation.

8.3. The choice-based lettings Code encourages local authorities to include accessible properties within choice-based lettings schemes and to ensure that in letting such properties, priority is given to people with corresponding needs\textsuperscript{46}. However, disabled people must not be restricted to bidding only for accessible homes as this would breach the duty to promote disability equality. Should a disabled applicant bid for a home not meeting their accessibility requirements the bid would need to be assessed in terms of local authority duties on provision of adaptations; including whether it is reasonable and practicable to adapt the property as appropriate.

8.4. In these respects, the overall aim for choice-based lettings schemes is to ensure that:

- the most effective and efficient use is made of accessible housing stock; and

- disabled people are allocated accommodation which meets their needs, while giving them the widest possible choice and greater say over where they live\textsuperscript{47}.

### Accessible housing registers

8.5. Accessible housing registers (or disabled housing registers as they are sometimes called) are variously defined to include a list of accessible properties, a list of applicants needing accessible housing, and/or a service for matching accessible properties to people with access needs. DCLG


defines an accessible housing register as ‘a list of suitable homes for disabled people with access needs’

8.6. accessible housing registers have existed in some localities for many years and have a number of roles:

- to develop/maintain an inventory of adapted and accessible housing
- to provide applicants with information about adapted and accessible housing
- to ensure that adapted and accessible housing is used effectively
- to operate as a single point of access for all accessible (social rented) housing in a locality.

8.7. In the context of choice-based lettings, the main argument for establishing (and maintaining) a comprehensive accessible housing register is the strategic value of information about the provision of accessible housing in informing investment planning. To inform operational decision-making about which lettings might be suitable for people with accessibility needs, it may be perfectly adequate to incorporate, within the routine void property inspection process, an assessment of a property’s characteristics in this respect.

Accessible housing registers in the choice-based lettings context: integrated or standalone?

8.8. Accessible housing register practices have been integrated with choice-based lettings to some degree by some landlords including: Erimus Housing (Middlesborough); Golden Gates Housing (Warrington); Blackpool Coastal Housing; Solihull Community Housing; and Bradford Homehunter.

8.9. Integration refers to arrangements where accessible homes are advertised alongside mainstream housing, with the accessibility features clearly specified (via text and/or symbols).

8.10. A standalone approach would be where accessible properties are let outside the choice-based lettings scheme through a separate system where matching of people to properties remains in the hands of housing officers (possibly also involving occupational therapists).

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8.11. Choice-based lettings schemes examined in the research underpinning this guide incorporated a variety of approaches in relation to the operation of accessible housing registers:

- No accessible housing register is maintained. The accessibility of a property is assessed only when it becomes vacant, providing information on the level or category of accessibility to be included in the advertisement of the property.

- An accessible housing register is established, together with a separate list of applicants assessed as requiring accessible housing. Accessible properties are not advertised through the choice-based lettings scheme but are matched by staff to the most appropriate applicant with the highest priority on the list of applicants with access needs. Applicants may also bid for mainstream properties advertised under choice-based lettings.

- An accessible housing register is established; accessible vacancies are advertised through the choice-based lettings scheme, with bidders requiring such properties given priority over all others.

8.12. Because they maximise choice for disabled applicants, schemes of the type described in bullet points 1 and 3 are recommended.

The London accessible housing register: An integrated approach

The **London accessible housing register** is based on the principle that disabled people should be able to exercise choice about their housing in the same way as others seeking social housing.

The scheme will work by categorising properties into accessibility bands. Disabled applicants will be awarded a recommendation for preference or priority for a category of accessible housing. Adapted and accessible properties will be advertised within choice-based lettings.

The London scheme has a number of attributes:49:

- It maintains choice for all groups by including disabled applicants within the normal choice-based lettings scheme.
- It allows individuals to make choices which balance competing preferences.

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priorities (such as accessibility and adaptation over location or proximity to family or key support services)

• applicants can – if they choose – bid for non-adapted properties

• it includes a standardised system of categorisation in line with the National Register of Social Housing NROSH (see 8.15)

• it recognises that accessible housing is not a clear cut category: there are gradations. Many properties which are not accessible could be adapted to some degree to meet individual needs. Disabled people often have to make trade-offs in their housing decisions as there is no guarantee that housing which has already been adapted will be in the right location\(^{50}\).

Letting accessible housing

The **Gateway to Homechoice** sub-regional scheme (Essex) includes all adapted properties, including housing suitable for wheelchair users.

**Berwickshire Housing Association** operates a ‘best use’ approach. Accessible homes are advertised alongside other properties, with bidders who require the special features on offer being given priority for them. Accessible housing is offered to other homeseekers only if there are no applicants needing such homes among eligible bidders \(^{51}\).

**Ocean Housing** works hard to find suitable applicants for adapted homes and may re-advertise a property before accepting a bid from an applicant not needing the adaptation.

**Oxfordshire Homechoice** routinely advertises all accessible/adapted properties across the entire sub-region to maximise the chances of such homes being let to people needing the facilities they offer.

Where there are no disabled bidders for an advertised accessible home, the **West London Locata** scheme makes the property available to people with relevant needs but currently living in another scheme-member borough.

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\(^{50}\) Ibid – Greater London Authority

Categorising accessible housing

8.13. Landlords with accessible housing registers need to have systems for classifying both the accessibility/adaptation of properties and the needs of disabled applicants. The National Register of Social Housing (NROSH)\textsuperscript{52} provides a set of data standards to describe the physical characteristics of dwellings including a number of fields which are specifically about the accessibility of the property.

8.14. From the point of view of exchanging information (between the choice-based lettings scheme provider and other agencies, including other choice-based lettings landlords in the case of sub-regional schemes), it is important that the accessibility categories used by the accessible housing register at the local level are consistent with the NROSH data standards.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>London accessible property categories</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In summary the definition of the categories used by Tower Hamlets Homes choice-based lettings and developed into the London accessible property categories are:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Category A:</strong> wheelchair accessible – designed to meet the most recent wheelchair housing standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Category B:</strong> partially wheelchair accessible – designed to older wheelchair housing standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Category C:</strong> life time homes – specifically designed to create an accessible and adaptable home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Category D:</strong> easy access – designed to be spacious with no steps to the property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Category E:</strong> step free – general housing with no steps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Category F:</strong> general housing</td>
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</table>

8.15. Whatever the adopted approach to categorisation, it is essential that up-to-date information on accessible and adapted properties is fully maintained and kept up to date. Hence, all staff visits to a social landlord’s homes (e.g. in relation to transfers and arrears, as well as void inspections) should be viewed as an opportunity to verify and if necessary update property records.

Assessing disabled applicants’ needs

8.16. An assessment of the access needs of applicants needs to be carried out before either they or an occupational therapist/lettings officer can identify the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{52} NROSH (2009) http://www.tenantservicesauthority.org/server/show/ConWebDoc.14836
\end{footnotesize}
appropriate features required of an accessible, adapted or adaptable property. This is equally important in the context of choice-based lettings to ensure that applicants are able to bid for (and are accorded appropriate priority for) properties which meet their access needs.

### Tower Hamlets accessible housing register: consultation feedback on needs assessment

The health assessment process requires transparency and clear feedback to applicants about how recommendations are arrived at by the health advisers. People can also fall through the system if already in suitable housing but needing a move for other reasons: ‘Some disabled persons do not perceive themselves as ‘vulnerable’ as one consultation participant told us, so she did not complete the relevant forms which would indicate a ‘medical assessment.’

The consultation recommendations were for a social model of disability to underpin practice, rather than the medical model and for self-assessment to be promoted at an early stage of the process, to identify need for a professional assessment.

### Advertising accessible vacancies

8.17. The choice-based lettings Code provides advice about advertising accessible housing, noting the type of information to be provided to disabled applicants. This should include: information on accessible housing stock in the locality; details of the accessibility features of each advertised property; and the time an applicant would be likely to wait for a particular type of property.

8.18. Further specific information, in addition to the accessibility category, may be added to vacancy advertisements, depending to some extent on the media used for advertising. While newspaper advertisements may be constrained in terms of detail, online property listings tend to have the flexibility to provide greater detail. Detailed information, including room sizes and floor plans, may help applicants determine whether the property is suitable to meet their access needs. This is where the virtual tours developed by Home Connections can come into their own.

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55 [http://www.home-connections.co.uk/](http://www.home-connections.co.uk/)
of the external environment, such as the proximity of parking spaces to the property, and access to shops, and other services, including transport, will all be highly relevant. Providing such additional information in advance can inform applicants' bidding and potentially reduce refusals.

### Advertising accessible vacancies

The **Tower Hamlets Homeseekers** scheme uses what is now known as the London Accessible Property categorisation system, a six category system for the property register (see Box above paragraph 8.15). Advertisements are automatically generated with this category information through the choice-based lettings system.

**Solihull Community Housing** holds weekly meetings with an occupational therapist to ensure that properties with adaptations are advertised appropriately. The OT also helps to identify properties that are suitable for adaptations for applicants who have a high priority for housing\(^\text{56}\).

### Accepting an offer

8.19. Once shortlisted, disabled applicants will need to visit the property before deciding whether to accept an offer. **Blackpool Coastal Housing** offers accompanied viewings for all disabled applicants, with an OT present to assist with discussions about suitability and the need for any further adaptation\(^\text{57}\). This approach is very constructive as it is sensitive to the needs and preferences of the applicants.

8.20. The experience of multiple viewing arrangements, as discussed in Chapter 5, is also an issue for accessible housing. Those responsible for organising the viewings should consider the feasibility of providing separate appointments and adequate time between appointments to allow applicants and their OTs/support workers sufficient time to discuss in detail the suitability of the property.

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Chapter 9
Summary of key messages

Positive practice principles

- To the maximum extent possible, access to social housing for potentially disadvantaged homeseekers should be encompassed within choice-based lettings systems (rather than being handled through direct lets which preclude applicant choice).

- There is a range of important legal obligations which require choice-based lettings scheme provider organisations to configure provision appropriately for potentially disadvantaged groups.

- Identifying potential barriers to participation in choice-based lettings can provide a crucial initial step in devising the range of techniques and approaches needed to maximise participation by potentially disadvantaged groups.

Identifying people needing help

- Information on applicants’ needs for support to engage with choice-based lettings should be routinely collected and proactively sought by choice-based lettings schemes.

- Trigger questions in application forms should be used to collect information to enable identification of people who are likely to need personalised advice or direct assistance.

- Particular demographic groups can be identified as likely to need support, such as people under 18 years or above a very elderly age threshold.

- Support should be routinely considered for applicants originating from specific access routes, such as young people leaving care or ex-offenders being released from prison.

Information dissemination

- Both general and more specific information about the choice-based lettings scheme policies and procedures should be provided in a wide range of accessible formats.

- Properties should be advertised across a range of media, such as websites, print media, direct mailings, telephones services, digital TV, TV screens and local radio; and at a range of locations, housing offices, other public buildings (e.g. libraries and leisure centres), through partner and support agencies.
• Ensuring that choice-based lettings information is provided in accessible format and via media which are accessible to all should be addressed via an equality impact assessment.

• Innovative tools and techniques, such as symbols, Browsealoud and Typetalk should be used.

• Consideration should be given to working with specialists to develop the design and content of media and materials, including disabled people.

• Information about the accessibility of the neighbourhood as well as the property advertised should be available for applicants with access needs.

Assistive technologies, rules and procedures
• A range of mechanisms should be used to support the bidding process, including online through websites and digital TV, 24-hour telephone services and in person at a local office.

• While applicants increasingly use on-line systems, procedures should nonetheless be put in place to support access to PCs and in making bids for people less familiar with computers and websites.

• Feedback should be provided in a range of media and formats, together with appropriate support and guidance where necessary, to assist applicants to be more effective in bidding.

• Mechanisms for assisted, automatic or proxy bidding should be widely advertised to ensure that people who need this support are aware of these services, yet be carefully used to continue to support the choice ethos.

• Post bid procedures, such as viewing and time to decide, should be used sensitively to encourage informed and supported decisions on offers.

• The organisation of support should ensure consistency and reliability between partner organisations, delivered by well trained staff, whether in generic or specialist roles.

Joint working
• In supporting members of potentially disadvantaged groups to navigate the choice-based lettings system, there is substantial scope for inter-organisational collaboration. Choice-based lettings schemes are encouraged to develop an access strategy with their external partner agencies which details specific objectives and designates clearly defined roles.

• Regular liaison, working group or forum meetings between partners and stakeholders help to maintain contact and provide opportunities for updating, review and improvement to choice-based lettings systems.
• Planned ongoing training programmes for choice-based lettings partner and support agency staff are required to allow for staff turnover and new volunteer recruitment.

• Plan for regular community events, annual open days, to raise awareness of choice-based lettings.

**Monitoring effectiveness**

• Scheme provider organisations should commission periodic non-bidder surveys to improve understanding of the factors involved (particularly for those applicants assessed as having a substantial need).

• Although one-off exercises, such as scrutiny reviews and customer surveys, are useful, these are no substitute for routine monitoring of people from potentially disadvantaged groups, in terms of registration, engagement in the bidding process and successful housing outcomes.

• In monitoring the effectiveness of policies to maximise engagement by members of potentially disadvantaged groups there is a key role for equality impact assessments.

**Accessible housing and choice for disabled people**

• The case for accessible housing registers in the context of choice-based lettings rests mainly on the strategic value of establishing a comprehensive database of accessible housing; and in particular to inform needs analysis in the context of housing investment planning. However, the identification of accessible dwellings in the course of the void inspection process can also be effective in making best use of this limited resource.

• Whichever system is used to identify and categorise accessible housing, it is essential that information about accessible housing is fully maintained and kept up-to-date.

• The recommended model for an accessible housing register within the context of choice based lettings is an integrated approach, where accessible (and otherwise adapted) homes are advertised alongside mainstream housing and also let through the choice system. For this to work, it is essential that choice-based lettings schemes are designed so that priority for accessible/adapted properties is given to people with an assessed need for that accommodation.

• Choice-based lettings landlords should consider what procedures are needed to maximise the chances that an accessible home will be let to a person requiring such a dwelling where a lack of suitable bidders means this cannot be initially achieved. Such procedures might include holding properties vacant pending re-advertisement or widening eligibility criteria – e.g. allowing applications from disabled people from outside the area.
References


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Annex 1

Research underpinning this guide

Elements of the research

The research involved three main components:

- Contacts with national stakeholder agencies
- Review of existing literature on issues relating to choice-based lettings and potentially disadvantaged groups
- Case study work focusing on a diverse group of nine choice-based lettings schemes in operation in various parts of England

Interviews with national stakeholder agencies included representatives of the following agencies: DCLG (special advisers on choice-based lettings), Department of Health, the Equalities & Human Rights Commission, the Greater London Authority, the Housing Corporation, Mencap and Shelter. These interviews probed for informed perspectives on:

- the groups most in need of special help to engage with choice-based lettings
- measures incorporated within some choice-based lettings schemes to address the needs of potentially disadvantaged groups
- the scope for improved practice in accommodating the needs of potentially disadvantaged groups
- publications/reports relevant to the research
- choice-based lettings schemes believed to embody ‘good practice’ – especially in relation to engagement with potentially disadvantaged groups.

As well as revisiting previous official evaluations, the literature review covered unpublished reports on local schemes, Audit Commission inspection reports and academic journal articles.

Bearing in mind stakeholder interviewee recommendations, the choice of case studies was influenced by the need to include (some) schemes operating in areas where accessible housing registers were also
established. An additional criterion was the preference for schemes not included as case studies in previous official evaluations. Hence, the chosen group included only one of the 27 schemes subject to government funding in the official 2001-03 pilot programme.

Case study selection also took account of the desire for the research to encompass a diverse set of local circumstances and institutional contexts. Consequently, the chosen schemes include representation of (a) choice-based lettings schemes running alongside Accessible Housing Registers, (b) sub-regional as well as LA-specific schemes, and (c) schemes in non-metropolitan areas.

The case study work involved interviews with choice-based lettings scheme managers and operational staff, with tenants’ representatives, with partner agencies and with spokespersons for local groups representing and/or advocating for specific potentially disadvantaged groups. Case study findings were written up as thematically structured working papers which were sent to scheme provider organisations to check that findings had been accurately interpreted.

Case study choice-based lettings schemes

- Greater Norwich
- Hammersmith and Fulham/ Locata West London
- Homechoice, Colchester
- Homefinder, Blyth Valley
- Property pool, Liverpool
- Sheffield Property Shop
- Tower Hamlets Homes, Homeseekers
- Walsall Choose and Move
- Your choice Homes, Newcastle

Drafting the positive practice guide

The positive practice guide was developed from the underpinning research report and a first draft discussed with two focus groups, in London and Manchester. Invited participants represented: choice-based lettings scheme provider organisations from different types of local authority areas (urban, rural, district, city and metropolitan) and regions; also a small number of representative and support provider agencies.
• Bolton, Homes for Bolton
• Choice Homes, UK, LB Newham
• Colchester Borough Council
• LB Hammersmith & Fulham
• Hull City Council, Homeseach
• Incommunities, Bradford
• Leeds City Council, Leeds Homes
• Homes for Northumberland
• Press for Change
• Solihull Community Housing
• South Somerset Council
• Stonewall Housing
• LB Tower Hamlets/Tower Hamlets Homeseekers
• City of Westminster
• Homes4Wiltshire
• Wychavon District Council
Annex 2

Audit Commission Key Lines of Enquiry

As the Audit Commission’s Key Lines of Enquiry (or KLoE) for allocations and lettings constitute the standards against which they are judged in the course of housing inspection, the KLoEs are understandably recognised by social landlords as of crucial importance. The KLoE messages most relevant to choice-based lettings and potentially disadvantaged groups are those specifying that a social landlord ‘delivering an excellent service’ is one which:

- Offers a range of ways for service users to contact them – by telephone, in person or electronically – all of which are dealt with efficiently and effectively.

- Actively canvasses the views of service users and uses them to review or improve the allocation and lettings services. Service users are consulted and involved in major decisions that affect the service. Service users feel confident that their input will be valued and acted upon.

- Has a clear understanding of its local community using census and other information, including the input of local partners, and knows its own service user profile, making necessary adjustments where this is out of step in meeting the needs of those that require services.

- Knows, records, analyses and monitors information about the ethnicity, vulnerability and disability of service users and uses it to ensure services are delivered appropriately and to prioritise resources.

- Provides information about services and service standards in a comprehensive range of languages and formats appropriate to service users’ needs – e.g. large print, Braille, other languages etc.

- Has a formal clear, comprehensive allocations policy that has been derived in consultation with service users and agreed by councillors or board members, which is widely publicised and is available in all appropriate formats and languages.

- Has an allocation policy that records, collects and takes account of individual’s needs and support requirements in order to match their needs with appropriate housing. Ensures that appropriate support is available for vulnerable service users at the start of their tenancy.

- Has a clear policy in place aimed at maximising choice for applicants in accordance with the allocation policy such as a choice-based letting scheme.
• Works in partnership with other organisations and utilises mobility schemes to provide additional housing opportunities for those wishing to transfer.