

Ensuring Participation in Choice Based Lettings

A Strategy to ensure participation by vulnerable people

Background

South Gloucestershire Council has implemented a Choice Based Lettings Scheme, which is the way that we let social housing in the district. Under the scheme vacant properties (of all tenures) will be advertised. Applicants on the housing register will be able to express an interest in (bid for) properties which they feel fit their needs. These applicants will then be prioritised according to their housing need, with the top applicant being invited to a viewing of the property.

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

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

Purpose

This strategy sets out how we will:

- Ensure information on vacant properties is accessible as possible.
- Ensure support is available to applicants who may need it.

This strategy links with:

- Housing Strategy for people with learning difficulties
- Housing strategy 2004 - 2009
- Homelessness strategy
- Enabling Strategy

Aim of strategy

The aim of the strategy is to ensure that the benefits of choice based lettings are accessible to all applicants. We aim to empower people to make their own choices and decisions and provide support to enable people to do so.

Defining vulnerability

We cover three areas:

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

Several categories of customers are more likely to be 'vulnerable' to not accessing choice based lettings:

- Older people
- People with learning difficulties or mental health problems
- Homeless households
- Younger people
- People with drug or alcohol problems
- People leaving rehab or prison
- Care leavers
- People with medical needs
- People with English as a second language
- People with literacy problems
- Gypsies and travellers

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

The problem with this approach of looking at categories of people who may experience difficulties is that it does not consider what barriers may be. The other concern with looking at issues of vulnerability is there will be different barriers applicable to individuals depending on where they are in relation to the system.

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

Barriers to choice based lettings

We have looked at the three main steps of choice based lettings: accessing information, bidding, and decision making. These are based on issues highlighted by customers as either a concern for them, or an issue we should take into account. We also consulted representatives from local agencies. People can have combinations of barriers, for example, we plan to provide community languages on the website. This will help speakers of many of our community languages, but will not help those with literacy issues as well. Therefore, a combination approach may sometimes have to be offered, for example, symbols, choice of languages and access to language line interpretation service.

Accessing information:

- Literacy
- Speakers of other languages
- Chaotic lifestyles
- Perceptions of service and likely outcomes
- Lack of knowledge
- Visual impairments
- Learning difficulties
- Mobility issues
- Geographical isolation- rural communities
- Currently housed away from South Gloucestershire
- Mental health issues
- Profoundly deaf
- Crisis points e.g. acute illness, which makes it difficult for carers and those who are suffering illness to proactively obtain information.

Accessing bidding:

- Chaotic lifestyles
- Learning difficulties
- Visual or hearing impairment
- Geographical isolation
- Mental health issues
- Literacy
- Speakers of other languages
- Crisis e.g. acute illness

Decision making:

- Life skills
- Confidence
- Chaotic lifestyles
- Learning disability
- Mental health issues
- Crisis e.g. acute illness

This list is not intended to be exhaustive. Any of these barriers can lead to inequality of access.

Diversity and Inclusion

The aims of valuing diversity and inclusion run through this strategy. We need to ensure that people engage with our services in the first place. An issue, which has been highlighted in recent research by the CLG is that many BME community members do not approach their local council for help with housing issues, because of perceptions about the service on offer. They may think that services may be discriminatory, or that we only help certain groups of people. We hope that Choice Based Lettings will encourage customers to reconsider the services we can offer. In other areas applications from BME members have risen after the introduction of choice based lettings. We would view this as a positive impact.

Research suggests that the main reason people from BME communities do not access services is due to language problems. We need to publicise the availability of an interpreting and translation service much more and this will be addressed both locally and corporately.

Lettings policy

South Gloucestershire Council's lettings policy aims to prioritise people on the basis of their current housing need. We have a banding system of three categories; Band A, band B and registered category. Band A applicants are generally the people with a high housing need.

Generally Band A reflects high housing need and some level of vulnerability, for example, homeless households. This gives these applicants a higher chance of being housed quickly, depending on the choices they make, limiting the amount of time they will need to engage with the system.

There is also a priority card category to enable people in severe housing need to be re-housed very quickly as they will take priority over all other categories of applicants.

A panel will consider issues of high welfare or health needs where re-housing would resolve or alleviate this need.

The new banding system was developed because many applicants find our points system difficult to understand. Applicants who know their band and their chance of housing are much more able to make their own choices and decisions.

The new lettings policy was introduced in April 2008.

Inbuilt Solutions

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

Access to information

There will be a variety of ways to see property information: website, free-sheet at pick up points and at Council and Housing Association Offices. Staff will be able to explain information to people who may be visually impaired, with literacy issues, or who may need guidance to bid or make decisions.

There will be clear information in pick up points and Partner offices on who is eligible to join the housing register, how to apply and how to take part in Choice Based Lettings.

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

The website will be available in a range of community languages, along with an existing council translation service and availability of information in a range of formats for example, audio tapes.

The website will conform to the W3C's WAI AA standards for website accessibility and will be designed to meet RNIB accessibility guidelines.

We will target mail-outs of property information by post and email to geographically isolated people or people with mobility issues who request us to do so. We will also email or send property information to agencies and advocates.

Parish councils and rural members will be made aware of the choice based lettings system and will be trained on the system. Advert free-sheets will be sent out to the Parish councils.

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

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

Access to bidding

There are a range of methods to bid: On-line by using the website, telephone, in person at partner landlord offices and Council Housing offices, by sending a completed coupon

The system can place an automatic bid on properties for applicants who may not be able to bid at all.

Advocacy bidding will be allowed on an informal basis to make use of existing networks of informal support from family, friends, and neighbours. To bid, they will only need the person's application reference number. Obviously, if we are required to give information, there is a formal procedure to ensure confidentiality.

Staff at offices will be available to assist people with the bidding process. They will also encourage people to make use of all the bidding options available to them, so if their circumstances change so one method will no longer be available to them, they will be able to use another. For example, if an applicant goes abroad on holiday, they may not want to use the telephone line, but will be able to make a bid through the website.

As part of their role, HomeChoice staff will help any people having trouble engaging with choice based lettings, by identifying suitable properties, and encouraging participation.

Decision making

Staff can help people with general decision making, but there will be limits to this to avoid too much guidance or a reliance on 'professional' opinion overriding a person's own choices. For those who cannot exercise choice, there will be an automatic bidding facility.

We will also have a direct offer facility for those in high priority who do not engage. There are the safeguards of a rigorous appeal procedure and a complaint policy.

Library staff are praised as useful information resources by BME community members, so we will plan an outreach programme.

Monitoring

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

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

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

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

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

Future service improvements

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

The Council operates an integrated housing options approach. We have skilled staff available to discuss a whole range of options with applicants including private rented tenancies, existing schemes to access these and sources of support.

Considering Impacts

Although choice based lettings does involve considering issues of access for groups, it is important to bear in mind the positive impacts choice based lettings has had in other areas, or is expected to bring. Government research reveals that customers recognise the extra input they have to make in choice based lettings, but most consider the increased choice and control worth it.

We will no longer be making people go to an area they don't want to live in. It is hoped that it will contribute to community stability when people live where they want to live.

We have also considered some of the less positive potential impacts of choice based lettings. Issues of segregation have been raised recently, and these are being considered. We do not consider this to be an urgent issue in South Gloucestershire as a relatively small proportion of people in the region (in whatever tenure) consider being close to members of their own community as important to them. We do not expect it to lead to segregation or clustering for these reasons.