



# **KENT CHOICE BASED LETTINGS PARTNERSHIP**

**‘OPPORTUNITIES AND INCLUSION FOR  
ALL’**

**STRATEGIC GUIDANCE FOR MEETING  
THE NEEDS OF VULNERABLE PEOPLE**

<b><u>CONTENTS</u></b>	<b><u>SECTION</u></b>
<b>BACKGROUND</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>KENTS' ALLOCATION POLICIES</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>PARTNERSHIP WORKING</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>PURPOSE OF STRATEGY</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>HOW TO ACHIEVE THIS PURPOSE</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>DEFINING VULNERABILITY</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>BARRIERS TO CBL</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>CONSIDERING IMPACTS</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>BUILDING IN SOLUTIONS</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>ACCESS TO INFORMATION</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>ACCESS TO BIDDING</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>DECISION MAKING</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>PROVIDING SUPPORT</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>WHO CAN HELP</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>MONITORING</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>CBL PROCESS FLOW CHART</b>	<b>APPENDIX</b>

## **1.0 Background**

1.1 A consortium of Kent local authorities and their Registered Social Landlord (RSL) partners is implementing a Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme by 2008 in line with Government targets. The consortium is currently known as 'the Kent CBL Partnership'.

1.2 CBL fundamentally changes the way that households will be able to access social housing. Previously, applicants would apply to the housing register, points would be awarded by a housing needs or allocations officer and the applicant would wait to be made an offer of a property, usually a maximum of one or two. Because Kent is a region of high demand, and has an acute shortage of, social housing, a large percentage of people on the register are unlikely to be offered a property and so would be waiting for years with no realistic prospect of being housed.

1.3 CBL means that applicants will be more active in searching for vacancies and 'bidding' for properties they feel would be more suitable for their needs. Available properties are advertised, by means of a 'freesheet' publication and on the internet and applicants can 'bid' for properties that they are interested by a variety of means: on the internet, by post, telephone or text message. Applicants are then notified whether or not their bid has been successful and bid results are published. The Chart in appendix 1 sets out the CBL bidding process. The assessed level of housing need of each household determines access to social housing. And the introduction of CBL does not affect the way in which this is assessed. However, it is recognised that some vulnerable people may find it difficult to access housing through choice based lettings. This strategy seeks to ensure that vulnerable people seeking rehousing have fair and easy access to take part in the CBL scheme.

1.4 The issue of raised expectations must be considered; this may impact on some groups who are encouraged to access the system, but do not have enough priority to be housed. Some applicants may find this more difficult than others, and may lack the knowledge or capacity to find other solutions to their housing need. It is, therefore, crucially important that CBL is integrated as part of the wider housing options approach, which encompasses the private rented sector and shared ownership initiatives.

## **2.0 Kent's allocations policies**

2.1 Each local authority will continue to determine its policy on assessing housing need including the treatment of vulnerability in this process. It will also be the decision of each local authority on how this need is designated, (e.g. by the number of points, or by placing an applicant within a needs band). CBL is merely a mechanism for matching people seeking re-housing with vacant properties and ensuring that those with the greatest level of need are given priority.

## **3.0 Partnership working**

3.1 Lots of successful partnership arrangements exist between housing providers, gatekeepers and support and care agencies. There are also good arrangements for jointly assessing housing and support needs: Single Agency Assessments (East Kent); Joint Assessment and Referral processes (West Kent) and Supporting People agreements).

3.2 Other successful partnerships which incorporate the evidencing and assessing overall need for vulnerable groups are:

The Joint Policy and Planning Board for Housing (JPPB) which is a strategic partnership between health, housing and social care and provides the forum where strategic issues requiring joint working between these agencies, can be raised, and measures to address them, developed.

The Board incorporates representation from; East and West Kent local housing authorities, social services, primary care trusts, Kent probation service, youth offending service, 16+, mental health and Supporting People.

The Supporting People programme, which is aimed at improving the quality of life for vulnerable people by enabling them to live more independent lives in their accommodation and communities, or maintaining their capacity to do so. The overall desired outcome is sustained independent living. The programme is a partnership between Kent County Council as the Administering Authority, the twelve districts/boroughs, health authorities, probation and other stakeholders such as service providers and service users.

3.3 CBL will build on and develop these partnerships to help empower vulnerable people and give them choice.

#### **4.0 Diversity and Inclusion**

4.1 The aims of valuing diversity and inclusion run through this strategy. It is important to ensure that people are encouraged to engage with our services in the first place.

4.2 There is a danger that Minority Ethnic (ME) community members may not approach their local councils for help with housing issues, possibly because of perceptions that services may be discriminatory, or that help is only available to certain groups of people. In other areas, for example, in both the London Borough of Newham and Leeds City Council, applications from ME members have risen after the introduction of CBL. This would be a positive impact.

4.3 One of the barriers to members of ME communities accessing services could be due to language problems or cultural differences. The availability of language line services and use of interpreters where available, perhaps through working with community groups who are able to translate and act as advocates, will need to be publicised much more. Key advice documents could be provided in different languages. Local housing authorities may be able to form links with community leaders through resident/tenant participation officers, in order to ensure that cultural needs are met.

4.4 Some of the less positive potential impacts of CBL have been considered, for example: issues of segregation such as the socially excluded, lack of applications for unpopular areas/estates and disaffected communities. Local housing authorities therefore need to work with other agencies and developers to ensure communities of mixed tenure and population. This can be achieved through local lettings policies. Local authorities are already working towards these goals in order to comply with the Government's targets on sustainable communities.

## **5.0 Purpose of strategy**

### 5.1 The Purpose of the Strategy is:

- To identify barriers to the participation of vulnerable people in CBL
- To ensure that vulnerable people are empowered to have control over their housing options and are able to exercise choice about where they live
- To identify ways in which the scheme can be expected to enable vulnerable people to participate in CBL
- To ensure information on vacant properties is as accessible as possible
- To ensure support is available to applicants who may need it
- To equip statutory and non-statutory agencies in their understanding of the CBL process for the purpose of advocacy for their service user
- To provide information about CBL in a range of formats to meet the needs of vulnerable people.

**The over-arching aim of this strategy is to ensure that all applicants have fair and equal access and are able to participate in CBL.**

### 5.2 This strategy links with

Local Authority Housing Strategies  
Government's Supporting People programme launched April 2003  
South East Regional Housing Strategy  
Sustainable Communities –Homes for All  
Sustainable Communities- Settled homes; changing lives  
Towards 2010: The Kent Agreement  
Kent CBL Partnership's Communications and Marketing Strategy  
Sustainable Communities-A Strategy for Choice Based Lettings

## **6.0 How to achieve this:**

### 6.1 This will be achieved by:

- Ensuring that all applicants are given equal opportunities to benefit from the CBL process
- Ensuring that vulnerable people are able to achieve similar or improved outcomes under the CBL process and are not disadvantaged
- Ensuring that vulnerable people are able to access a similar proportion and quality of available properties as they did under previous allocation systems
- Ensuring that people who are in need of support are matched with the appropriate level of support to access CBL, which can be 'stepped-up' and 'stepped-down' as necessary
- Identify who would provide the support to individuals - 'right support at the right time'
- Ensuring that people are empowered to make their own choices and decisions and to provide support to enable people to do so
- Integrate all applicants' needs and aspirations for housing into CBL.

## **7.0 Defining vulnerability**

7.1 Vulnerable people need to be empowered and should have the same access to choice. The danger is, that if vulnerable people are excluded from CBL this will create a parallel allocations system, in which vulnerable people are likely to get poorer accommodation, rejected by those who have access to choice. Vulnerable people must be allowed to participate fully, and must be safeguarded to ensure inclusion for all.

7.2 Existing CBL schemes have highlighted 3 issues around CBL, which could impact on vulnerable people:

- Access to information on housing options
- Access to bidding methods
- Capacity to make decisions and strategies for bidding.

7.3 In terms of support needs to participate in CBL, the following groups are generally considered to be vulnerable:

- Older people
- People with a learning disability
- People with mental health issues
- Homeless households
- Young people or care-leavers
- People with substance misuse issues
- People who have recently left an institution or rehabilitation
- People with medical issues
- Physical disability
- Visual impairment
- People who have literacy problems
- People from Gypsy and Traveller communities
- People who have fled domestic violence or other serious harassment
- People who do not speak English as their first language
- People who are vulnerable through their offending behaviour (reducing re-offending agenda)

7.4 These groups are largely identical with the groups identified under the Supporting People Programme as having specific and identifiable vulnerabilities that render them in need of housing related support services provided for the purpose of developing a person's capacity to live independently in accommodation or sustaining his/her capacity to do so.

7.5 It should not be assumed that persons in the above groups are automatically vulnerable; for example, older persons may be active retired people who are quite able to access any information. Also, some people who are not included in the above groups will need support too. Therefore every applicant must be considered as an individual. However, it is important that the appropriate support is in place to ensure accessibility for all, should this be required.

7.6 The other issue with vulnerability is that there will be different barriers applicable to individuals depending on where they are in relation to the system. For example, before the launch of CBL, everyone will be 'vulnerable' because they will not know about the system, and so information, training and guidance will be given.

Information will need to be given in various languages and formats in order to be fully inclusive, together with well-publicised access points to that information for applicants and other agencies to access.

## **8.0 Potential Barriers to Vulnerable People Accessing CBL**

8.1 The three main steps in the CBL process are:

- Accessing information
- Bidding
- Decision-making.

8.2 People can have combinations of barriers, for example, a translation or interpreter service will be available to those who do not speak English, but this 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, DVDs, CDs and cassette tapes, large print, Braille etc

<b>Barrier</b>	<b>Vulnerability</b>	<b>Solution</b>
Unable to read	People with literacy issues People with a visual impairment	Use of symbols, pictures Large print, Braille, audio tape etc
English not first language	Minority ethnic communities	Leaflets and materials available in languages other than English Use of symbols, pictures Language Line Interpretation services
Unable to hear	People with a hearing impairment	DVDs to include signing
Mobility issues	People with a physical disability Frail older people	Targeted mail shots Outreach services Assistance with viewing properties
Geographical isolation	Rural communities Gypsy/Traveller communities	Targeted mail shots Outreach services Assistance with viewing properties
Difficulty in understanding/processing information	People with mental health problems People with learning difficulties	Advocacy services from housing staff and support agencies
Chaotic lifestyle	People with substance misuse issues People with mental health problems	Advocacy services from housing staff and support agencies
Unable to use internet/telephone/text lines	Any/all of the above	Help from housing staff, support agencies and advocates

8.2 If non-bidding is identified, the applicant concerned will be contacted if they could reasonably be expected to be a successful participant (for example, those in the top bands/with the highest points, 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.

### **9.0 Considering Impacts**

9.1 Although CBL does involve considering issues of access for groups, it is important to bear in mind the positive impacts CBL has had in other areas, or is expected to bring. ODPM (now CLG) research reveals that service users recognise the extra input they have to make in CBL, but most consider the increased choice and control worth it. There will be no penalties for refusing properties, so people will be able to choose a property suitable for their needs. People will no longer be made to 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.

### **10.0 Building in Solutions**

10.1 As an important part of setting up and implementing the CBL scheme potential solutions to some of the barriers some groups may face are explored below.

10.2 The three main steps of CBL are: accessing information, bidding, and decision-making. Some of the 'softer' barriers suggested above could be dealt with by support provision, which is detailed in the following sections.

### **11.0 Access to information**

- The availability of language line interpretation services can be actively publicised.
- Information on properties available will be given by a variety of means, including the website and a Freesheet available at main and district offices and at other designated 'pick up' points, such as libraries and in rural areas; mobile libraries, local shops and post offices.
- Staff will be able to explain information to people who may be visually impaired, who have literacy issues, or who may need guidance to bid or make decisions.
- There will be clear information in council offices and in various formats to explain who is eligible to join the housing register, how to apply, how to take part in CBL.
- 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, and there will also be a translation service and availability of information in a range of formats for example, audiotapes.



- The website will conform to the World Wide Web Consortium's Website Access Initiative AA standards for website accessibility.
- There will be potential for targeted mail outs of property information by post and email to geographically isolated people or people with mobility issues, who request this.
- Agencies and advocates can access property information.
- Parish and district councillors will be made aware of the CBL system and will be trained on the system. Parish councils can access advert freesheets.
- The bidding cycle will be well publicised and clearly set out to avoid confusion.
- Both statutory and non-statutory agencies will be part of the information process, via the Kent CBL communications and marketing strategy.

## **12.0 Access to bidding**

12.1 Advocacy bidding will be allowed on an informal basis to make use of existing networks of informal support from family, friends, and neighbours. As there will be no penalties for refusals, there should not be any resulting problems, unless it is one of decision- making (see below). Obviously, if housing departments and other agencies are required to give information, there is a formal procedure to ensure confidentiality. There may be cases where advocacy could be supplied by supporting agencies, e.g. Supporting People.

12.2 There will be a range of methods to bid, which may include:

- Website
- Automated telephone
- Contact with the customer service centre
- In person
- Telephone call to housing services team
- Text bidding.

12.3 Housing staff 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 or one method is no longer available to them, they will be able to use another. It will be important for staff and advocates to identify people who may need support around accessing bidding, e.g. ability to use the internet, text lines etc. As part of their role, they will help any people having trouble engaging with CBL, by identifying suitable properties and encouraging participation.

12.4 Providers of supported housing are anticipated to be able to enable and support service users who are seeking to move on through the CBL bidding process

## **13.0 Decision making**

13.1 For those who cannot exercise choice, there may be an automatic bidding facility. LHAs may choose to have a direct offer facility in place, for those in high priority who do not engage. There will also be the safeguards of a rigorous appeal procedure and a complaint policy within each LHA.

13.2 Generally it must also be noted an intensive publicity and training program is planned for all housing department, RSL and agency staff and customers, including providers of supported housing. Pilots have shown that library staff are a useful information resource, so they could be included locally in training. Training can be provided on an ongoing basis after the launch of the scheme to ensure that users who join the register after the launch will also be included.

#### **14.0 Providing Support**

14.1 The existing system of allocating housing to vulnerable people already presents considerable barriers and hurdles, e.g. completing application forms, presenting to officers etc. In this process, support agencies and advocates already have a major role in helping vulnerable people through the process. These agencies will have a critical role in future arrangements.

14.2 The following measures should be taken to address potential barriers an applicant can face in order that appropriate support is provided.

- Direct contact with service users and other agencies
- Noting difficulties in completing the application form. This will trigger contact to see if there are any barriers
- Support agency notified on application form or where advocate has completed the application form on behalf of the applicant
- A referral or expression of concern from an agency
- Monitoring of bidding, e.g. person/s with high need not bidding or where bidding has changed can trigger a further assessment.
- Enabling and assisting as part of housing related support that is provided under Supporting People

14.3 As there are time constraints and pressures for staff from other agencies, support agencies will not be identified as a sole source of bidding help unless the applicant is unable or unwilling to engage with local authority staff, and has issues that another agency would also be able to help them with.

14.4 It is recognised that continual information and a rolling training programme regarding CBL be maintained to take account of staff changes within all agencies.

#### **15.0 Who can help?**

An applicant can approach many organisations for help with CBL. Some of these are listed below.

Housing Advice/Options staff	Housing Advice Agencies, e.g. Shelter
Private Sector Leasing Teams	Kent Adult Social Services
Sheltered teams	Health Professionals
Providers under the Supporting People programme	Support workers, e.g. Floating Support
Customer Service Centres	Probation and Youth Offending Service
Registered Social Landlords	Connexions
Homelessness Teams	Libraries
Citizens Advice Bureaux	

In addition members of the CBL scheme should:

- Make systems and communications as simple as possible
- Train housing staff to help and support people to use CBL
- Produce clear guidance notes and CBL scheme guide to be available in different formats
- Engage with statutory and non-statutory agencies that can support vulnerable people

## **16.0 Monitoring**

16.1 A system to monitor and review CBL needs to be set up so that information can be gathered on how the system is working for service users and other agencies. It is anticipated that this could be carried out by incorporating into tenant/housing applicant surveys and fed into the CBL Project Board.

16.2 There will be 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 CBL
- Similar properties and quality of properties
- Similar or higher levels of customer satisfaction.

16.3 To ensure this service is available to all sections of the community, rates of access by different groups will be monitored

## Appendix 1: The Choice Based Lettings Process

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

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

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

Applicant bids on property, all bids are short listed

If more than one applicant in the same band applies for a property, the applicant who been registered the longest, or any applicant using a priority card (if system in use) will be selected for the property.

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

Tenancy agreement signed

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