

Choice Based Lettings and People with Learning Disabilities



**Report for the Valuing People Support Team,
Care Services Improvement Partnership**

by

**Claire Hall, Wayne Hooks, Wendy Perez &
Alicia Wood**

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1. Introduction

Choice Based Lettings is a recent development to improve choice to people applying for council and housing association housing. Choice Based Lettings is different to a standard housing register and waiting list because properties are advertised and people bid for them rather than waiting for the council to offer a property. Other aims of Choice Based Lettings are to bring more transparency about who properties are let to and make better use of housing stock by breaking-down artificial local authority boundaries and encouraging people to move by the introduction of sub-regional, regional and cross county schemes.

The housing strategy 'Quality and Choice: A Decent Home for All (2000)' introduced Choice Based Lettings for 27 local authorities to pilot in 2001. It is generally thought to have improved choice and access to public sector housing. The Government has now told all local authorities that they must start using Choice Based Lettings by 2010 and all schemes should enable people to take part equally, especially people who are vulnerable and/or find it hard to use the scheme.

There has been concern about how vulnerable groups of people, including people with learning disabilities, will access Choice Based Lettings because it requires applicants to actively bid for housing. Communities and Local Government research 'Monitoring the longer term impact of Choice Based Lettings, 2006', found that most Choice Based Lettings landlords recognise the need to safeguard the interests of groups potentially disadvantaged by Choice Based Lettings requirement for 'active participation' but that they need to demonstrate more clearly the effectiveness of the measures they are taking.

The Disability Equality Duty and Disability Discrimination Act 2005 says that housing organisations should seek to identify where their letting policies may be making it difficult to match properties to disabled people and make reasonable adjustments which include greater accessibility of the application and bidding process and allowing extra time for disabled people where required. This extends to treating disabled people more favourably if necessary.

Despite the recognition of the need to ensure vulnerable groups are enabled to access Choice Based Lettings, there is much anecdotal evidence to suggest that people with a learning disability are being excluded from the process. The Valuing People Support Team, part of the Care Services Improvement Partnership, has commissioned this report to understand how Choice Based Lettings works in practice for people with learning disabilities.

This is particularly important within the wider policy context. Putting People First 2007, Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People 2005, Independence, Choice and Wellbeing 2006 and Valuing People Now 2007 all place major importance on choice, independence and control. Housing is key to being able to deliver these for people with learning disabilities and demand for more ordinary housing options is likely to increase.

Choice Based Lettings will be the only way for people with learning disabilities to access public sector housing from 2010 so it is important to ensure that there are no barriers for people accessing this type of housing.

2. How Choice Based Lettings works

Most schemes operate differently to each other but the basic elements are the same;

- Application to a housing register
- The applicant is placed in a band depending on their situation. Most areas have 3-4 bands with the highest being urgent and the lowest being low priority.
- Properties are advertised in a similar way to properties in estate agents
- Applicants bid for the properties that they like
- The highest priority bidders are invited to view the property and the successful person is chosen based on who has the highest priority and been on the waiting list the longest

3. What we did and how we did it

We used a number of different methods to capture information about various Choice Based Lettings schemes operating across England.

We examined the ways in which twenty local authority schemes operate by looking at the websites, application and information packs supplied by 20 local authorities and assessed against the following:

- Accessibility of information against what is commonly accepted as good practice in making information more widely accessible to people with learning disabilities such as large print, audio and the use of pictures, symbols, photos and video.
- The assistance they offered people who need help with applying and bidding for housing
- Policies and procedures to enable access to housing in relation to vulnerable and/or disabled people

A 'mystery shopping' exercise was carried out with six Choice Based Lettings schemes by people with learning disabilities and assessed against the following:

- How the application process is for people with learning disabilities
- How easy it is to understand Choice Based Lettings
- How much help is offered to apply and bid for a home
- Whether information about other housing options is offered

'Family carer' telephone enquiries to seven Choice Based Lettings Schemes to identify:

- Whether help to complete the application is offered
- Whether help to bid for properties is offered

Fourteen interviews and three focus groups with people who have used the CBL system including people with learning disabilities, families, care managers, support providers and housing advice workers were carried out;

- To understand how the CBL system works or doesn't work for people with learning disabilities
- We asked the people who took part in focus groups to look at various applications and brochures and say how easy the information was to understand

Questionnaires were completed by seventeen people who have used the Choice Based Lettings systems to understand what their experience was.

4. What we found

In line with other research in this area, we found that almost all local authorities were using various methods to enable vulnerable people to access Choice Based Lettings. The quality and effectiveness of the methods used however, varies considerably across local authorities. There was no one local authority that we found that fully engaged people with learning disabilities in the process but we did find many examples of good practice in various aspects of delivering Choice Based Lettings.

We also found discriminatory practices that exclude people with learning disabilities from the system and this varied from simply a lack of understanding of how to make information accessible and easy to understand, to blatant exclusion from the process and being told to 'go to social services'.

Whilst this study is about the actual process of Choice Based Lettings for people with a learning disability, it should be read within the context of the fact that many people with learning disabilities do not even get to access this system in the first place because of the lack of awareness of social care professionals, support providers and families that ordinary social housing is a viable option. This was confirmed for us by the lack of response from people with learning disabilities that had actually used the Choice Based Lettings system.

We broke down the findings into the different elements of the Choice Based Lettings process:

- Information and accessibility
- Banding and priority
- Help with applying and bidding
- Help to decide what to bid for

- Viewing a property
- How Local Authorities deal with viewing issues
- Advice on other housing options

4.1 Information and Accessibility

Most Choice Based Lettings Schemes/Local Authorities have tried to make different levels of accessible information available, presumably as part of the Disability Equality Duty. For most, though surprisingly not all, there were large print forms and brochures offered. Audio tapes and speech enable websites were also fairly common.

Half of the twenty schemes that we assessed and half of the six we mystery shopped had produced written information that was easy to understand, well laid out and jargon free. Even so, it was felt that many people with learning disabilities would still struggle to understand how Choice Based Lettings works without diagrams, pictures, symbols or video.

A small number of schemes had used diagrams, pictures, symbols and video to help people understand information, with two schemes that had produced information specifically for people who have learning disabilities (see table1). In two schemes that we mystery shopped (see table 2), there was in one a guide produced for people with learning disabilities using symbols and in another, a video showing how the system works. We were aware of this information being available but neither was offered during the mystery shop despite prompts to the housing advisors of needing help.

Most people with learning disabilities that we spoke to had difficulty with the application process and most people needed help. Common themes were:

- Too many words
- Small type
- Not enough space for writing
- Not enough pictures, symbols or photos
- Questions that did not make sense for the person's situation
- Not enough questions about social need such as need to live near family or need for independence

The Audit Commission noted in their report 'Choosing Well 2006' that the Choice Based Lettings pages are usually in the top five most visited parts of local authority websites, therefore this key public resource needs to be accessible not only to people with learning disabilities, but to the rest of the community too.

Large Print Application	16 had large print/audio tape
Application with symbols/photos	None
Application easy to read/plain English/Jargon free	10
Easy to complete –not too many pages/space for writing	7
Brochure with large print	14 available or offered
Brochure with photos/symbols	5
Brochure easy to read/plain English/Jargon free	7
Website	10 easy to find/navigate, speech enabled, change text size, easy to use

Easy to fill in?	Yes - 0	Yes, with help - 2	No - 4
Application with symbols/photos	Yes - 0		No - 6
Application easy to read –plain English/jargon free	Yes - 3		No - 3
Brochure with large print	Yes - 2	Yes, but not offered - 1	No - 3
Brochure easy to read/jargon free	Yes - 3		No - 3
Brochure with photos/symbols/video	Yes - 0	Yes, but not offered - 2	No - 4

4.2 Banding and priority

As part of this study, we attempted to understand whether there was any difference in the way that people with learning disabilities were banded and prioritised within Choice Based Lettings schemes and how this had an impact on whether they got housing. We did this through focus groups, interviews and by looking at local authority banding policies.

Under most banding policies we studied there was no obvious priority for people who lived in the family home, residential care or supported housing as generally these would be considered as adequate housing. Within the context of wider policies however, it is not considered acceptable that people stay in the family home until a

crisis occurs, or that people remain in care or shared housing when they clearly want and need independence. Some local authorities have recognised this and reflect this in their banding policies. We found the following banding and priority policies that enable people in care and support services to move on:

- Will upgrade to the highest priority band when Community Team for People with Learning Disabilities provides evidence of need
- People leaving supported housing are placed in highest band
- Automatically placed in second highest band after being in supported housing for 6 months
- Will place people in the highest band who are moving on from care in conjunction with social services
- Will upgrade people by one band if they are moving to be more independent
- Will upgrade to next band if moving to live nearer to someone to give or receive support
- A joint housing and social services panel has the authority to upgrade to next highest band
- Automatically put anyone who has been placed or living in council care to next highest band
- Prioritises people whose housing makes their disability worse
- People who have spent a long time in a hospital or institution get highest priority
- People suffering domestic abuse or harassment including people living in care or supported housing get highest priority

We also found evidence of policies and procedures that discriminate against people with learning disabilities. The most common were protocols that take people out of the ordinary Choice Based Lettings system and through a supported housing route as a default option. This is done in an attempt to help people with learning disabilities get housing and clearly should be a choice, but this does severely limit peoples' choices rather than enhance them as the Choice Based Lettings system does.

A worrying policy that we found in two local authorities was that they only consider the persons disability as a priority when banding if they are in receipt of high rate components of Disability Living Allowance.

Most banding criteria does not neatly fit with a typical housing situation of a person with a learning disability and requires the help of a person who understands how the banding system operates and how the persons' situation fits within that, otherwise it is often assumed that if a person lives in the family home, residential care or supported housing, even within difficult circumstances, they are not a priority for housing.

We found situations where people needed to move on because of daily verbal abuse in shared housing. It took a year to get housing for one person who rightly felt that this was unacceptable. This was not down to a problem with the Choice Based Lettings system itself but because this situation was not named as a domestic abuse situation by the support provider who helped with the application process and treated as a situation where 'housemates were not getting on'. The person was then not prioritised in the same way as most people suffering domestic abuse.

When interviewing care managers, support workers and housing advisors that had helped people with learning disabilities to access the Choice Based Lettings system they all said that success in getting housing depended on whether people were in the higher bands or not and if people with learning disabilities are not assessed properly, then they will have little chance of getting housing.

For those we interviewed who had successfully helped people get housing through Choice Based Lettings systems, the following were felt to be success factors:

- They had built their knowledge of the process over time and learned by their mistakes with other clients
- They had found a "friendly person" in the housing department
- They had negotiated a quota of housing for people with learning disabilities
- They learned what social rather than medical evidence to provide and how to present it in order to get the best outcome for the people that they support.
- There was an effective joint working procedure between housing and social services

In areas where we found larger numbers of people who have had positive outcomes through the Choice Based Lettings system, there has been a skilled professional working with people who knows how the system works and how to navigate it. However, in other areas, if there is a lack of clear information about how the banding system works and how to negotiate these processes, then people who want to do it themselves or are supported by family, friends or inexperienced professionals are at a clear disadvantage.

4.3 Help with applying and bidding

Everyone with learning disabilities that we spoke to felt they needed different levels of help to apply and bid for housing. Four people who had previously attempted to do it by themselves or with just the help of their families had found it difficult. Some of the difficulties they talked about were:

- The housing application was too long and difficult to understand
- The housing department not understanding their disability because they could not see it
- Forgetting to bid or losing the motivation to bid

- Not understanding how to bid and just giving up

All Choice Based Lettings schemes that we looked at made allowances for people who had difficulties applying and bidding and offered help. Only 13 of the 20 Choice Based Lettings schemes made it very clear that they offered help to apply or bid for housing. Most of the schemes that were mystery shopped did offer some form of help but all but one needed prompting before offering help. The following types of services are being offered by most of 20 Local Authorities that we looked at:

- Help with form filling
- Housing staff to bid on your behalf
- Housing staff to support you to bid at the housing office
- Nominating a person you know to bid on your behalf

The following more intensive help was offered in 7 out of 20 authorities that we looked at:

- Housing department helps fill out application in a home visit
- Supported living providers supporting people to move on in partnership with housing department
- Housing Department refers to a comprehensive support and advice service funded by Supporting People
- Voluntary sector organisations helping people through the system
- Housing brokerage provided by the housing department

Two support and advice services that were able to deliver good outcomes for people were provided by independent sector organisations that were funded by Supporting People. One, a support provider who provided supported living services, saw it as their role to help current tenants move on and actively engaged with the housing department and supported people to bid as part of their everyday support. Another scheme based in a local Mencap, actively supported people to apply and bid through Choice Based Lettings as well as other housing options. This scheme is commissioned by the Supporting People team and links closely with the housing department and Choice Based Lettings scheme.

The mystery shopping exercise highlighted the problem of not getting the right information even when there is a local service to help (see table 3). In local authority 4, we were aware of the availability of what looked like a good support service to use the Choice Based Lettings system and get housing in general. We were not told about this by the person in the housing office when making the application despite being very clear that help was needed to bid.

Telephone enquiries were made posing as a carer that needed help for a relative with learning disabilities (see table 4). The enquiries were made to all of the local authorities that either have more intensive help to bid or who have policies that were clear about helping people with learning disabilities to get housing through the

Choice Based Lettings system. Only 2 out of 7 of the schemes we contacted in this way told us about the extra help they had.

We found that front-line staff in Housing and Social Services are not aware of what help is available to support people with learning disabilities through the system. This is a real problem and unless Choice Based Lettings schemes make the help they offer readily available and consistent, it leaves it down to individuals to ask for help and to know what they are asking for; otherwise as our mystery shopping examples show, they simply will not get any help.

On the positive side, we also found local authorities with housing staff who are helpful, happy to engage with individuals and clearly trained to offer various services including assessing need, explaining options, guiding people through various stages of the process, including bidding. It can be done.

Table 3: Mystery Shopping : Help offered to apply and bid

	Help with application	Explanation of how it works	Help to bid
Local Authority 1	No offer but said you could get someone you know to do it	Only after pushing, was hard to understand with lots of jargon	No. Was told a day centre might help but could not find one that would.
Local Authority 2	Offered only after a prompt	Given a brochure only after a prompt. It had no pictures or symbols and was hard to understand. Was given a verbal explanation	Yes, staff available at all times who approach customers to help with bidding. Can also bid on your behalf
Local Authority 3	Offered only after a prompt	Gave a brief verbal explanation and a brochure after a prompt. Could not understand.	After prompt, said they will do it for you/with you if you come to the office.
Local Authority 4	Yes, offered without prompt. Question in the application form asks if help is needed to bid.	Gave a quick verbal explanation after a prompt. Gave brochure without prompt. Could not understand	Yes offered help weekly if person comes into the office but did not tell about more intensive help available locally
Local Authority 5	Yes, after a prompt	Yes, 3 times after a prompt. Was hard to understand. Gave brochure after a prompt with good step by step guide but no pictures.	Yes, said could attend office every week and get help but only after pushing for it

Local Authority 6	Yes, after a prompt. One of the first questions in the application asks if help is needed.	Yes, without prompt it was explained clearly and simply and visually	Yes, with prompt offered to help with bidding in the office or referral to a caseworker from social services for extra help
	5 out of 6 offered to help	All gave an explanation or brochure but only 1 out of 6 explained clearly	5 out of 6 offered help to bid but only one without a prompt

Table 4: Carer telephone enquiry: Help offered to apply and bid

Local Authority	Help with application form	Help to bid
Local Authority 7 has a quota of housing for people with learning disabilities as well as a housing post in Social Services and independent provider who helps with bidding	Will help if he comes into office but better if it is at a quiet time	No, that would be a conflict of interest. Referred me to social services for help. Social services did not think he was eligible and wanted to know his IQ before they would offer help.
Local Authority 8 has an excellent external housing advice and support service for people with learning disabilities	Will help with application if he comes into the office	Offered to help with bidding if he comes into the office, or will bid on his behalf. Did not offer information about local housing advice and support service for people with learning disabilities that we already knew about.
Local Authority 9 automatically refers people with support needs to an external team who help with all aspects of getting and maintaining housing	Yes, offered to help in office	Was told by first person I spoke to that they could help if he came into the office. I had to research another service myself who then offered to come to his house and help with everything from the application, bidding, moving in, furnishing and tenancy support
Local Authority 10 Has a team linked to the CBL scheme that helps vulnerable people use the system	Yes, offered to help in office	Referred to a link team who will help with bidding and setting up tenancy. Will do a support plan with you
Local Authority 11 Has	Yes, will help	Can explain how it works when you

clear policies that vulnerable people should receive a 'hand-holding' service throughout the CBL process	complete application form	come in but they rely on support workers/families to help with the bidding as they do not have the resources
Local Authority 12 Has a housing brokerage service connected to the council to help vulnerable people get housing	Said 'oh you'll want social services'	Left message with the CTPLD but no response as yet
Local Authority 13 Has good policies about supporting access to housing for vulnerable people	Yes, can come into the office and they will help	Yes, will offer a support service for vulnerable people to get housing. Very helpful

4.4 Ways to bid

Generally, vacant properties tend to be advertised on websites, in local papers and in specially produced magazines that are distributed widely throughout the community in libraries and supermarkets for example. Some schemes will post the magazine to people who cannot get out easily. The main ways to bid for housing are shown in table 5:

Table 5: Ways to bid	Number of local authorities of 20 using method
telephone	20
post (with coupons)	9
Internet	19
email	6
Text	13
in person	11
Digi TV	0

How people with learning disabilities bid

The internet The people we spoke to who get formal support to bid used the internet – usually at the office of the person helping them. In one focus group, the participants felt that the internet was the best way because it had more information such as maps and local facilities than the magazine. It also has larger type and is

generally easier to read. Most people said that they would have difficulty using the internet by themselves.

Text Another focus group were supported through their support provider to bid- they used the property magazine and bid using the mobile phones of their support workers to text their bids because there was no readily available access to the internet. Text is thought to be a quick and easy method of bidding for most people.

Telephone & in person Of the people who returned questionnaires, the majority said that they used the telephone or bid in person at the office- most of the people who returned questionnaires were supported by family or support workers

Another person placing the bid Some support workers and families bid on behalf of people in order to manage their expectations. A few local authorities make a point of identifying vulnerable people who may need extra help and then arrange to bid for them. Two people who returned questionnaires said that somebody from the housing department made a bid on their behalf.

Digi TV As yet, a little used method using digital television to help people bid, but potentially very accessible for people with learning disabilities. Apparently 80% of the UK population has a TV.

People with learning disabilities use a variety of methods to bid depending on their situation and the schemes that offer a wide range of methods can only encourage and improve access for people with learning disabilities.

4.5 Help to decide what to bid for

The most useful way of helping people decide on which property to bid for is to have as much information about the property in the advertisement as possible. The people with learning disabilities and their supporters that we spoke to said that the following are the most helpful aspects of the advertisements;

- The use of symbols explaining features of the property such as number of bedrooms, floor level, pets allowed and so on
- A photo of the property
- Maps
- Information about local facilities such as shops nearby, bus routes and similar
- Not every website we looked at uses photos or symbols, but most included maps and some information about local amenities. Some symbols used were really clear and helpful to people and some did not make much sense.
- Most people we spoke to said they need help with bidding even if the adverts are accessible and can be mastered. This is because of the need to think through whether the area is right, whether it is better to wait for a more ideal

property or more realistic to make a compromise. All people we spoke to felt that the help they got from families or supporters to do this was essential.

In some local authority areas, people are penalised for not accepting a property after they have bid for it. In these cases, support staff needed to support the individual to visit the local area before bidding to look at the estate, block or general area in order to see whether it is “worth using up a bid”. This takes time and staff resources and is dependent to a certain extent on knowledge of the particular area. It would be helpful if much of this information is provided in the adverts and include floor plans, level and type of crime in the area and the potential for extension, adaptation and conversion.

Most Choice Based Lettings schemes we looked at give feedback on the banding of successful bidders and how long they have been on the housing list. Some will suggest which properties are likely to have the least bids in order to give people the chance to be more successful with their bid. All of this information helps people know how likely they are to be successful for certain properties and this enables them to decide whether they need to make compromises when bidding. This information was found most useful by the professionals who were helping people to choose.

4.6 Viewing a property

Many people had difficult experiences when they went to view properties. In focus groups, interviews and questionnaires, the following were common themes:

Short notice to view It was noted that the technology used to bid was quite sophisticated yet invitation to view letters are usually sent in the post and regularly arrive with very little notice, often the day before or on the day of the viewing. Some Local Authorities will telephone the person’s supporter to advise of the viewing arrangements.

Reliance on support to view People rely on their support networks and families to make arrangements at short notice to ensure that they can make it to the viewing. We heard several reports of missing out on viewings because there was nobody available to support

Shared viewings Most local authorities do not offer individual viewings. Usually, the three highest priority bidders are invited to view at the same time. We heard reports of people feeling angry at the bidding competitor and there have been incidents of aggression and intimidation. Some people with learning disabilities we spoke to felt bad about accepting a property when they saw other people who also wanted it. In one case the person could not rationalise that they were the highest priority and thought that the other bidder was needier.

Lack of privacy Support staff and carers said they found it difficult to help people to look round and think about things in context at multiple viewings because they could not speak in confidence about sometimes very personal issues with other people within ear-shot. We assume that everyone, disabled or not, would feel more comfortable with individual viewings, which only need to be staggered by 5 or 10 minutes each to give people some privacy and space.

On the spot decisions The highest priority person at the viewing is usually expected to make a decision about whether or not to accept the property there and then. For some people with learning disabilities this can be very difficult, especially if they want more than one person's opinion of whether the property is right. As one support worker put it "I make a point of never making a major decision without sleeping on it; why should anyone be forced into that situation?"

Signing the tenancy and moving in Having accepted an offer, people are then expected to sign their tenancy agreement within a couple of days. This has implications for people needing a support package to move and support is usually needed to co-ordinate various aspects of housing and support. There is also an issue for some people in giving notice and having to pay rent on two properties at the same time.

How local authorities deal with viewing issues

The Disability Discrimination Act says that "reasonable adjustments should be made to procedures" to accommodate people with disabilities. This is clearly an aspect of the Choice Based Lettings system that discriminates against people who require support to make decisions.

- We found no examples where extra time is allowed to enable people with learning disabilities to decide or visit again with someone else.
- We heard from one local authority that they allow people extra time to move in if they need adaptation work to be completed, but we have no specific examples of this working in practice.
- Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) administrators and Lettings teams need to work together to ensure that DFG applications can be processed as quickly as possible to ensure properties remain accessible whilst void periods are also minimised. We found no examples where DFG information is available as part of the housing application or housing option exploration processes
- It is possible to claim housing benefit payments for two properties in a situation where a person requires a transition period or has to give notice on one property whilst accepting the tenancy of another at short notice - Regulation 7, paragraph 6 of Housing Benefit Regulations (2006). Again, this information is not readily available and some people we spoke to had been given incorrect information by the housing benefit department.
- One local authority said that all their local authority and RSL (housing association) partners on their regional choice based lettings scheme have agreed to waive notice if existing tenants move within the scheme so that there are no issues of overlapping tenancies.

4.7 Advice on other housing options

The Choice Based Lettings system is primarily used to access council and housing association rented property, although a few schemes we found also include private rented housing and/or low cost home ownership. Nearly all of the local authorities we looked at informed people about alternative housing options at the point of application to the housing register.

For some people with learning disabilities, the council or housing association rented housing option may not be suitable for their needs, for example, if people want to share with others, or if a particular area is necessary to receive support. It is important that they are able to get good information and advice about housing options at the point of applying for housing.

Through mystery shopping (see table 6), interviews and questionnaires, people have had experience of the following:

- Some local authorities do not have any readily available information about local housing options or anyone to help guide people with learning disabilities
- People with learning disabilities are being told to go to social services for housing
- Staff within Housing Departments suggesting that the person would be better off staying in their registered care home
- Being told that people with learning disabilities can't have tenancies because they can't sign
- Housing departments not aware that people with disabilities can access Income Support for mortgage interest payments and can therefore access low cost home ownership schemes
- Supported housing is not advertised through Choice Based Lettings

Local Authority 1	Yes, mentioned private rented after pushing but told me I was better off staying where I was as it was more secure
Local Authority 2	Yes, after a prompt, told me about shared ownership for people with disabilities and made an appointment for me to talk to someone about it
Local Authority 3	Yes, immediately offered mutual exchange as the most realistic option and gave information about private rented and shared ownership after a prompt

Local Authority 4	Yes, mentioned shared ownership after a prompt but said that my income might be too low. Signposted to housing advice
Local Authority 5	No , said to do application first
Local Authority 6	Yes, after a prompt gave detailed info on private rented housing and a contact for shared ownership
Information on other housing options	5 of 6 gave information after a prompt but none had detailed knowledge of all options for people with disabilities

5. Conclusions

5.1 Choice Based Lettings is a good system for people with learning disabilities

People have told us that in general, Choice Based Lettings is a good system. Being part of the process enables people to feel more in control.

5.2 You need to understand the system to get the best from it

We have seen and heard about some really good practice that has come about through committed staff in housing, social services and the voluntary sector working together to find ways around the system with such things as exceptions panels, quotas, liaison staff, regular communication and so on, but in most cases there is no formalised joint approach or clearly publicised way for people to be guided and supported through the process. Where it has worked well it is because there are people who understand the system and know how to get the best out of it for people with learning disabilities.

5.3 There is not enough support for people with learning disabilities to fully access the Choice Based Lettings systems

We found very little good support available to people with learning disabilities. Where we did find schemes which appear to be able to deliver a more intensive level of support, we found that the reality of trying to actually access it can be very different with frontline staff in Housing and Social Services not having or giving information about the help available.

5.4 There are different issues in accessing the system for different people

For some people with learning disabilities, good support is needed to help them do it themselves and this requires user friendly information and systems, the availability of help on a regular basis and monitoring to ensure they are bidding for properties they want.

For people with greater support needs that live with their family or in services, there needs to be more intensive support offered as a matter of course to ensure that they have equal access to the system.

5.5 Having a wide range of bidding methods works well for people with learning disabilities

Most schemes have a good range of bidding options and this does not appear to be the main issue that excludes people with learning disabilities though there is room for improvement for some local authorities.

5.6 People with learning disabilities are being excluded from accessing the Choice Based Lettings system fully

This exclusion first and foremost comes from the lack of support from social care professionals, support providers, housing staff and families to access the ordinary housing system. When in the system, there is very little of the intensive support necessary to actually make it happen from bidding and viewing to setting up a home.

5.7 There is a lack of awareness on the part of Choice Based Lettings providers on how to make information accessible to people with learning disabilities

5.8 Banding policies are not easy to understand, not easily available and/or discriminate against many people with learning disabilities

6. Recommendations

6.1 Local authorities and CBL schemes need to get better at making information more accessible and easier to understand

There is clearly a widespread attempt by local authorities to ensure that vulnerable people in general have improved access to Choice Based Lettings. This is mainly concentrated in easy to use application and bidding systems that ensure that as many people as possible can easily access it. There are several good examples of simple and clear language and explanations but virtually no use of diagrams, symbols and photos. All information should contain at least symbols and diagrams.

6.2 Banding, priority and allocation policies need to reflect wider policies of independence and personalisation

More and more people are being encouraged to use individual budgets to arrange and pay for support – this is leading to a move away from options such as residential care and supported housing to more individualised support in ordinary housing. Valuing People Now states a clear delivery programme to increase access to mainstream housing options for people with learning disabilities and this will be difficult to achieve with many local allocation policies.

6.3 All local authorities need to ensure there is help available for people with learning disabilities to apply and bid for housing

The practical side of getting housing needs to be well supported. Many people with learning disabilities need one to one support to bid, support to make choices about which properties to bid for, support to choose the right area etc. There is also all the preparation that goes with moving to a new home from furnishing to registering with a GP and setting up bill payments. Frontline staff in housing and social services

should have a checklist of what they need to cover when dealing with a customer with a learning disabilities including where to signpost for more help. Application forms should ask about disability and whether support is needed to bid.

6.4 Support providers need to understand the Choice Based Lettings system to support people to access it

Providers of housing and support are well placed to help the people they support to move on and should view access to housing as part of their role and understand the system themselves. This should form part of the contracts and service level agreements that local authorities have with providers.

6.5 Housing staff need training to understand people with learning disabilities and be confident to support them

The experiences of the mystery shoppers have ranged from the some what expected lack of eye contact during interviews and directing questions to supporters rather than the individuals through to some clearly discriminatory practices such as telling people to go to Social Services or that they are better off in a shared housing setting. The Office for the Deputy Prime Minister commissioned an evaluation of 6 of the pilot schemes in 2004 (Applicants' Perspectives on Choice Based Lettings). One of their key findings was that "Staff in local housing offices and central choice-based lettings offices played a crucial role in enabling applicants to understand and participate in the new system." "It was important for respondents to be able to access staff that would spend time with them, encourage them to bid, advise them how to bid, and reassure them that their bids were being registered and that they did have a chance of success." The DCLG & CSIP should support /commission a training programme for frontline staff in housing.

6.6 Viewings should not be shared. This is to reflect the extra privacy people with learning disabilities need to view the property

Schemes should stagger viewing times or hold separate viewings so that people with learning disabilities have the opportunity to discuss how the home meets their needs with a supporter or family member without compromising their privacy.

6.7 People with learning disabilities should get good information and advice about housing options when making an application for Choice Based Lettings

There are major limitations in accessing public sector housing and Choice Based Lettings schemes do not necessarily increase supply. They do however create a less dependent and more proactive home seeker and the CBL system should be better utilised to support people into a wider range of housing options such as home ownership, private renting and supported housing. All application forms should ask people if they are interested in other options. All housing staff should be made aware of how people with learning disabilities can buy their own homes.

6.8 Housing and social services need to have joint working protocols to ensure that housing and support provision is co-ordinated

For some people with learning disabilities, improved access and support to use the Choice Based Lettings system alone will not be enough to really enable people to

access the housing system. Housing and Social Services need to work more closely together to co-ordinate the delivery of the housing and support that people need.

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8. Acknowledgements

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