

The Cambridge Sub-regional Choice Based Lettings Scheme Framework Document

Draft 3

30th November 2006

1. Introduction

This document outlines the Cambridge Sub-regional Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme.

The Cambridge Sub-regional CBL scheme is a method of letting social housing across the sub-region. The partner organisations (as detailed in section 3) have agreed to operate one sub-regional CBL scheme. The scheme will operate through a shared IT system, whilst still allowing the partner organisation (PO) to let their homes in accordance with their individual lettings policy. Individual lettings policies are available from local housing offices.

Customers who join the housing register are placed in one of four broad bands of housing need. Most vacant homes are advertised for a set period of time on a regular basis called an advertising cycle. Customers can express an interest in an advertised property they wish to be considered for. Expressions of interest can be made either via the internet, the telephone or in person at a local office.

Once the deadline of the advertising cycle is reached, a shortlist of the customers who have expressed interest is taken from the IT system. The lettings policy is then used to determine who is housed from the shortlist. Feedback on lettings is made available after the homes have been let.

Customers can apply to the scheme via any PO who will process the application and undertake the initial assessment of need. Further assessment and verification may be undertaken by the PO where the customer has a local connection.

A small portion of available homes will not be advertised through the CBL scheme, but let directly to a customer who meets specific criteria. These are known as direct lets. A detailed explanation of who is eligible for a direct let and when one will be made is outlined in the PO's lettings policy.

2. Statement on choice

The POs are fully committed to enabling customers to play a more active role in choosing where they live, whilst continuing to house those in the greatest need, through the sub-regional scheme.

In order to maximise choice and mobility for customers within the sub-region, each PO will advertise a percentage of its properties as available to customers who have a local connection to any one of the seven local authorities.

3. Partner organisations

The following local authorities are participating in the scheme:

- Cambridge City Council
- East Cambridgeshire District Council
- Fenland District Council
- Forest Heath District Council
- Huntingdonshire District Council
- South Cambridgeshire District Council
- St Edmundsbury Borough Council.

East Cambridgeshire DC, Forest Heath DC, Huntingdonshire DC and St Edmundsbury BC have transferred their housing stock to the following housing associations:

- Havebury Housing Partnership – working with St Edmundsbury BC
- Hereward Housing Association – working with East Cambridgeshire DC
- Kings' Forest Housing Association – working with Forest Heath DC
- Luminus Homes – working with Huntingdonshire DC.

Contact details for all POs are available in Appendix 1.

Within each authority there are other local housing associations who will advertise their available homes through the scheme.

4. Governance

The scheme will be subject to a sub-regional partnership agreement and managed by the sub-regional board. All POs will contribute to the ongoing monitoring, development, funding and policy decisions regarding the scheme.

5. Objectives of the scheme

a) To meet the legal requirements for letting social housing as set out in the Housing Act (1996) and Homelessness Act (2002);

All assessments of need and lettings will be made in accordance with the PO's individual lettings policy. POs will ensure their lettings policies comply with all legislative requirements, related legislation, case law, local policies and strategies.

b) Partner Organisations' letting policies will be based on common principles and structure.

The POs will develop their lettings policies in accordance with the principles and structure agreed sub-regionally.

c) To assist customers in the highest assessed need;

All customers will have their housing needs assessed and be placed in a housing needs band according to their circumstances. This will take into account the reasonable preference criteria outlined in the Housing Act (1996), as amended by the Homelessness Act (2002).

Homes let through the scheme will be let to the customer in the highest housing need, who express an interest in the home and meet the property labelling criteria. Waiting time in the housing needs band will be taken into account when shortlisting.

d) Making best use of housing stock

Due to the significant shortage of housing stock across the sub-region, POs will label available homes to indicate who can express an interest in them. Generally, homes let through CBL will be let to the customer who tops the shortlist. In exceptional circumstances, either to protect vulnerable customers or to make best use of the housing stock, POs may need to offer the property to a person lower down the shortlist. Details of this can be found in PO's individual lettings policy.

e) To provide a consistent lettings process across the sub-region, where properties will be let in a fair and transparent way.

There are several ways in which the lettings process across the sub-region will be made consistent, fair and transparent. These include:

- comprehensive feedback on homes let;
- all lettings policies are based on common principles and structure;
- adoption of the same assessment of need and banding structure across the sub-region;
- sub-regional governance;
- clear labelling of properties;
- detailed procedures of how needs are assessed and homes let;
- availability of performance management information;
- a consistent review process.

f) To provide increased choice and information to customers

The scheme will provide customers with more choice and involvement in choosing the home and area in which they wish to live.

Customers will be provided with sufficient information to explain where homes are more likely to become available. This will allow them to make informed choices about where they are more likely to make a successful expression of interest.

g) Supporting vulnerable customers

POs will ensure vulnerable people are able to access the system. The assessment process will highlight customers who may be vulnerable.

A number of measures will be put in place to ensure that vulnerable customers are not disadvantaged, for example through:

- providing appropriate advice and assistance;
- translating key documents;
- providing information in other formats;
- ensuring there is appropriate support for customers using the system;
- partnership working with support agencies and professionals;
- publishing a sub-regional vulnerable persons strategy; and
- undertaking monitoring and regular reviews of the lettings policies.

h) To ensure that customers are not discriminated against, whether directly or indirectly;

Regular equality impact assessments will be carried out on the scheme. It will be monitored and reviewed on a regular basis by the sub-regional board.

i) To provide a wider housing options approach in supporting customers to meet their housing needs;

POs will adopt a wider housing options approach to provide advice and information on alternative housing options. This could include:

- adapting the customer's current home;
- low cost home ownership;
- mutual exchanges;
- rent deposit schemes;
- private sector renting.

j) To improve mobility across the sub-region;

In order to promote mobility across the sub-region, the POs have agreed that 10% of vacancies within existing stock from each PO will be let to anyone with a local connection to any authority in the sub-region. It has also been agreed that 25% of new growth homes will be made available for cross boundary mobility. This will be reviewed regularly by the sub-regional board.

k) To promote social inclusion and help achieve sustainable communities.

Homes may be labelled to ensure that a wide range of customers are able to contribute to the cohesion and sustainability of a community. POs will have area specific policies in place to help achieve this aim.

6. The lettings policy

Each PO will use its own lettings policy to determine who is housed from those who express interest in an available home. The lettings policies have been developed using common principals and the same structure. There will be consistency across the sub-region in:

- how customers access CBL, through using the same IT system across the sub-region;
- application for housing, as one application form will be used in the sub-region;

- the assessment of housing need, through a shared banding system. Once a customer is placed in a housing needs band by one PO, that applies across the whole sub-region;
- the shortlisting process used to select the successful customer;
- the local connection criteria for each authority.

To reflect local conditions, there are some variations in the lettings policies adopted by each PO. These include:

- whether a customer's financial resources will be taken into account;
- making direct lets;
- the size of property a person is able to express an interest in; and
- the decision making and review processes.

For more information, please refer to the lettings policy of the relevant PO.

RSLs who advertise their available homes will use their own lettings policy to determine the successful customer. Advertised homes will be clearly labelled to outline any local policy issues.

7. Choice based lettings

Step 1: Applying for housing

To be able to express interest in available homes, customers must be registered for housing with one of the POs. An application can be made to any PO. Where the customer has a local connection to a specific PO, that organisation will normally undertake any assessment of need. Once the application is registered, the customer will be placed in the appropriate housing needs band, and informed of this.

Step 2: Expressing interest in available homes

Available homes will be advertised through a range of media over the advertising cycle. Customers can make three expressions of interest per advertising cycle. Customers should only express an interest in properties where they meet the criteria outlined on the property label. Full details of how to express an interest in available homes is set out in the scheme user guide.

Customers with support needs will be assisted throughout the process.

Customers will not be considered for any property they are not eligible to express an interest in. This includes:

- if the household's bedroom requirement is different to the number of bedrooms in the property, for example a single person would not be considered for a three-bedroom home;
- where the customer does not meet the criteria of a PO's area specific policy;
- where there are disabled adaptations that the customer does not need;
- where there is an age restriction on the home.

Customers who regularly express an interest in properties they are not eligible for will be contacted and offered support.

Step 3: The shortlisting process

Once the advertising cycle for the property has closed, a shortlist of customers who expressed an interest in the home will be produced from those who met the advertising criteria for the property.

The home will be offered to the customer who expresses an interest in the property who is in the highest housing needs band who meets the advertised criteria. Band A is the highest housing needs band, Band D the lowest.

Where two or more customers who express interest are in the same housing needs band, the offer of accommodation will be made to the customer with the longest applicable date in band. If they also have the same applicable date, the offer will be made to the customer with the earliest date of registration.

8. Sub-regional allocations and assessment of needs

Improving sub-regional mobility is an important part of the scheme. As outlined in the objectives, 10% of each PO's available homes will be advertised as available to any customer with a local connection to any authority in the sub-region. It has also been agreed that 25% of new homes built as part of the 'growth' agenda will be advertised as available to anyone with a local connection criteria anywhere within the sub-region. Customers will be informed of which authority they have a local connection to when they apply for housing.

Where a PO makes an assessment of need and places a customer in one of the four housing needs bands, that is the customer's housing needs band for the entire sub-region. Customers will not be placed in different bands by different POs, even if they have a local connection to more than one authority.

The housing register is open to all customers who are eligible for housing even if they do not have a connection to the sub-region. They are able to express interest in advertised homes, but usually the property will be labelled as available to a customer with a local connection. If there is no local connection criteria required for the property, this will be stated on the property label.

9. Labelling properties

POs will label advertised properties to provide more information on who is eligible to express an interest in the property. Criteria that can be applied when labelling properties include:

a) Local connection: whether the property is only available to households with a local connection with a particular local authority or whether it is open to households with a local connection to any of the local authorities in the sub-region.

b) Transferring tenant: whether the property is only available to existing tenants of the PO.

c) Property size: the number of bedrooms in the property and the size of household that is likely to be offered it.

d) Property type and facilities: the property type, floor level and any other relevant details.

e) Age restrictions: whether there is a minimum age requirement (e.g. sheltered housing).

f) Adapted properties: whether the property has adaptations such as a level access shower instead of a bath.

g) Pets: whether pets are allowed.

h) Area specific policy : to promote sustainable communities, POs may introduce a specific policy in certain areas, which varies from the overall lettings policy of that PO. This could be, for example, where an age restriction is in place, there is a local connection criteria for a specific village or parish or more preference is given to a particular group. Where such a policy is in place, further details can be obtained from the relevant PO.

i) Housing needs band: properties may be labelled for customers within a specific housing needs band.

When a customer does not meet the criteria outlined on the label, they will not be considered for that home.

Re-advertising Properties

If a property has been advertised through CBL, but no eligible expressions of interest have been received, POs may re-advertise the property and relax the labelling criteria. The home will be allocated at the end of the advertising cycle to the customer in highest need who expressed interest in it.

10. Ongoing monitoring and development of the scheme.

To ensure the objectives of the scheme are being met, POs will:

- monitor expressions of interest and lettings outcomes to ensure vulnerable customers are supported;
- monitor lettings policies so that they do not prejudice or discriminate against any individual or group of people;
- make sure that the scheme is responsive, accessible and sensitive to the needs of all;
- publish an annual report on lettings across the sub-region;
- produce an ongoing development plan;
- undertake regular customer satisfaction surveys.

POs will regularly review the policy to ensure it meets its objectives and the scheme complies with legislative changes.

11. Reviews and complaints

Each PO's reviews and complaints procedures are outlined in their individual lettings policy. Reviews or complaints should be directed to the decision making PO.