



Home-Link
Your choice – your home

Home-Link

The Cambridgeshire Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings Scheme

Report On 1st Year Review Of Scheme

(Report Adopted and Approved By The Home-Link Management Board 6th March 2009)

18th March 2009

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1.0 SUMMARY

This document reports on the review of the Home-link Choice Based Lettings (**CBL**) scheme, which covers the Cambridgeshire sub-region. The report includes;

- Background to the review.
- The key recommendations.
- The scope of the review.
- How the review was carried out.
- Details of the responses to consultation.
- Analysis of the responses above.
- Recommendations and conclusion.

This report was presented to and approved by the Home-Link Management Board on the 6th March 2009.

2.0 INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND TO THE REVIEW

2.1 The introduction of CBL by 2010 is one of the Government's high level policy targets and the key elements of any CBL scheme is an allocations policy which addresses choice, balances housing needs and is easily understood.

The Home-Link scheme places applicants to the housing register into one of four broad housing needs bands A, B, C, and D. Band A being the highest priority and Band D the lowest priority.

2.2 The Home-Link CBL scheme went 'live' on 22nd February 2008 and includes the following Partner Organisations (PO's);

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

Fenland D C went 'live' with Home-Link in November 2008 following completion of their Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT) of housing stock. The following is a list of the partners who have now carried out LSVT transfer of their housing stock:

- Havebury Housing Partnership – (St Edmundsbury Borough Council)
- Kings' Forest Housing – (Forest Heath District Council)
- Luminus Homes – (Huntingdonshire District Council.)
- Roddons Housing Association – (Fenland District Council). Roddons H A also manages the housing register on behalf of Fenland D C.
- Sanctuary Hereward Housing Association – (East Cambridgeshire District Council). Sanctuary Hereward H A also manages the housing register on behalf of ECDC.

2.3 The Home-Link scheme is administered and staffed by each of the PO's. The scheme is co-ordinated by the Home-Link manager (HLM), and PO's are represented at monthly Home-Link Operations Group (HLOG) meetings. The Home-Link Management Board (HLMB), which meets on a quarterly basis, govern the scheme.

2.4 A review of the Home-Link CBL scheme was agreed as part of the original project plan and implementation process. The first review was due to have been completed by the end of the first year of operation (February 22nd 2009). Both the HLMB and HLOG support the review. This report details the work undertaken during the review process. A number of appendices are included and referred to within the report offering additional and supporting information.

3.0 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

This report contains 46 recommendations within the main body of the report. However, these have been incorporated into 12 key recommendations across 8 broad areas of the Home-Link Scheme. The key recommendations are detailed within 3.1 to 3.8 below.

(E)SSENTIAL	(I)MPORTANT	(M)ERITS (A)TTENTION
ACTION IS IMPERATIVE TO ENSURE THE OBJECTIVE OF THE RECOMMENDATION IS MET.	REQUIRES SIGNIFICANT ACTION IN ACHIEVING THE OBJECTIVE OF THE RECOMMENDATION	ACTION IS ADVISED TO ENHANCE OR IMPROVE OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY AND BEST PRACTICE

KEY RECOMMENDATION AREA	(E)SSENTIAL	(I)MPORTANT	(M)ERITS (A)TTENTION
3.1 LOCATA SYSTEM	3		
3.2 HOUSING REGISTER ASSESSMENTS	1		1
3.3 COMMUNICATION	1		
3.4 TRAINING			1
3.5 SCHEME MANAGEMENT	1		1
3.6 BENCHMARKING & SERVICE STANDARDS	1		
3.7 HOME-LINK POLICIES	1		
3.8 OTHER KEY RECOMMENDATIONS			1

3.1 Locata System - Key Recommendations

1. **(E)** It is recommended for approval by the HLMB that the current working group continues work on developing the Locata performance management reporting system. Work will include production of a definitive suite of sub-regional system reports and the production of a consistent sub-regional reporting procedure. The working group will also be required to identify the most appropriate method of distributing and disseminating performance management information to partners, stakeholders, the HLOG and the HLMB. This recommendation is linked to the actions at 3.6.
2. **(E)** It is recommended for approval by the HLMB that the HLM produce for its approval, a definitive list of prioritised enhancements to the reporting system with cost implications and a timetable for completion.
3. **(E)** It is recommended for approval by the HLMB that the current list of enhancements to the Locata IT system should be updated by the HLM to include any approved recommendations from this report. HLMB approval is also sought for the Review Sub-Group (RSG) to prioritise the list of enhancements required, examine the cost implications and report back to the HLMB to seek approval.

3.2 Housing Register Assessments - Key Recommendations

4. **(E)** As a matter of best practice it is recommended for approval by the HLMB that a working group is formed to devise a consistent sub-regional housing register procedure document. The document will be approved by the HLMB and should include, but not limited to:
 - a) Timescales for introduction.
 - b) A strategy for identifying more robustly, vulnerable people who may be in priority need, and how their engagement, awareness of, and support in using the scheme can be increased.
 - c) A process for reporting and dealing with register anomalies as well as the introduction of system control checks which will identify, for example, properties on the system which show no let date.
 - d) That an appraisal of the housing register application assessment process is carried out every six months, as carried out by the review, to assess sub-regional consistency.
 - e) That a sub-regional assessment guidelines document is produced. The guidelines should address the inconsistencies found in the sub-regional register as part of the review. The document should also identify a sub-regional approach in dealing with medical assessments.
5. **(MA)** It is recommended for approval by the HLMB that Band D applicants are classified as 'Low Housing Need'. This falls in line with the Strategic Housing Market Assessment guidelines and moves away from the current terms of 'Adequately Housed' and 'Applicant with no identified housing need'.

3.3 Communication - Key Recommendations

6. **(E)** It is recommended for approval by the HLMB that a Sub-Regional Communication Strategy is developed to include, but not limited to:
- Increase engagement with RSL's, Voluntary & Statutory Agencies, and applicants.
 - Increased partnership working with the RSL Forum.
 - Increased awareness and understanding of how the scheme, it's policies and processes operate.
 - Identifying new opportunities for joint working initiatives with all partners agencies and groups including Supporting People to create a more 'joined up' approach to information sharing and communication.
 - A representative from Supporting People to join the HLOG.
 - Increasing awareness of the Home-Link Access Strategy.
 - The introduction of newsletters for applicants and RSL's/Statutory and Voluntary Groups.
 - Production of a development plan for the Home-link website which would lead to;
 - a) A review of content and links.
 - b) Increased awareness and use of the site
 - c) Increased availability of relevant service information to customers linked to the Enhanced Housing Options action plan.
 - d) Ability to produce monitoring information in relation to its use by customers.
 - The production a sub- regional procedure manual.

3.4 Training – Key Recommendations

7. **(MA)** It is recommended for approval by the HLMB that a consistent sub-regional training plan should be developed. As part of this Locata will be requested to update their system training manuals to allow them to be used as part of the training process. Locata system training will be included within the training plan as well as training in the assessment of housing register applications.

3.5 Scheme Management – Key Recommendations

8. **(MA)** It is recommended for approval by the HLMB that the Home-Link framework document is reviewed in six months time following the implementation of other key recommendation. The document should, where appropriate, include any recommendations/actions as a result of this review. The amended document to be approved by the HLMB.
9. **(E)** It is recommended for approval by the HLMB that future HLM administration support requirements be identified by the HLM. Any resource implications from this to be discussed and approved by the HLMB. Work on implementing this recommendation is already underway as part of the Enhanced Housing Options (EHO) development plan. As part of this recommendation the HLM will compile an Operational Guidance document in relation to the HLM post. The manual will outline invoicing, partnership and other administrative procedures.

3.6 Benchmarking And Service Standards – Key Recommendations

10. **(E)** It is recommended for approval by the HLMB that the Benchmarking And Service Standards working group continues its work which will include but not limited to;
- a. Identifying and developing a consistent sub-regional benchmarking strategy document.
 - b. Identifying national benchmarking opportunities.
 - c. Identifying a set of specific and consistent service standard reports which should include;
 - i. Service standard reports for the Locata IT system and produced by them and Sector-uk.
 - d. A recommendation as to how often reporting takes place and where and when the report should be published.

The strategy document to be presented to the HLMB for approval. This recommendation is also linked to the actions at 3.1.

3.7 Home-Link Policies – Key Recommendations

11. **(E)** It is recommended for approval by the HLMB that the Home-Link Access Strategy is reviewed and amended as appropriate following completion of the Recommendation 17 above.

3.8 Other Key Recommendations

12. **(MA)** It is recommended for approval by the HLMB that recommendations made as part of any internal or external inspection carried out on a Home-Link Partners Housing Services (which may impact on the Home-Link scheme) are passed to the HLM. This ensures any identified gaps in service can be addressed whilst examples of best practice can be considered for introduction across the sub-region. Any recommendations identified in this way will be considered first by the HLOG and then placed before the HLMB for approval and inclusion in the HLDP.

4.0 SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

The RSG first met in July 2008 to agree the scope, methodology and timetable of the review. The group met regularly to carry out review-associated tasks, analyse reports and responses from partners, stakeholders and other statutory and voluntary groups. The findings and recommendations of the RSG are included within each section covered by the scope of the review. **NOTE: Recommendations made in one section may also be linked to, and have an impact on, other areas of the review.**

The scope of the review included;

- Locata Housing Services
- Housing Register Anomalies
- Locata Reporting System
- Service user satisfaction.
- Benchmarking & Service Standards
- Sub-regional assessment of housing application process, specifically;
 - Review of the priority banding and criteria
 - Application assessment process
 - Priority banding criteria

4.1 Locata Housing Services

As part of the review a number of operational issues have been raised and discussed with Locata. The issues covered;

- Reporting functions
- System enhancements
- Service standards
- Website statistics
- Aspects of future scheme developments

The results of this part of the review can be found in section 5.1.

4.2 Housing Register Anomalies

To ensure accuracy of any reports generated from the system as part of the review, a number of housing register anomalies were identified. Some examples of the anomalies found included;

- Duplicate applications
- Applications without a banding reason
- Applications placed in the wrong priority band but having a correct band reason.
- Applications placed in the right priority band but having a wrong band reason.
- Incorrect housing list criteria applied e.g. Homeseeker should be Transfer applicant.

Anomalies were passed to individual register-holding partners to correct prior to downloading review reports from the system.

4.3 Locata Performance Management Reporting System

Each housing register-holding partner was asked to generate a list of specific reports that had been identified by the RSG as relevant to the review of the scheme. The reports were only to be downloaded from the Locata system once a number of housing register anomalies had been corrected. Analysis of these reports by the RSG would allow any trends etc to be identified across a number of areas of the Home-Link scheme. The results of this part of the review can be found in section 5.2.

4.4 Service User Satisfaction

As part of the review process we consulted service users seeking their views through a number of questionnaires designed specifically for the different types of service users. Questionnaires were sent to the following groups;

- Housing register applicants (10% of sub-regional register consulted). The results of this can be found in section 5.3.
- A web based questionnaire. The results of this can be found in section 5.4.
- Registered Social Landlords. The results of this can be found in section 5.5.
- Voluntary groups and agencies. The results of this can be found in section 5.6.
- Statutory agencies. The results of this can be found in section 5.6.

4.5 Sub-Regional Assessment of Housing Application Process

Each housing register-holding partner was asked to complete an assessment of eight housing register application scenario's identifying the priority band and reason. This exercise was carried out in order to assess the consistency of the sub-region assessment process.

4.6 Sub-Regional Housing Register

The sub-regional housing register was examined as part of the analysis of the reports taken from the Locata performance management data (see 4.3). The task of the RSG in analysing the data was to identify any positive or negative trends within the reports across priority bands A, B and C, which could be addressed through recommendations of specific actions.

4.7 Priority Banding Criteria

The RSG examined the banding system and criteria used by the Home-link scheme to prioritise applicants to the housing register. The results of this examination can be seen at 5.9.

5.0 CONSULTATION, ANALYSIS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Locata Housing Services (LHS)

Based on the use of the system so far by partners the RSG have raised a number of issues with LHS about the IT system. Issues raised are based on feedback from staff, from issues raised via the Sector-UK support site as well as emails from partners sent to the HLM.

The main area's covered included;

- The Locata IT system in general
- The reporting functions
- The search facilities
- Service standards

FINDINGS

LHS were very responsive and positive to the list of new enhancements suggested to them. These enhancements will be integrated within the current list and form part of the future IT development plan.

The RSG approached LHS about service standards in relation to the IT system. These included;

- Welcome Packs
 - Time taken to send out from point of request
- Online Applications
 - The number of uncompleted applications which remain on the system each month
- System downtime
- Website statistics
 - Most visited pages
 - No of 'unique' visitors to the site
- Issues raised with the Sector-UK support site
 - Trends in issues raised may need to be followed up by;

- Enhancements to the system
- Changes in procedures or processes

LHS are happy to produce any of the above reports or others yet to be identified. Locata informed the RSG that we were the first Locata scheme to have requested this information. This confirms that we continue to lead the way in this area and that Locata are happy to support us in this.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The HLM to set up a working sub-group to identify the specific service standard reports required and how often these should be reported. Web analysts from one of the Home-link partners could assist the sub-group group were appropriate.

Other recommendations from this part of the review are included in other sections of this report.

5.2 Housing Register Anomalies & Locata Performance Management Reporting System

Having corrected the housing register anomalies (see 4.2), the following reports were taken from the system by each register-holding partner. These were passed to the HLM for collation and production of a sub-regional report that was later analysed by the RSG.

Housing Register

1. Number of applicants on the register by band and band reason.
2. Number of transfer applicants on the register by band and band reason.
3. Number of homeseekers on the register by band and band reason.
4. Number of applicants on the register by ethnicity.
5. Number of applicants on the register by age.
6. Number of applicants on the register by vulnerability.

Properties/Lets;

7. Offered but are still outstanding (no let date).
8. Advertised but have attracted no bids.
9. Number of applicants bypassed on a shortlist by reason.
10. Let direct and the reason for the let.
11. Let by size, type, ethnicity and age.
12. Lets made to transfers applicants.
13. Advertised by mobility level, size and type.
14. Advertised on more than on occasion.

Bids;

15. Number made on all properties advertised by size and type.
16. Number and method of bidding on all advertised properties.
17. Number of bids made by applicants by band.
18. Number of applicants on the register who have never bid, by;
 - a. Band
 - b. Band reason.
19. Applicants bidding by age, ethnicity and vulnerability.

FINDINGS

In generating the above reports, the register holding partners identified a number of gaps in the performance management reporting system. Some reports were more difficult than others to extract and in some cases reports could not be generated at all. This was, and still remains, a real concern for PO's. It was also interesting to note the level of inconsistent formatting of the reports when presented to the HLM. This led to further work by the HLM in transferring the information into a consistent format for presenting to the RSG for analysing..

Significant differences were found between partners across the sub-region in

- Number of applicants in each band.

- Reason for being in that band.

Gaps in information missing from the system were also highlighted, for example;

- 'Let' dates missing.

A lack of accessible standard reports in the back office was also noted as was a sub-regional variance in applicants method of bidding;

- Less bids were made via the website in the East Cambs area than the sub-regional average.
- More bids by coupon were made in the East Cambs area than sub-regional average.
- Less bids made by coupon in Forest Heath area than sub-regional average.
- Less bids made by staff in Hunts DC area than sub-regional average.

The level of non-bidding applicants by partner as a percentage of their own registers shows large variances within each band. Sub-regionally, 73.46% of registered 'live' applicants had not placed a bid when the information was taken from the system in October 2008, as at January 2009, the figure was 69.50%.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Production of a definitive suite of system reports required by the sub-region which should also include;
 - a. Sub-regional mobility reports
 - b. Mutual Exchange (MX) system
 - c. Suite of reports specific to Option 1 RSL's
2. The data warehouse, as an additional option for performance management reporting, should continue to be pursued.
3. The production of a consistent sub regional reporting procedure should be taken forward.
4. Identify the most appropriate method of distributing and disseminating performance management information to partners, stakeholders, HLOG and HLMB.
5. Enhancements to the Locata I.T. system should be prioritised and approved by the HLOG and HLMB with the aim of completion as soon as possible.
6. HLM to identify a list of system checks to be carried out by register holding partners. For example, properties on the system which still show no let date.
7. Request that Locata update their system training manuals and re-circulate.
8. Locata I.T. system training to be included within the Home-Link sub-regional training plan and should specifically include;
 - a. Reporting
 - b. Shortlisting
 - c. Property wizard
 - d. Application assessment training.
 - e. Refresher training for new partners and their staff.

5.3 Questionnaire Sent To Housing Register Applicants

The questionnaire was sent to 2,312 customers (10.51% of the sub-regional register). A total of 364 questionnaires were returned which equates to a 15.74% response rate. This low return rate needs to be considered when analysing the information in **APPENDIX 1** and should help to keep in perspective some of the figures and comments referred to in that appendix. Only 37 questionnaires were returned as undelivered. Finally, Fenland D C did not take part in this exercise having only gone 'live' with the scheme in mid-November, 2008.

FINDINGS

Those who responded to the questionnaire understood how the Home-Link scheme worked, had sufficient scheme information, and knew where to get a copy of the Home-Link magazine. However, 67 (18.41% of respondents) had not placed a bid on a property because they had difficulty in understanding or using the scheme. Although 178 (48.90% of respondents) had never placed a bid through choice, this was probably due to them being in low priority or waiting for a property to become available in a particular area. Respondents liked the ease of use, transparency and choice the scheme

offered as well as the greater geographical area now available to them.

As a method of bidding, the website remains the most popular although other methods remain important to other applicants. Some respondents stated;

- There should be more properties available.
- Thought the system was complicated
- Felt there was lack of feedback.

Please see **APPENDIX 1** for the full analysis of this questionnaire.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. HLM to investigate the introduction of a Customer newsletter.
2. HLOG to consider further options for communicating information with those applicants who do not use the website and a raising of the levels of awareness of the scheme generally.

5.4 Website Questionnaire

During the first year of operation, questions regarding the scheme have been placed on the Web site on a regular basis. This has been a useful exercise in interacting with service users and is available to any partner who would like feedback on any issue particular to them.

Questions are posted just as a bidding cycle begins and they remain in place until a new question is posted at the beginning of the next cycle. The average number of sub-regional website bids per cycle now stands at 4,500.

A Selection Of Questions & Responses

The figure in brackets is the percentage of the total number of respondents to that particular question.

1. Do you understand how the scheme works?

Question posted in May 2008 when 347 applicants responded.

YES 313 (90.20%) NO 34 (9.80%)

Question posted again in November 2008 when 626 applicants responded.

YES 551 (88.02%) NO 75 (11.98%)

Understanding of how the scheme works remains positively high and following the review it is hoped to increase this figure by developing more positive ways of communicating with customers.

2. Would you like to see privately rented homes, that are available to rent, advertised on the Home-Link website?

Question posted in June 2008 when 833 applicants responded.

YES 586 (70.35%) NO 247 (29.65%)

The question was raised in order to gain some insight on whether or not customers would find access to private rented accommodation a useful and additional option through Home-link. Inclusion of this type of accommodation forms part of the longer term Home-Link and EHO Development Plan and is clearly something customers would like to be made available to them.

3. Do you find the Home-Link website easy to use?

Question posted in May 2008 when 1110 applicants responded.

YES 1003 (90.36%) NO 106 (9.55%)

Question posted again in August 2008 when 671 applicants responded.

YES 626 (93.29%) NO 45 (6.71%)

It is pleasing to see such a positive response to this question, particularly as it is planned to develop the website further. This form of consultation has been used to good effect in seeking the views of customers on how they would like to see the website developed.

4. If you are aged 60+ OR, under 60 and registered disabled, would you consider a 1 or 2 bedroom sheltered property if this led to you being housed more quickly?

Question posted in July 2008 when 286 applicants responded.

YES 115 (40.21%) NO 171 (59.79%)

There are quite a number of sheltered units available across the sub-region so this was a relevant question to ask customers. This response raised a number of additional questions for consideration by the HLOG and HLMB, e.g.;

- Should we be more proactive in identifying on the system those who would positively consider moving to sheltered accommodation?
- Are we using the Locata system to best effect to do this?

5. Home-Link is approaching the end of its first year of operation. Overall how would you rate the Home-Link scheme?

Question posted in January 2009 when 850 applicants responded.

Poor 254 (29.88%)

Below Average 99 (11.65%)

Average 232 (27.29%)

Good 206 (24.24%)

Excellent 59 (6.94%)

The above figures were correct at the 21st January.

- 194 applicants (31.18%) rated the scheme as Good or Excellent.
- 173 applicants (27.29%) rated the scheme as Average
- 254 applicants (41.53%) rated Home-Link as Poor to Below Average.

A high proportion of those who rated the scheme as Poor or below Average left comments indicating they were in Band C or D. Consequently their high expectations of being housed under this new allocations scheme are not being met. This appears to have led to feelings of dissatisfaction with the service.

FINDINGS

The Home-Link website has been an excellent channel of communication with applicants. However it could be used to greater effect in other ways, for example, using the questionnaire to test out the views of applicants on future developments of the Home-Link system, procedures or assessment process. It could also be used to 'test out' sub-regional development initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. HLOG to be tasked with Identifying options to increase the wider use of the website.
2. HLM to develop a separate development plan for the website which should include a timetable of updating hyper-links, downloadable documents, checks on content etc.
3. Website to be developed further as part of the Enhanced Housing Options (EHO) scheme to make information/signposting available as appropriate to the EHO development plan
4. Introduction of a Customer newsletter to increase information about other housing options and other Home-Link related issues.

5.5 RSL's Questionnaire

50 questionnaires were sent to both Option 1 and Option 2 RSL partners who have used the scheme since going 'live'. As part of this exercise RSL's were asked to identify any improved performance in void times as a result of the introduction of a CBL system.

FINDINGS

Only 4 questionnaires were returned equating to a response rate of just 8% of the total sent out. This low return rate has made it virtually impossible to reach any statistically supported conclusions. Forms were returned by;

- Hundred Houses (Option 2 RSL)
- King Street (Option 2 RSL)

- Havebury Housing (Option 1 RSL)
- Riverside Group (Option 1 RSL)

Three of the above RSL's rated the scheme as good/excellent and one rated the scheme as average. All the above RSL's report that the system had led to better partnership working and requested further training on many aspects of the system including the MX system, shortlisting and the property wizard. Two of the RSL's who responded indicated they had seen an improvement in void times. King Street had seen previously hard to let Almshouses now being turned around in 5 days. Riverside Housing indicated their void time had improved by an average of 5 days; this could be equated to a weeks rent. Please see **Appendix 2** for the full analysis of this questionnaire.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. HLOG to set up a joint working sub-group to engage with the RSL Forum on identifying strategies designed to increase engagement with the scheme.
2. Further monitoring of the levels of engagement should be carried out in six months time to assess any change in engagement following implementation of these recommendations.
3. Introduction of regular Sub-regional newsletter, to include Sheltered Housing availability. To be distributed via web site, and e-mailed to all interested parties. Applies to voluntary and statutory groups with each partner providing an up to date list of agencies they would like to receive the newsletter.
4. Increased awareness made of the HL Access strategy.

5.6 Voluntary & Statutory Groups Questionnaire

In total 75 questionnaires were sent out to this group, this included those who had signed up to the Home-Link Access Strategy and those had yet to sign up.

FINDINGS

Again, disappointingly only 10 questionnaires were returned equating to a response rate of 13%. Most of the responses came from Cambridge City based organisations. The agencies who did respond and who actively engage with scheme are;

- Supportive of how the scheme works,
- Positive about the choice and transparency of scheme,
- Reported how their particular client groups felt more empowered.

The lack of responses raises concerns that there are still many agencies who are;

- Potentially not aware of the scheme,
- Don't understand the scheme, and therefore,
- Are not supporting their clients to access the scheme.

Comments on how the scheme could be improved focused on procedural matters e.g. how clients would be awarded priority coming out of supported accommodation. All the organisations who responded assist their clients to access the scheme. They do this in a range of settings using a variety of methods to place bids, the most popular methods being by telephone and the website. Please see **Appendix 3** for full analysis of this questionnaire.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A number of sub-regional awareness forums should be held, details and timeframe to be agreed.
2. Assess how well Voluntary and Statutory and other agencies understand the housing application assessment process.
3. Increase information sharing and identify joint working initiatives with Supporting People to create a more 'joined up' approach.
4. Identify ways for increasing awareness of the scheme and communication with voluntary groups and agencies. This may be achieved via a newsletter as recommended earlier.
5. Further monitoring of the levels of engagement should be carried out in six months time to assess any change in engagement following implementation of these recommendations.

5. Increased awareness of the HL Access strategy should be initiated..

5.7 Sub-Regional Assessment Of The Housing Application Process

Eight housing needs scenarios were developed and sent to all register holding partners for completion by their teams. Team members were asked to complete these individually and return them to the HLM. This exercise was not designed to 'trip up' members of staff; it was designed to assess the consistency of the sub-regional housing register application process.

MAIN FINDINGS

21 staff members completed the form sub-regionally which equates to 168 scenarios in total (21x8 scenarios) being completed. Of those 80.36% were assessed correctly. The full results of this exercise can be seen in the appendices, however, the main areas of concern are;

- Potentially there may be 20% of applicants on the register who are incorrectly prioritised in one way or another.
- The possibility of an applicant being incorrectly allocated a home.
- The possibility of an applicant not being allocated a home because they have been given a lower priority than should be the case.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Individual results to be returned to each Lettings Manager so areas of concern can be discussed within each team and addressed via additional training.
2. Additional training in the assessment process to be included within the sub-regional training strategy.
3. Future monitoring of consistency in the application process should be carried out every six months as an aspect of best practice.

5.8 Sub-regional Housing Register

Following consultation with all service users and applicants, in particularly taking account of the;

- Review of the Locata system (see 5.1),
- Responses to the Applicant Paper Questionnaire (see 5.3), and;
- Responses to the Website Questionnaire (see 5.4)

It is recommended that further work around the sub-regional housing register be carried out.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A working sub-group is formed from the HLOG to devise a consistent sub-regional process for reviewing the housing register.
2. Register holding partners to agree a timescale for the review of registers.
3. In reviewing housing registers (and noting the inconsistencies at 4.2) partners should examine in particular the following groups;
 - a. Urgent Transfer cases (Band A Applicants)
 - b. Non-bidding statutorily homeless cases (Band A +3months)
 - c. Urgent medical needs (Band A Applicants)
 - d. Current supported housing residents (Band A Applicants)
 - e. High medical needs (Band B Applicants)
 - f. Housing conditions (Band C Applicants)
4. Identify consistent sub-regional approach to dealing with non-bidding applicants.
5. Identify consistent sub-regional approach to awarding Homeless Prevention priority.
6. Recommend that band D applicants are known as 'Low Housing Need'. This will fall in line with the Strategic Housing Market Assessment guidelines and move away from the following criteria;
 - a. Adequately housed, or
 - b. Applicant with no identified housing need.
 - c. **Actions** – change to Locata system back office fields and reporting functions.

7. That a sub-regional housing register anomalies check is carried out at regular intervals and distributed to partners for correction.
8. That current medical procedures are re-evaluated in light of reports drawn from the housing register.

5.9 Priority Banding Criteria

As a group, the RSG felt these were correct and had not, to date, had any significant impact on any particular group of applicants other than 'Rough Sleepers'. Rough sleepers had originally been placed in Band C along with applicants with a roof over their head and sharing facilities. This issue had been brought before the HLMB in November 2008 with a recommendation that 'confirmed' rough sleepers should be given a higher priority and placed into Band B. The HLMB agreed with, and approved the change in priority. Local Authority partners should ensure they include this change when revising lettings policies.

As part of the consultation process, the Supporting People team raised the issue about the move on mechanism from supported accommodation. However, on review it was felt that the banding system already and adequately supported this through register holding partners ability to award Band A priority under the move on from supported accommodation criteria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That each LA partner ensures that the supported accommodation providers are aware of how the referral system works in their local area so that supported residents are prioritised correctly when ready to move on to more independent living.

5.10 Benchmarking & Service Standards

FINDINGS

Benchmarking the Home-Link scheme against other schemes at a similar stage of development has been difficult and requires further work. This is an area that needs to be developed via use of established benchmarking tools e.g. Housemark, as well as other options e.g. Locata National Users Group. The RSG recognises that this should become a priority over the next year if we are to accurately measure our performance against other schemes.

The above being the case, benchmarking could still take place within our own scheme, and again, the RSG recognises that this is another area of work to be prioritised over the coming months. The group believe that it is still too early to draw any real conclusions around benchmarking, as there is still insufficient data available to make any measurable comparison. However, with changes to the reporting system being recommended as part of the review, improvements in benchmarking will become evident. As a priority, the RSG is particularly keen to benchmark the area of homeless applicants, identifying trends and comparing;

- The number of homeless acceptances in the first 6 months of 2008/09 and compare this to the same period 2007/8
- The number of homeless applicants in 'Temporary Accommodation' over same periods
- The average length of time in 'Temporary Accommodation' over same periods.
- The size and type of properties let to those moving from TA in the same quarter.

In relation to void times, the Locata system is not currently able to accurately identify **all** void time as some of this sits outside the Home-Link system. However, some identified enhancements to the IT system could make this achievable and more accurately reportable.

During the review, the RSG identified gaps in the mechanisms for the reporting and measurement of service standards via the performance management system. These will be addressed through the recommendations made in relation to that area of the Locata system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That a sub-regional benchmarking strategy is developed, and
2. Access to more national benchmarking opportunities identified.
3. Continues to identify and produce a set of sub-regional service standards for publication.

4. Devise a list of required service standards that should be produced by Locata about the IT system, to include;
 - a) Downtime of system
 - b) Time taken to dispatch welcome packs.
 - c) Number and types of issues raised with the support site.
 - d) Website statistics
 - e) Those online applications that remain uncompleted.

5.11 Cross Partner Mobility

To improve sub-regional mobility, a proportion of properties have been advertised on a sub-regional basis. This means that some properties were available to applicants with a local connection to any authority within the sub-region, including the authority area where the property is located. It was agreed as part of the implementation of the scheme that:

- 10% of available properties would be made available to any applicant with a local connection to any authority within the sub-region (known as a sub-regional allocation).
- 25% of properties on large new build schemes would be advertised on a sub-regional basis.

Properties available on a sub-regional basis are advertised in a separate section of the Home-Link property magazine and on the Home-Link website. RSL properties have also been let on a sub-regional basis in the same manner as Local Authority properties, using the lettings policy of the organisation where the property is located.

The system will place properties into the 'sub-regional pot' in one of two ways. First, properties are automatically selected by the Locata system to be advertised, selecting 10% of properties by property size (i.e. 10% of 1, 2 3 and 4 bed properties) and 10% of sheltered properties. Secondly, Local Authorities and Housing Associations can choose specifically to advertise properties on a sub-regional basis. This could be where demand for a particular property is low, for example, sheltered bedsits. If a property is advertised voluntarily on a sub-regional basis it would not count towards the 10% of sub-regional lets.

FINDINGS

At the time of the review it was too early to measure how successful this initiative was as the scheme had been live for a little over six months. From the cross partner mobility reports generated, partners are clearly using the system to good effect both automatically and voluntarily. Automatically, the 'All Partner' level of cross-partner properties was 9% and the voluntary figure was 10%. Both these figures are in line with expectations. The RSG found the Cross partner reporting function slightly complex and felt this could be improved and enhanced to offer more accurate performance management information. This can be addressed via the recommendations to improve the overall performance management reporting system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Improvements to the cross-partner reporting be included as part of the overall enhancements to the Locata performance management reporting system see 5.2.

6.0 OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Other recommendations have been specifically identified which do not fall into any of the previous areas covered by the review. These are as follows;

1. The HLM to amend /update the HLDP with recommendations from review report prioritised and approved by the HLMB.
2. The HLM to amend /update the HLDP with recommendations from other partners own internal and external inspections as appropriate. This will ensure the HLDP takes account of identified gaps in service and allows any examples of best practice to be highlighted for use across the sub-region. Any recommendations identified in this way to be approved by the HLMB before inclusion in the HLDP.
3. Integrate into the HLDP any approved actions required from the EHO project.
4. HLM to produce a draft terms of reference for sub-group working which will act as a consistent guide for future sub-groups.

7.0 CONCLUSION

The first review of the Home-Link CBL scheme has shown that many service users believe the scheme has been successful and is a much better way of allocating homes. Service users understand how the scheme works and suggested ways in which the system could be improved. When asked about specific developments to the scheme e.g. private rented sector homes being advertised, service users expressed their support for this. They also found the scheme easy to access with the vast majority using the website to place a bid whilst others interact with the scheme in other ways. The views of those housed through the scheme were not included in this particular review. At the time it was being conducted, there was insufficient measurable information available to offer a reliable and accurate contribution. However, this will be addressed in future reviews. However, the review has highlighted some areas for improvement and these can be addressed via the recommendations contained within this report.

The main areas identified for improvement include;

- Performance reporting.
- Enhancements to the IT system and website.
- Increased levels of engagement.
- Reduced levels of non-bidding applicants, particularly in the higher priority bands.
- More consistent sub-regional procedures, checks and controls.
- The introduction of more robust benchmarking and service standards
- The development of a sub-regional training plan.

The fact that these areas have been identified for improvement should not be viewed from a negative aspect. The Home-Link CBL scheme continues to lead the way in service development and those areas identified for improvement will add to the positive reputation the scheme enjoys nationally. The HLM continues to receive requests from other schemes seeking best practice guidance as well as other general information. Locata and Sector-UK, for their part, both continue to be positive and supportive partners in the continued development of the Home-Link CBL scheme.

ADVISORY NOTE:

Partners are advised to ensure they have an Equality Impact Assessment in place to cover their lettings function and are able to measure their lettings performance against the EIA and local area statistics. Any anomalies found from carrying out this task should be referred to the HLM, as these may have to be addressed and included when the Home-link Access Strategy is reviewed.

Planned service development include;

- Implementation (Spring 2009) of a homelessness module as part of the development of the Locata 'back-office'. This will allow the scheme to offer a more 'joined up' service in the area of housing advice and homelessness. The module will also contribute to the EHO initiative, see below.
- The Home-Link scheme will also form part of the initial development work of a wider 'EHO' approach following a successful grant-funding bid to Communities & Local Government by the Cambridge Regional Housing Board. It is anticipated this work will begin in late Spring 2009.

The HLOG requests the HLMB adopt this report and approve the recommendations contained within it.

8.0 APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Housing Register Applicants - Questionnaire Response Analysis

Appendix 2 - RSL Questionnaire Responses Analysis

Appendix 3 - Review Questionnaire Results For Statutory & Voluntary Agencies

Appendix 4 - Sub-Regional Assessment Of The Housing Application Assessment Process

Appendix 5 - A Selection Of Home-Link Statistics Used As Part Of The Review Process

Andy Glaves, (Home-Link Sub-Regional Manager)
18th March 2009



Housing Register Applicants Questionnaire
Responses Analysis

December 2008

It is important when considering the analysis of the information below that due regard is paid to the small number of respondents to the questionnaire. Percentage figures in **bold** are in relation to the total live number of applicants on the housing register.

There were 22,0005 live applicants on the sub-regional housing register at the time the questionnaire was sent out, of which, 15,782 (**72%**) have never bid. Questionnaires were sent to 2,312 customers **10.51%** and 364 questionnaires were returned, a 16% (**1.65%**) return rate. Fenland did not take part in this questionnaire as they had only just gone live with the scheme.

Main Points:

- Some respondents lacked an awareness and understanding of how the scheme works.
- On a scale of 5 (Excellent) To 1 (Poor), respondents rated the scheme overall as;
 - 5 = 16.67% (**0.23%**)
 - 4 = 22.88% (**0.32%**)
 - 3 = 25.49% (**0.35%**)
 - 2 = 15.36% (**0.21%**)
 - 1 = 19.61% (**0.27%**)
- A number of respondents indicated they require support to access the scheme.
- Applicants who understood the scheme like it because it is easy to use, transparent and gives greater choice than before.

Response:

The survey illustrated;

- 79% (**1.30%**) of respondents understand how the scheme works.
- 73% (**1.21%**) report they have enough information to allow them to use the scheme.
- 72% (**1.19%**) know where/how to obtain a copy of property magazine or find out what properties are available.
- 46% (**0.76%**) knew they could subscribe to the property magazine for a fee.
- 18% (**0.30%**) of respondents state they have never bid because they have difficulty in understanding or using the scheme. If that figure was true of the total live sub-regional register it would equate to 3962 applicants.
 - Of the 18% above who did not bid because of difficulties understanding and using the scheme.
 - 12% (**0.04%**) had difficulties accessing the scheme due to lack of computer facilities, unable to get/afford magazine.
 - 8% (**0.02%**) need support to access the scheme. 47% (**0.77%**) of all respondents stated they did not have support in using Home-Link.
 - 5% (**0.01%**) were not aware of Home-Link

Although these figures make positive reading, steps should be taken as part of the recommendations of the review to increase information and awareness of the Home-Link scheme.

What did respondents like most about the scheme?

- Top responses – Ease of use, Transparency of the scheme, Choice – not only of property but the increase in geographical area.

What did respondents like least about the scheme?

- Top responses – Not enough houses, complicated system, lack of feedback, don't like the system, unfair process, Band C & D disadvantaged.

Overall rating of the scheme.

Good/Excellent – 40% (**0.55%**)

Average – 25% (**0.35%**)

Poor – 35% (**0.49%**)



Home-Link

Your choice – your home

RSL Questionnaires Analysis

December 2008

Forms were sent out to all RSL's both Option 1 & 2 who have used the scheme since going 'live'. Only 4 forms were returned, this equals an 8% return rate. Unable able to make any statistically supported conclusions.

Forms were returned by;

- Hundred Houses (2)
- King Street (2)
- Havebury Housing (1)
- Riverside Group (1)

Issues raised:

- Overall respondents rate the scheme as good/excellent - 3 responses or average - 1 response.
- Respondents report the system has led to better partnership working.
- Respondents would like more training on mutual exchanges, shortlisting, group adverts.
- Can the system filter out ineligible bidders better? For example where there are s106 local connection restrictions.

Home-Link

Your choice – your home



Statutory & Voluntary Agencies

Review Questionnaire Analysis

November 2008

Main Conclusions:

Those agencies that are actively engaged with scheme are supportive of how the scheme works and are positive about the choice and transparency of scheme and how applicants have become empowered. The lack of responses raises concerns that many other agencies are not aware, don't understand the scheme and are not supporting their clients access the scheme.

- 75 forms sent out 10 returned. Equals 13% return rate. 8 of the returns are from Cambridge city based organisations the other 2 from Hunts.
- The majority of respondents (90%) understand and are confident in supporting their clients access the scheme and are not requesting further training. Does the lack of responses, particularly from other than Cambridge city mean that other agencies are not aware, don't understand the scheme and are not supporting their clients access the scheme?
- All respondents assist clients access the scheme, in a range of settings and using a variety of methods to place bids (via telephone and Web being the most popular).
- 80% of respondents are aware of the Home-Link Access Strategy even if not formally signed up to it.
- 60% display Home-Link information in their offices, whilst 50% have computer access to clients in their offices.
- Respondents rate the scheme as good/excellent 80% or average 20%. Aspects of scheme that received general support as working well are: Choice, transparency and the empowerment of applicants.
- Comments on how the scheme could be improved focused on procedural matters such as how a client should be awarded priority coming out of supported accommodation.



Home-Link

Your choice – your home

Sub-Regional Assessment Of The Housing Application Assessment Process

December 2008

These are the results of an appraisal of how consistent the sub-regional assessment of housing applications is being carried out.

This is the sub-regional result only; the individual partner results have been fed back to their lettings teams so that any gaps in training and/or knowledge can be addressed. Although the common assessment policy is still in its infancy the results of this exercise proved less than satisfactory.

Another area of the review has examined the inconsistencies between partners of the numbers of applicants in the different priority bands and the reasons for being placed into that band. Some of those inconsistencies are as a result of the historical data transferred across to the new housing register when the scheme went live. However, the results of this exercise *may* also be an ongoing contributory factor to that situation.

	TOTALS
Total Forms Returned	21
Total Scenarios Completed	168
Scenarios Completed Correctly	135
Scenarios Completed Correctly As A % Of Total Completed	80.32%
Scenario Correctly Banded But Given Wrong Banding Reason	8
Scenario Correctly Banded But Given Wrong Banding Reason As % Of Total Completed	4.76%
Scenario Placed In Totally Wrong Band	22
Scenario Placed In Totally Wrong Band As % Of Total Completed	13.10%
Scenario Incorrectly Banded But Given Correct Banding Reason	1
Scenario Incorrectly Banded But Given Correct Banding Reason As % Of Total Responses	0.60%

Areas Of Concern

- Potentially there may be nearly 20% of applicants on the register who are incorrectly prioritised in one way or another.
- The possibility of an applicant being incorrectly allocated a home.
- The possibility of an applicant not being allocated a home because they have been given a lower priority than should be the case.

A number of recommendations to reduce the risk of the above taking place will be included in the review and on approval from the HLMB be included in the post review Home-Link Development Plan.



Home-Link

Your choice – your home

A Selection Of Home-Link Statistics Used As Part Of The Review Process

October 2008

Sub-Regional Housing Register By Band & Area

	Band A	Band B	Band C	Band D	Total	TOTAL As % Of S/R Register
Hunts D C	123	397	1218	860	2598	12.06%
Cambs C C	350	521	2908	2505	6284	29.18%
South Cambs D C	189	313	1749	1809	4060	18.85%
East Cambs D C	48	154	864	638	1704	7.91%
St Edmundsbury B C	136	386	2116	2643	5281	24.52%
Forest Heath D C	24	156	874	556	1610	7.48%
TOTALS	870	1927	9729	9011	21537	
As % Of S/R Register	4.04%	8.95%	45.17%	41.84%		

'Transfer' Applicants By Area & Band

	Band A	Band B	Band C	Band D	Total	TOTAL As % Of Partners Register
Hunts D C	30	141	329	185	685	26.37%
Cambs C C	119	251	483	876	1729	27.51%
South Cambs D C	54	83	130	295	562	13.84%
East Cambs D C	13	59	192	154	418	24.53%
St Edmundsbury B C	37	107	264	472	880	16.66%
Forest Heath D C	3	56	156	78	293	18.20%
TOTALS	256	697	1554	2060	4567	
As % Of S/R Register	1.19%	3.24%	7.22%	9.56%	21.21%	

'Homeseeker' Applicants By Area & Band

	Band A	Band B	Band C	Band D	Total	TOTAL As % Of S/R Register
Hunts D C	93	256	889	675	1913	8.83%
Cambs C C	231	270	2425	1629	4555	21.15%
South Cambs D C	135	230	1619	1514	3498	16.24%
East Cambs D C	27	87	644	466	1224	5.68%
St Edmundsbury B C	98	277	1829	2145	4349	20.19%
Forest Heath D C	21	100	718	478	1317	6.12%
TOTALS	605	1220	8124	6907	16856	
As % Of S/R Register	2.81%	5.66%	37.72%	32.07%	78.27%	

Non-Bidding Applicants By Band & Sub-Region

	Band A	Band B	Band C	Band D	Total	TOTAL As % Of Partners Own Register	TOTAL As % Of S/R Register
Hunts D C	43	216	750	666	1675	64.47%	7.78%
Cambs C C	154	288	2103	2182	4727	75.22%	21.95%
South Cambs D C	118	233	1276	1439	3066	75.52%	14.24%
East Cambs D C	6	39	528	447	1020	59.86%	4.47%
St Edmundsbury B C	62	272	1616	2343	4293	81.29%	19.93%
Forest Heath D C	13	87	522	419	1041	64.66%	4.83%
TOTALS	396	1135	6795	7496	15822		
TOTAL As % Of S/R Register	1.84%	5.27%	31.55%	34.81%	73.46%		

Lets By Size & Area

	Studio/ Sheltered	1 Bed	2 Bed	3 Bed	4 Bed	5 Bed	6 Bed	TOTALS
Hunts D C	5	72	119	49	11	0	0	256
* Cambs C C	0	142	105	50	7	3	1	* 307
South Cambs D C	4	58	97	45	1	0	0	205
East Cambs D C	0	68	95	19	1	0	0	183
St Edmundsbury B C	9	77	88	45	3	0	0	222
Forest Heath D C	21	58	85	55	2	0	0	221
TOTALS	39	475	589	263	25	3	1	1394

* = Minor data accuracy problem identified

Lets By Type & Area

	Bedsit	Bungalow	Flat	House	Maisonette	Other	TOTALS
Hunts D C	0	38	102	112	4	0	256
Cambs C C	0	18	248	95	16	0	377
South Cambs D C	0	116	24	65	0	0	205
East Cambs D C	0	78	49	55	0	1	183
St Edmundsbury B C	0	35	106	74	2	5	222
Forest Heath D C	0	45	85	85	5	1	221
TOTALS	0	330	614	486	27	7	1464

Bidding Methods By Area & Sub-Region

	Web	Telephone	Text	Coupon	Staff	TOTALS
Hunts D C	10205	941	282	290	66	11784
Cambs C C	21479	1351	533	708	632	24703
South Cambs D C	10423	921	492	399	679	12914
East Cambs D C	4150	427	167	477	666	5887
St Edmundsbury B C	9294	652	271	245	174	10636
Forest Heath D C	5072	377	146	61	602	6258
TOTALS	60623	4669	1891	2180	2819	72182