



**SOCIAL HOUSING ALLOCATIONS
AND FAMILY NETWORKS**

Rachel Abbott

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Choice-Based Lettings

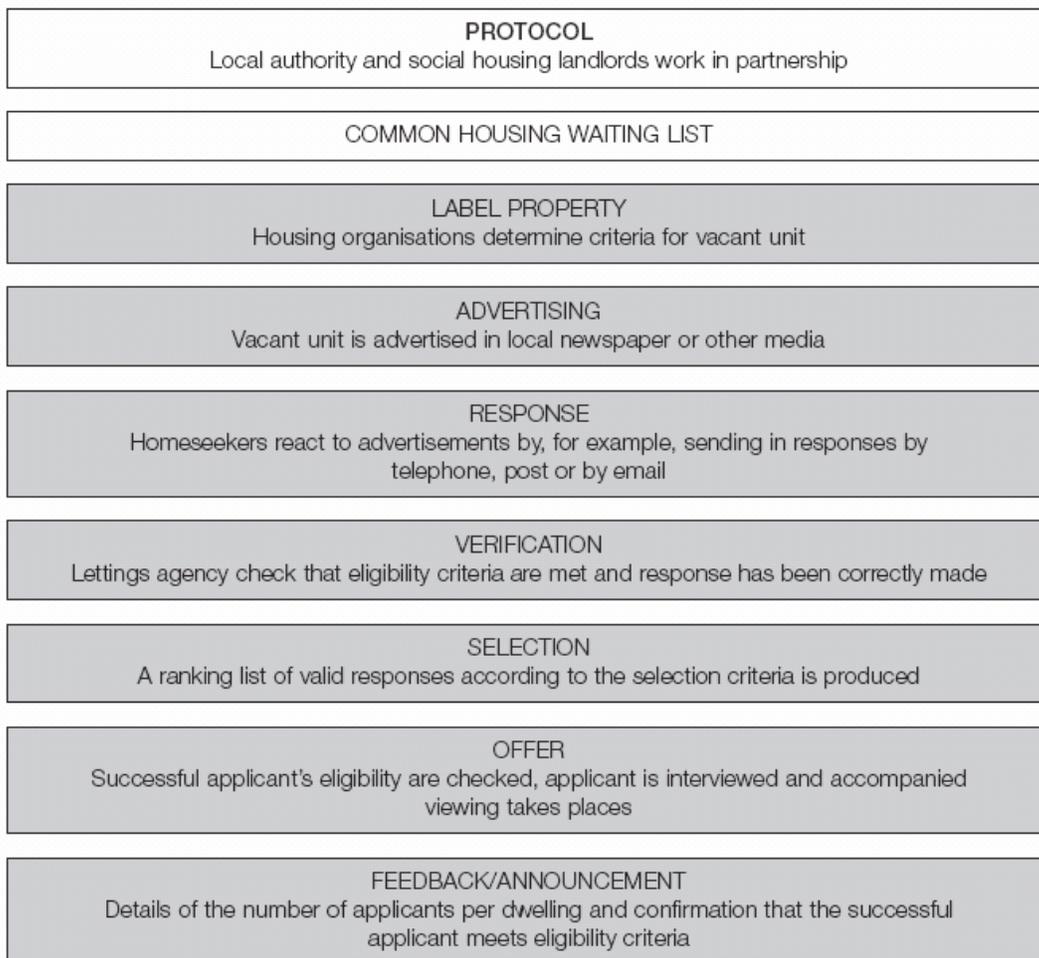
Background

Choice-Based Lettings (CBLs) integrate market mechanisms into previously purely administrative systems. The concept of CBLs originated in The Netherlands in the City of Delft in the late 1980s. The first Choice-Based Lettings schemes in Britain were developed and launched in the late 1990s and early 2000, based on the ‘Delft Model.’ ‘The six principles underpinning a CBL system are:

- initiative taken by the customer;
- market information for the customer;
- property and neighbourhood information for the customer;
- system for vulnerable households;
- eligibility and selection criteria and;
- communications’ (‘How to Choose Choice.’ ODPM, 10/2002: 11, Para. 2.5) (see reference for further explanation).

‘CBL schemes allow people to apply for vacancies which are advertised (preferably openly, e.g. in local press or inter-active website). Applicants can see the full range of available properties and apply for any home to which they are matched. The successful bidder is the one with the highest priority under the scheme’ (‘Fund for the development of regional and sub-regional choice based lettings schemes: Bidding guidance’ ODPM, 07/2005: 3). Properties are often labelled in a way that restricts who can bid for them. There is quite a lot of flexibility under the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) guidance with schemes developed to reflect local circumstances. For example, some schemes have a structure of needs-related bands and prioritize applicants according to waiting time; others retain a system of points but may still divide properties between different bands. However, using a quota system for the different bands often conflicts with the statutory responsibility to house those in priority need ‘and the need to contain budgets for temporary accommodation’ (Marsh et al, 2004: 12).

The following flow chart illustrates a general sequence of how CBLs work.



Source: 'How to Choose Choice.' ODPM, 10/2002: 16, Para. 2.6

CBLs strongly adhere to New Labour thinking, with its central emphasis on rights and responsibilities in 'the construction of moral communities' (McDermont, 2004: 858). ODPM argues that 'giving people a choice and a stake in where they live will lead to more satisfied tenants, who stay longer, pay the rent and look after their homes. This in turn will ensure more stable, viable and inclusive communities' ('Sustainable Communities: Homes for All. A strategy for Choice Based Lettings.' ODPM , 2005). CBLs could also create communities with a wider social mix if those people with lower currency (i.e. less in need) can access less popular social housing.

The system is thought to deliver greater customer satisfaction by virtue of its transparency. For example, feedback is provided on how many people put in a bid for a property, and the points/waiting time/band of the successful applicant. This enables applicants to better understand their chances of getting housing of a particular type/size, and in specific areas: and thus make rational decisions about how best to meet their housing need. ODPM advises that CBLs should work alongside a service which informs applicants on a whole range of ‘housing options,’ not just the socially rented sector, so they can explore other ways of meeting their housing need if they are unlikely to secure a socially-rented tenancy.

The Housing Green Paper published in 2000 highlighted three objectives on allocations:

1. to empower people to make decisions over where they live and exercise choice
2. to create sustainable communities
3. to encourage the effective use of the nation’s housing stock

Following proposals in the Green Paper, the Government supported 27 pilot schemes, involving 43 Local Authorities, from April 2001 to March 2003. The Government’s commitment to the development of CBLs was highlighted by the Homelessness Act 2002, and in that year it also announced that all Local Authorities should have CBLs by 2010 (‘How to Choose Choice’ ODPM, 10/2002: 34).

Paving the way for the development of CBLs, the 2002 Housing Act outlawed the exclusion of applicants from outside the local authority area (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 48). (The Housing Corporation’s regulatory code for Housing Associations/Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) falls in line with ODPM guidance for local housing authorities. RSLs must seek ‘to offer a choice of home, while giving reasonable preference to those in priority need’ (The Housing Corporation, 01/2002: Para. 3.5.1).) The 2002 Act simultaneously encouraged social housing organizations to offer greater choice, while increasing Local Authorities’ duty to house the homeless (by repealing legislation that had restricted homeless people’s rights in the 1996 Housing Act) and to draw up strategies to prevent homelessness. Secondary legislation subsequently expanded the categories of those in priority need (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 30), placing further limitations on how properties should be allocated in a CBL system.

The five year housing plan *Homes for All* – published in January 2005 – commits the Government to reducing the number of households living in insecure temporary accommodation by 50% by 2010. This determination to drive down homelessness exists alongside an equal focus on promoting greater customer choice. Thus in relatively high demand areas, CBLs can deliver real choice to those with high levels of “currency” (‘albeit among a limited range of alternatives’) (Marsh, 2004: 11). Groups who are not in priority need, however, may find it increasingly difficult to quickly find accommodation that meets their needs. Whether those in priority need get the greatest amount of choice when bidding for properties depends on how currency is calculated. For example, in a system where waiting time can make a significant difference to an applicant’s levels of currency (e.g. the Homeseekers Policy in BANES), those who can afford to wait for their ideal home may fare rather better than homeless households with an urgent need to move.

Homes for All sets out the Government's plans for developing CBLs. Aims set out include:

- The Government building on the existing ODPM target – for all Local Authorities to have adopted Choice by 2010 – ‘by extending CBLs to cover, not only local authority and housing association properties, but also low cost home ownership options and properties for rent from private landlords’ (‘Fund for the development of regional and sub-regional choice based lettings schemes: Bidding guidance’ ODPM, 07/2005: 3, Para A.1.).
- CBLs working on a regional and/or sub-regional basis
- Giving people ‘information and advice about all the housing options available to them, not just the properties which are available through CBL. A housing options approach is likely to involve:
 - Promoting a wider range of housing options (e.g. shared ownership, low cost owner occupation, the private rented sector, and mobility schemes);
 - Making more and better information available about other related housing services, e.g. care and repair/staying put initiatives and adaptation services;
 - One-stop shop; advice centres; and
 - Marketing properties and neighbourhoods in low demand areas including targeting new groups of potential customers’ (*ibid*, Para. A.6.).

Thus, with greatly enhanced support and information to help them make informed choices, the onus is now on consumers to resolve their housing problems.

A competitive bidding round for £4m ODPM funds to develop new sub-regional and regional CBL schemes between 2005 and 2008 is now running. ‘The purpose of the regional fund scheme is to support social landlords who are keen to work together to create sub-regional and/or regional CBL schemes’ (*ibid*: Para. A.5.).¹ Sub-regional and regional schemes aim to re-address the imbalance of supply and demand ratios between different boroughs, and ultimately regions as the Government looks toward CBLs eventually operating nationally. The role of social housing is not the same, however, in different regions. For example, new entrants are younger and a higher proportion of tenants are employed in Northern England since the relatively large social housing stock lowers the ‘housing-need threshold’ (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 7; 19). Much higher relative demand in London and the South is highlighted by the high unemployment rate of social tenants compared to elsewhere, despite the overall employment rate running above the national average (*ibid*: 19).

¹ODPM gives the following benefits of larger, cross-local authority schemes: ‘they enable partners to share ICT and advertising costs; for RSLs they cut the costs of being involved in several different schemes; they enable greater regional mobility; they break down artificial boundaries and recognise existing housing and labour markets: and they bring together a larger pool of available housing, giving tenants more choice and helping to ease localised problems of high demand’ (‘Fund for the development of regional and sub-regional choice based lettings schemes: Bidding guidance’ ODPM, 07/2005: 3, Para A.4.).

A CBLs scheme with a points system that does not rotate through different needs-related bands could still create more balanced communities in lower demand areas since those less in need may be able to access less popular or difficult-to-let properties. In the absence of additional policies to combat the residualisation of social housing (e.g. Local Lettings Plans - see below) in areas with an acute housing shortage, however, the spatial polarization of the most disadvantaged and socially excluded groups is likely to continue since the threshold for accessing any social housing will be much higher. New mixed developments are an attempt to combat the residualisation of social housing but existing clusters of social housing, e.g. large estates, need to be tackled.

If there are low and high demand areas (not simply pockets of undesirable housing), those not in priority need may also have to move even further away from their desired location in sub-regional or regional schemes. The demand for mobility between boroughs is unclear but a Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) report on the first district-wide CBLs system, 'Harborough Home Search,' found that homeseekers' search patterns were 'extremely localised, stable and clearly defined.' More than three quarters of applicants hoped to move in either the same ward or the adjacent ward and placed their bids for properties accordingly ('Implementing a choice-based lettings system for social housing tenants.' JRF 123: 01/2003). It is reasonable to assume that most people will not move to areas where there are no jobs but will gravitate towards where the economy is strongest. The potential of regional and national CBLs for easing localized problems of high demand is thus yet to be realised. More research is needed into how area specific applicants are with their preferences and the principal reasons behind bidding decisions.

CBLs Pilots

The pilot programme showed that general perceptions of social housing could change: the launch of CBLs was typically followed by a large increase in people on the housing register. This included working households and households from minority communities (Marsh et al, 2004: 9). Evaluation studies of pilot schemes showed that customers' perceptions of choice, control and the allocation system's transparency increased. Applicants generally felt that unfairness or corruption based on the influence of staff was reduced. However, some people still thought that the system itself was unfair (ODPM Housing Research Summary 207, 2004; Marsh et al, 2004). Following the launch of CBLs, the number of households registered for social housing increased in almost all areas. In some places the increase was dramatic and more working households and minority communities were registering (Marsh et al, 2004: 5).

Qualitative research in six of the areas where CBLs were piloted showed that bidding decisions were most strongly affected by area, and particularly its perceived quality and safety (ODPM Housing Research Summary 207, 2004). Research into applicants' willingness to move between areas also showed, however, that few whole 'areas' are low demand. Low demand appears to be much more focused, e.g. single blocks or a particular area on an estate. 'Only sheltered flats and bedsits emerge consistently as relatively low demand properties' (Marsh et al, 2004: 16).

CBLs have called the ‘safety-net’ function of social housing into question (Fitzpatrick, 2005): many of the pilot schemes were woeful in getting to grips with the needs of vulnerable people. In order for CBLs to provide equal opportunities, there needs to be considerable cross-agency working between various support services. Various strategies have been put in place since the beginning of the pilots, e.g. as part of the Government’s ‘Supporting People’ programme, partnerships between local government, service users, RSLs and support agencies have been developed; many Local Authorities are setting up landlord accreditation schemes to ensure that involving the private-rented sector does not lead to an insecure tenure for vulnerable groups (see Camden section).

Turnover rates

While there is no doubting the transparency of CBLs, there is no real evidence in Britain (as yet) for the ‘social capital’ argument, i.e. that CBLs will reduce tenancy turnover rates and people will be more inclined to invest in their physical and social environment. Reducing tenancy turnover rates would also deplete the number of vacancies available for home-seekers (although cohort effects will push up vacancies in the next 10-15 years: more than a quarter of all council tenants in 2003/04 were aged 70 or over) (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 7). Increasing tenure length is also at odds with new policies that support a transitional view of the socially rented sector. For example, the First Time Buyers Initiative offering homes on a shared equity basis. After four years without any charge on the un-held equity, an escalating charge kicks in, encouraging buyers to move on (‘Homes for All: *A Five Year Plan from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.*’ ODPM, 01/2005: 34).

Regulatory Codes on allocations affecting family networks

The Government appears to subscribe to the view that ‘community relies on proximity to those with whom you have informal links and the length of time you have lived in an area’ (Mumford and Power, 2003: 267; Young and Lemos, 1997) but these notions are not prioritized. For example, ODPM’s code of guidance on the allocation of accommodation allows local authorities to take account of family ties and local connections but both are optional criteria when allocating points. The document states that while reasonable preference should be given to those in priority need, the relevant categories ‘should not be regarded as exclusive. A scheme should be flexible enough to incorporate other considerations. For example, **housing authorities may wish to give sympathetic consideration to the housing needs of extended families**’ (ODPM Allocation of Accommodation Code of guidance for local housing authorities, 11/2002: 24, Para. 2.25).

While the scope for acknowledging people's social needs exists, 'local-lettings plans' (see below), for example, are the exception rather than the rule. Social housing providers are more likely to transfer priority between relatives providing medical support, not social support (e.g. childcare). Welfare can 'not only cover care or support needs, but also other social needs which do not require ongoing care and support' ('Allocation of Accommodation: Code of guidance for local housing authorities,' ODPM ,11/2002: 21, Para. 5.14). Most RSLs follow Government guidelines in their policies. However, the extent to which a Local Authority or RSL takes social needs in account (on welfare grounds) in their policies is up to them (Mizon interview, 30/06/2005).

'Local connection' can be understood differently, e.g. Camden, Cotswold and BANES' different meanings,² but the 2002 Act defines local connection as follows:

'By s.199 of the 1996 Housing Act, broadly speaking a person has a connection with the district of the housing authority if he has a connection because of normal residence there (either current or previous) of his own choice, employment there, **family connections** or special circumstances' (ODPM Allocation of Accommodation Code of guidance for local housing authorities, 11/2002: 23-24: Para. 5.32c).

Many Local Authorities have recently introduced a preference for applicants with a local connection (or increased the priority they will give to applicants with a local connection) to the district as a whole since (following the 2002 Housing Act) households living outside the Local Authority's boundaries can apply for social housing. Local Connection criteria cannot be used to exclude households from accessing social housing, although it can be used to determine relative priorities ('How to Choose Choice.' ODPM, 10/2002: 36). Additional preference for applicants with a local connection to a very specific area, e.g. a village, often applies to small rural communities.

For example, BANES' rural strategy involves only considering transfer applicants currently under-occupying and applicants with a strong local connection to the parish for vacancies in parishes with populations below 3000 inhabitants (Wilk interview, 22/06/2005). In Cotswold, priority is frequently given to applicants with a local connection to a small area within the district in order to sustain the community and maintain some sense of rural continuity.

² The different definitions of Local Connection in Camden and Cotswold are given in the relevant sections. BANES (which operates CBLs with bands and uses points in the same way as Cotswold uses extra waiting time) has recently increased the need score for local connection. Family ties are not mentioned in the Homeseekers CBLs policy. 'Local Connection' includes people who live in the BANES area and applicants with an agreed need to move to BANES because:

- 'A member of the household needs to move to the area to receive intensive care and support from a close relative
- A member of the household is likely to need long term specialist health, care, education or other support services that are only available in the district
- A member of the household has employment or a firm offer of permanent employment in the area' 'Bath and North East Somerset Homeseekers Register.' Housing Services BANES Council, 06/2004: 12, Para. 3.6).

The changing role of Housing Associations

Housing Associations originated as organisations run by volunteers and reliant on charitable funding. Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) or Housing Associations had their own lettings policies but community management also involved providing activities and support mechanisms for tenants, not just rules.

Housing Associations' techniques of governing changed as they ceased to be reliant on housing related grants in the 1960s and 1970s. Funded almost entirely by statutory sources, RSLs' ability to interpret 'housing' widely (e.g. through providing gardens, nurseries and employment schemes) diminished. RSLs instead became key players in urban renewal. The introduction of Housing Action Areas set in motion a wave of developments to regenerate inner cities, enabling RSLs to 'preserve older established communities' (McDermont, 2004: 864).

Risk-free funding mechanisms which were put in place by the 1974 Housing Act charged the Housing Corporation (HC) with promoting and funding the whole range of Housing Associations. Unable to borrow private money or access HC funding, Local Authorities ceased to be influential in decisions regarding the allocation of funds for new developments. While debates in the late 1970s ran on housing need and transparency of decision making, not community, programme agreements between the HC and RSLs 'reflected more the Corporation's perception of (housing) associations' ability to meet delivery targets than local housing needs' (*ibid*: 866).

The 1988 Housing Act transferred the risk of development from public bodies back to RSLs. Now operating in a more competitive environment, the Act led to an increase in large-scale (cost effective) developments and fewer projects within existing communities. Rising homelessness in the 1980s was problematic for Local Authorities, although they regained some of the control in decision making as RSLs bought local authority land at reduced value, provided that the Local Authority could house more homeless households (who increasingly were housed in expensive temporary accommodation) on their waiting lists (*ibid*).

Housing Corporation circular 48/89 required RSLs to give Local Authorities 50% of first and subsequent lettings, and more where the Council had provided cheap land.

Different agreements exist between different local authorities and their RSL partners. Local Authorities get 100% nominations from some RSLs (transfers from these RSLs' properties would have to apply through the council's waiting list), while other RSLs keep up to 50% of their 'true voids'³ for their own transfers, and also to accommodate households with certain characteristics, e.g. Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Households.⁴ RSLs' policies for transfers tends to differ from the Council's lettings policy in which they operate since the Local Authority deals with the statutory homeless whereas RSLs look at people who are already housed. The RSL therefore looks at what applicants are lacking for their need (Baxter Interview, 01/07/2005).

The five year housing plan sets out the different functions of the Local Authority and their RSL partners in the social housing sector. The bidding guidance for the development of regional and sub-regional CBLs funding states that ODPM will not fund RSLs directly but that Local Authorities should 'take the lead in developing partnership schemes – because of their strategic housing role, and their statutory housing allocation and homelessness duties' ('Fund for the development of regional and sub-regional choice based lettings schemes: Bidding guidance' ODPM, 07/2005: E.24.), reiterating the strong preference for the division of strategic and delivery roles between Local Authorities and RSL partners respectively.

Community Lettings Schemes (Local Lettings Plans/Sensitive Lettings)

Community lettings are:

'Social housing allocations policies which operate alongside, or in place of, a consideration of housing need and take account of the potential tenants' contribution to that community in which the vacancy has occurred' ('Community lettings in practice.' JRF Housing Research 171, 03/1996).

The suitability of an estate or block of flats for applicants with particular characteristics can lead to the clustering of particular needs groups. In order to change the social environment by allocating housing to a wider range of household types, it may be necessary to under-occupy properties. Under-occupying in areas with a shortage of larger properties will only be acceptable where there is a strong belief that such a strategy will produce a significant net benefit. The Local Authority usually permits the use of a sensitive lettings policy, which may entail under-occupying, on new developments since they have nomination rights. Households of couples in BANES, for example, were deliberately placed in a 2-3 bedroom properties on a new development of 22 units on Newton Rd, Twerton. Parents with both younger and older children, transfer applicants and some band A (priority need) applicants were also housed on the same development to create a mix (Wilk interview, 28/06/2005).

³ A true void occurs when there is a new vacancy, i.e. the tenant is not transferring.

⁴ Giving priority access to certain groups is set out in an RSLs' constitution which must be approved by the Housing Corporation

Community lettings usually aim to prevent concentrations of deprived people and reduce or prevent anti-social behaviour. This is usually achieved through attempts to promote a wider social mix or by giving preference to households who *want* to live there, including those who can show a local connection. However, the scheme has also been introduced to protect existing stable communities by retaining the status quo ('Community lettings in practice.' JRF Housing Research 171, 03/1996). Community lettings schemes have been used sparingly because of the statutory pressure to give reasonable preference to those in priority need (and drive down numbers in temporary accommodation), and because of the 'limited scope for social landlords to manipulate social balance' (*ibid*). The rehousing manager for Wandsworth (where no community lettings schemes are in operation) told me how the big problem when talking about sustainable communities is that the majority of people on the Council's waiting list do not fall within many of the key categories thought to make up a balanced community, e.g. 75-80% of tenants are benefit dependent; many are unemployed lone parents (Rowen interview, 18/07/05).

Community/local or sensitive lettings grew out of a growing disillusionment with needs-based allocations which were thought to have led to the social exclusion of tenants living in the least popular housing estates. The JRF report *Building for Communities: A study of New Housing Estates* (Page, 1993) criticised RSLs for building large estates and filling them with uniformly poor tenants. The report, advocating a form of social engineering in the building of balanced communities, had far-reaching effects. The Housing Corporation revised its Performance Standards on selection policies in 1997 to say that new lettings should be given to those in greatest housing need 'except where this would lead to unsustainable tenancies or unstable communities' (McDermont, 2003: 869). The government has since embraced the need for RSLs to 'play an effective part in the recreation of local civil societies' (*ibid*: 270). Recent research supports the guidance given in the Page report: a study into factors affecting the popularity of estates in Southwark concluded that one of the elements necessary for a sustainable community was 'lettings policies that take account of the social mix on an estate, not just individual needs' (Niner, 11/1998).

Since the advent of CBLs, housing managers face contending requirements of social mix and customer choice. The adoption of some local-lettings plans alongside providing greater choice for applicants can help them achieve both objectives. More sensitive local allocations policies, however, create new concerns for service providers. For example, favouring existing residents and their families risks discriminating against BME households and does little to address social mix; giving preferential allocations to households with at least one member in employment may have a limited effect on the employment of existing residents and may discriminate against those in greater need of social housing ('New approaches to social housing allocation.' JRF 661, 06/2001).

Different RSLs and Local Authorities have their own policies regarding nominations to community lettings plan areas. For example, the Peabody Trust's community lettings plan aims to house mainly single people and couples without children in housing need who have also been a Trust resident for at least five years. In addition, the RSL may exclude an applicant from being rehoused through a local lettings scheme if they cannot provide a local connection or evidence that they will contribute to the local community through local employment or a need to support an existing tenant (Peabody Trust Lettings Policy, 05/2004: 12-13, Para 3.2 and 3.5-3.7). Ujima Housing Group gives 'key workers or people with a local connection because of family, social or work conditions' as examples of target household types that they seek to house through community lettings schemes (Ujima Housing Group Lettings Policy and Procedure, 07/2004: 5, Para. 19.1).

Management efficiency or Community?

Housing Associations use the rhetoric of community 'to create a space for themselves in the power relations of what we now call social housing provision' (McDermont, 2004: 855). Through the discourse of community, RSLs seem to be increasingly getting into the statutory policy area as regards interpretation.

The role of RSLs in creating balanced communities has converged with reducing their own management problems, engendering some tension between RSLs and Councils. Local Authorities have thus sometimes been cautious when permitting RSLs to operate a community lettings schemes since this is at odds with their statutory responsibility to house those in priority need, because of the exclusionary potential that such policies entail. (RSLs have sometimes challenged Local Authorities' definitions of priority need, e.g. placing families at the top of waiting lists (McDermont, 2004: 865).)

The existence of some tension between RSLs and Local Authorities was voiced in interviews with both the Housing Services Manager for BANES Council and a team-leader from the Local Authority's main RSL partner (to whom the Council's housing stock had been transferred). The RSL and the Local Authority may differ about whether a particular property is suitable for an applicant with certain characteristics. The RSL argued that they do not want to 'set people up to fail' (Baxter Interview, 01/07/2005), i.e. to house someone who will not be able to sustain their tenancy in a particular property. The Local Authority feels that they must be quite firm when RSLs request that a local-lettings plan be put in place, however, since RSLs run their organizations essentially as businesses and so will seek to avoid tenants that might cause them management difficulties (Wilk interview, 28/06/2005).

When CBLs were piloted between 2001 and 2003, RSL partners were normally more concerned than the Local Authority with the scheme's cost and the impact on housing management performance. An evaluation study of pilot schemes commissioned by ODPM showed how RSLs 'are fixated upon void turnaround times, almost to the exclusion of any other consideration' (Marsh et al, 2004: 16). Local Authorities' claim that RSLs will act in their own interest is thus supported by this evaluation study of CBLs pilot schemes.

Case-studies:

Cotswold

Background

In 1997, the Cotswold District Council (CDC) transferred its housing stock, through Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT), to Fosseyway Housing Association mainly to enable additional Government funding to be made available for improvements to the housing stock. CDC retains key housing responsibilities for the statutory duty with respect to homeless households, administration of the housing register⁵ and housing advice all operated under the name HomeView. In addition, CDC has responsibility for providing 'enabling services through which the Council ensures the delivery of housing services and development by a range of housing providers,' and ensuring that housing is safe and suitable for tenants in the private rented sector (Cotswold District Council Housing Strategy 2005-2008, 07/2005: 11).

'Key facts: Social and Economic Factors

- Cotswold District's population increased by 7.3% between 1991 and 2001 (the largest increase in Gloucestershire). Much of this difference is a factor of inward migration because of the attractiveness of the area to live and work.
- Almost 10% of the population in 2001 was over 75 which is predicted to rise
- 98.8% of its population is ethnically white but is decreasing as a proportion
- Employment is currently high but incomes are low with significant a proportion of the population in less well paid work' (*ibid*: 21).

The aging population and low average incomes stand out as factors likely to affect both the supply and type of affordable housing that is required.⁶ The difficulty in meeting the housing needs of rural communities stems from the high prices and demand for homes against limited supply in an area of development constraint. Since 2001 average house prices have risen by 75%. A household would need to be earning over £3,000 (net) per month to be able to afford the mortgage of an average priced entry-level dwelling (*ibid*: 24). All major new developments include a Section 106 planning agreement which is designed to provide new affordable housing to people with a local connection.

⁵ N.B. The 2002 Homeless Act abolished the requirement to maintain a housing register in order to encourage social housing organizations to offer greater choice through their allocations schemes. Most CBLs schemes maintain a register, however, to ensure that reasonable preference is given to households in priority need ('How to Choose Choice.' ODPM, 10/2002: 35-36).

⁶ 'In 2003 and 2004, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published two national research studies ('Can Work Can't Buy') exploring the difficulty of working households, aged 20 to 39, to afford owner occupation. It was based on a survey of Cotswold house prices for two and three bedroom homes (i.e. modest sized family dwellings) compared to local incomes. The ratio of average two/three bedroom house prices to income in Cotswold was 4.80. The findings closely echo those of the Housing Need Assessment 2004' (Cotswold District Council Housing Strategy 2005-2008, 07/2005: 27).

As in many Local Authorities, Right-to-Buy sales (despite a sharp decline in recent years) have accounted for a significant depletion of the affordable housing stock (*ibid*: 24).

The Joint Housing Register (JHR), established in 1997, provides an index of housing demand from groups with different levels of need in the district. All RSLs that provide the JHR agreed to develop a CBLs scheme called HomeView. Fosseway Housing Association provides HomeView (the service for which CDC is responsible) on the CDC's behalf. As was the case following the launch of several CBLs, the number of applicants registering has increased dramatically in Cotswold. Since HomeView began to run CBLs in June 2004, the number of applicants on the JHR/HomeView register has gone up from around 1700 to 3700 (Mizon interview, 30/06/2005).

Choice-Based Lettings

Under HomeView's CBLs scheme, applicants are assessed according to their level of need and are placed within one of three 'bands.' Each registration will be awarded a banding, a registration date and their housing entitlement, e.g. a two-bedroom need. Transfers are subject to the same rules as non-tenants under the HomeView scheme (Cotswold CBL Policy, 06/2004: 8, Para. 11.1).

The following households may express an interest in properties of the sizes shown in the table below:

Household Type	Eligible Size for Expressions of Interest
Single Person or Couple	1/2 bedroom
Parent(s) with 1 child	2/3 bedroom
Parent(s) with 2 children of the same sex	2/3 bedroom
Parent(s) with 2 children of different sexes	3/4 bedroom
Parent(s) with 3 children	3/4 bedroom
Parent(s) with 4 or more children	3/4+ bedrooms

Source: Cotswold CBL Policy, 05/2004: 15, Para. 19.1

Banding depends on the suitability of their existing accommodation and whether an applicant's quality of life improves by moving them from A to B. For example, someone with a serious heart problem is not necessarily gold band if they are already adequately housed in a ground floor flat.

- *Gold band* applicants are those considered to have an urgent need to move. They include: under-occupying applicants; those with a high health priority; homeless applicants in priority need/unintentionally homeless. Gold band homeless applicants are awarded Gold Band for three months after which their case is reviewed. The Gold Band may be extended, a final offer made to the applicant (for a property where they had expressed an interest) or the homeless duty may be discharged and their application assessed according to normal banding criteria (*ibid*: 9-11, Para. 13.2).
- *Silver band* applicants have an identified need to move, e.g. medium health need; non-statutory overcrowded; to fulfil an offer of permanent employment; key worker, but there is not a need to move because of statutory requirements and there is not serious risk to safety, health or well-being (*ibid*: 11, Para. 13.3).
- *Bronze band* applicants do not have an identified housing need or have been demoted from the other bands because of rent arrears or unacceptable behaviour. Bronze band applicants' needs might include those with a low health priority, applicants who are awarded a minor disrepair assessment and applicants whose relationship has broken down but who are still residing in the same property (*ibid*: 12-13, Para. 13.4).

Banding is awarded according to the highest identified need factor. Since CBLs will never cater for everything (there will always be grey areas), extra waiting time is awarded to applicants with multiple needs. The additional time to be awarded for each subsequent factor (after the highest identified need which determines banding), for each household member, will be as follows: Gold need factor, 3 months; Silver need factor, 2 months; and Bronze need factor, 1 month (*ibid*: 13, Para. 15.2).⁷

The example below shows how needs are assessed. Note that banding on welfare grounds is *transferable* between the carer and the person in need of support. In the example, the mother offering care to her elderly parents equates to a silver band need (plus two extra months since the household has an additional second silver band need, i.e. children in a flat and/or without a garden). Thus when banding or extra time are awarded on welfare grounds, they tend to relate to individual needs. Priority is not given to people who wish to move closer to relatives, unless it is on welfare grounds or because a 'local connection' is required.

⁷ If a change in circumstances results in the applicant moving to a higher band, the registration rate will be the date the higher band was awarded. If an applicant is moved to a lower band (due to change in circumstances, unacceptable behaviour or rent arrears, the registration date will remain the same (Cotswold District Council Housing Strategy 2005-2008, 07/2005: 14, Para. 16.2-16.2).

Example:

Household: 2 adults and 1 child. The child is severely disabled, the mother also offers care to her elderly parents and needs to move closer to them to assist with daily living. The family live in a second floor flat without access to a garden. The family applied to HomeView on 1st January 2004.

*Banding: High Medical Need of child = Gold Band
Additional Time: Welfare Need = Silver Band = + 2 months
Children in Flats = Silver Band = + 2 months*

*Banding = Gold (as highest need factor).
Date = 1st January 2004 + 4 months = 1st September 2003*

Source: Cotswold CBL Policy, 05/2004: 13, Para. 15.3

When applicants are sent their band and registration date, they are also given a registration number; details of how to register for a bid; and details of the right to review and appeals procedure (*ibid*: 16, Para. 22.1). RSLs notify HomeView if they have a vacancy which HomeView will then advertise. No single newspaper covers the whole district so properties are advertised in two local newspapers on a weekly basis. CDC and Fosseyway Housing Association keep copies of adverts in their offices and the HomeView website allows applicants to register, view advertised properties and express an interest on line. A photograph of the property and full description is provided in adverts.

Eligibility criteria are specified in each advert. The label may state the eligible band(s) and more specific criteria, e.g. a preference for a local connection. A property may be labeled for a particular household size or type, to ensure that the community remains balanced or mixed (*ibid*: 16, Para. 19.6). Applicants can bid for ONE property each week (by telephone, text or online) and are then short-listed according to:

- Essential criteria
- Preferred criteria
- Band priority
- Registration date

The top applicant is offered the property subject to their eligibility being checked and confirmed by the RSL provider. HomeView previously visited every applicant before they were offered housing but because people were on the list for a long time, and their circumstances often changed, the allocating officer now checks the applicant's details when the offer is made (Mizon interview, 30/06/2005). If the offer is refused or the applicant does not meet the eligibility criteria, the RSL contacts the next applicant on the shortlist.⁸ The applicant is notified of the reason why they were refused, e.g. because of rent arrears.

⁸ N.B. Difficult to let properties may be re-advertised as they are; the banding and eligibility criteria may be relaxed; the property may also be improved in response to refusal reasons; offered as temporary accommodation to a homeless household or; opened up to people who are not on the HomeView register (Cotswold CBL Policy, 05/2004: 23, Para. 36.1). There are little pockets of social housing which people tend not to like but there are not the same problems of spatial polarization as in London (Mizon interview, 30/06/2004).

The example below illustrates how bids are shortlisted:

Example
A 2 Bedroom House is advertised, for Gold and Silver Bands only, stating preference will be given to couples. Seven expressions of interest are received and are shortlisted as follows:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Band</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Essential</i>	<i>Preference</i>
<i>1. Taylor</i>	<i>Gold</i>	<i>10/10/2001</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>Y</i>
<i>2. Brown</i>	<i>Gold</i>	<i>13/12/2002</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>Y</i>
<i>3. Goody</i>	<i>Silver</i>	<i>25/08/2003</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>Y</i>
<i>4. Turner</i>	<i>Gold</i>	<i>16/02/2004</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>5. Jones</i>	<i>Silver</i>	<i>18/11/2003</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>6. Evans</i>	<i>Bronze</i>	<i>20/12/2002</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Y</i>
<i>7. Hart</i>	<i>Bronze</i>	<i>13/05/2003</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>

Source: Cotswold CBL Policy, 05/2004: 20, Para. 29.2

Under the old points system, the HomeView team selected tenants for other RSLs and sent them the nominations. HomeView now generates a list, according to the criteria that has been set, and sends this back to the landlord. (HomeView has no involvement after the deadline for bidding has passed.) Each RSL can decide how to band their own vacancies but under the scheme it is generally accepted that 25% go to gold band, 50% to silver and gold bands and the remaining 25% go to all bands. Under Housing Corporation rules, all RSLs will be advised to give a minimum of 50% of their properties to the local priority where they are operating. Most RSLs give the majority or all of their properties to the HomeView Register but then the RSL lets the properties themselves, with their own policies. An RSL may have their own policy for selecting a tenant if they are responding to a particular problem, e.g. anti-social behaviour on an estate. Properties may be deliberately under-occupied (as in the above example) when the RSL is trying to create a more mixed estate profile and avoid the clustering of families with children.

RSLs do not have to agree their allocation policies with CDC but generally do notify them as a matter of courtesy. This relies upon trust and good working relationships between the RSLs and CDC. All the RSLs operating within the Cotswold District belong to the Cotswold Accommodation Partnership and have signed up to CDC's CBLs scheme. This means they have agreed to allocate their properties in line with the CDC's CBLs policy. However the Council has agreed that when there are issues involving housing related debts and unsociable or unacceptable behaviour they may refer to their own allocation policies. If they bypass an applicant who is top of the automated shortlist for a property being advertised for whatever reason then they have to record why they have been by passed, which is built in to the automated allocation process. The relevant RSL is prevented by the system from moving on to the next applicant until they have done so. This issue can and is monitored by CDC (Mizon interview, 30/06/2005).

The relevant housing officer monitors problems on their 'patch.' The relevant RSL responds to identified problems as a management issue. They may decide to let the property more selectively but changes to the way the property is allocated may not be necessary. It may be more a question of improving the environment, e.g. gardens, fences and communal areas. An RSL estate manager generally deals with problems of anti-social behaviour but Fosseway Housing Association also now has an officer who deals specifically with those sorts of issues. Although there is a partnership between all the RSLs and CDC, issues surrounding housing management on estates are not covered in their meetings. RSLs will talk to each other, however, if there are problems on a site where they both have properties. Two RSLs recently came together and set up a tenants association on an estate which has become known as a 'rough' neighborhood on Bourton-on-the-Water (Mizon interview, 30/06/2005). Two Crime and Disorder groups have also been set up, one in the north and one in the south of the district. These groups involving joint working between the Local Authority, Police, Social Services, some RSLs, education services, representatives from local pubs and Gloucestershire Rural Community Council (which advises local communities on rural issues) have come about in response to problems of anti-social behaviour.

A feedback section is also included in each weekly advert so that applicants are informed about how likely their bid for a property in a particular area and of a particular type is to be successful. (The feedback section gives details of the property and shows the number of applicants who bid, the band and the registration date of the successful applicant.) A member of the HomeView team might also advise an applicant to bid in areas that are unpopular if they want to get housed more quickly.

CDC is one of five Local Authorities and District Councils that comprise the Gloucestershire Strategic Housing Officers group. Cotswold is the only authority to have adopted CBLs but a sub-regional scheme is on the horizon once the other District Councils change their allocations policies.

New developments

Even under CBLs, applicants are asked where they would like to be housed when they fill in the form so that the Local Authority knows where new housing needs to be built. 'The success of recent years of CDC working with RSLs and private developers in securing more affordable housing is now in jeopardy because of reduced levels of investment being released by Government' (Cotswold District Council Housing Strategy 2005-2008, 07/2005: 6). Following the cessation of Local Authority Social Housing Grant on 1 April 2003, which was a significant development, Local Authorities no longer receive reimbursement from the Housing Corporation for the grant the authorities were issuing to RSLs. CDC's "land bank" has also dried up in recent years, thus revenue from selling housing and land to RSLs can no longer be recycled to provide more new affordable housing.

Housing Corporation funding for new developments in the District may also be more limited in the future: there is currently a debate surrounding the sustainability of Cotswold to provide significant numbers of additional homes, compared to principal urban areas and the larger market and coastal towns in the region (*ibid*: 9). (Following the Government's *Sustainable Communities Plan* (02/2003), there is an increasing emphasis regional funding with a requirement that regional agencies work together, e.g. the new fund for the development of regional and sub-regional choice based lettings schemes.)

Local Connection

All major new developments are included in a section 106 agreement which ensures that a proportion of the housing in each new development is perpetually affordable.⁹ This is particularly important now that Local Authority Social Housing Grant has been abolished. There are currently 20-30 such schemes operating in Cotswold. A 'local connection' is included on these new sites¹⁰ and is usually defined in one or more of the following ways:

- A connection through employment/currently working in the parish or surrounding area
- Previous residence of five years or more (sometime in the past)
- **Immediate family, i.e. siblings, parents or grandparents, having lived there for five years or more**
- You or your partner having lived in the parish or surrounding area for the last three years or more

The local-connection criteria may be very specific. For example, following a section 106 planning agreement on a private development in the Stratton area of Cirencester, Raglan Housing Association (the RSL CDC selected to take on the properties kept for affordable housing) gave a local connection to Stratton as essential criteria for allocating housing advertising vacancies. Stratton is part of Cirencester Town, not even a parish on its own (Mizon interview, 30/06/2004).

Key Workers may also be given priority in certain areas but CDC has a fairly loose definition of Key Worker which includes anyone currently in employment which provides a benefit to the local community or the surrounding area. Someone making bricks, for example, may be defined as a key worker because of the benefit that their work provides to the local economy (Hawkins telephone interview, 03/08/2005).

⁹ The Council's definition of 'affordable' includes a proportion of Starter type homes as well as subsidized 'social housing' (Cotswold District Council Housing Strategy 2005-2008, 07/2005: 24).

¹⁰ A local-connection criteria/preference can operate anywhere. In BANES, however, it is only used for rural communities of less than 3000 people. Camden has a very narrow definition of local connection which takes no account of family ties or previous residence.

Camden

Background

The supply of social housing

On 31 March 2005, just over 16,000 people were registered on the Housing Register (Review of Camden's Allocation Scheme, 15/07/2005: 2.2). The London Borough of Camden Council, hereafter referred to as LBC, lets around 1600 properties per annum (*ibid*: 2.3). The greatest demand is for family-sized units but properties with three bedrooms or above make up just 27% of Camden's socially rented stock (Camden Council and Home Connections Information Sheet 'Will I get housed?' 10/2004). Camden's public sector housing stock has significantly reduced over the last two decades, decreasing by approximately 10,000 homes since the early 1980s. While demand for social housing steadily increases, the supply of Council housing continues its downward trend. 432 homes were sold through Right to Buy in 2004/5 although sales through the Right to Buy scheme are now expected to slow to 100-150 per year (Camden's Housing Strategy 2005-2010 (Draft) May 2005: 6, Para. 1.3) with the reduction in the discount to £16,000 (*ibid*: 9, Para. 2.1).

LBC has retained a large proportion of its stock: in April 2001 25.96% of total households in Camden rented from LBC and 11.42% from RSLs (www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk). A lot of LBC's housing stock is in poor condition. In July 2003, LBC was awarded Government funding to set up an Arms Length Management Organization (ALMO) to cover all their stock, 83% of which did not meet the criteria of the Decent Homes Standard. LBC's total bid of £283m to achieve Decent Homes by 2010 was approved. When balloted in November 2003, however, 77% of tenants voted against the proposals (Camden's Housing Strategy 2005-2010 (Draft) May 2005: 5, Para. 1.2). The pressure group 'Defend Council Housing' (based mainly in Camden) campaigns for the Government to invest directly in Council housing and rejects all three of the Government's attempts at privatisation.¹¹ LBC's housing department has a three star "excellent" rating, heightening the belief held by tenants that privatisation is not in their interests. LBC's housing department is, however, now stranded without new Government funding.

¹¹ The Government will only invest in social housing in three ways:

1. **Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs)**, a company set up by a local authority to manage all or some of its homes and make them decent;
2. **Private Finance Initiative (PFI)**, in which the local authority awards a long-term contract to a private sector operator who will manage and maintain some of its stock over a 30-year period.
3. **Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT)**, where a local authority transfers the ownership of all or some of its stock to a housing association.

LBC gets the following nomination rights from its Housing Association/Registered Social Landlord (RSL) partners:

- 100% new developments
- 50% one bed true voids
- 75% two beds plus true voids

(A 'true void' equals a new vacancy; a 'non-true void' is where the tenant is transferring.)

Allocations

LBC's allocation scheme is under review. The report 'Review of Camden's Allocation Scheme' (15/07/2005) will be submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and The Executive on 26 July and 27 July 2005 respectively. The report 'describes the background to the review and proposes a new allocations scheme, which is intended to be easier to understand and to give priority to people in need of rehousing in accordance with legislative requirements and Camden's Housing Strategy' (Review of Camden's Allocation Scheme, 15/07/2005).

The Prevention Ethos

The 1977 Homeless Persons Act creates perverse incentives for people to pretend they are homeless when they are not, e.g. collusion between young adults and their parents or other host householders to manufacture conflict. (Nationally, "family/friend exclusions" form the most frequently given reason for homelessness' (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 15).) This is likely to have scattered families and social networks, fragmenting support networks already in place.

LBC's revised Scheme aims to remove 'incentives for applicants to become homeless as a means of obtaining priority access to a restricted housing supply' (Review of Camden's Allocation Scheme, 15/07/2005: 2.6). This follows on from the Homelessness Act 2002 which 'introduced a local authority duty to draw up homelessness strategies whose central function would be to identify means by which homelessness could be prevented altogether' (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 30). Preventing homelessness, and promoting independent living and safe and stable housing, is part of the government funded Supporting People Programme which provides housing-related support to vulnerable adults (Camden's Housing Strategy (Draft) May 2005: 21: Para. 4.1). LBC's Housing Advice Service and Tenancy Support Service aim to prevent homelessness by providing advice and support but LBC also contracts multiple organisations to deliver services as part of the scheme (*ibid*). Pilot CBLs showed that vulnerable groups needed more advice and support (not legal procedures and policies): CBLs worked better for vulnerable people when there was a partnership with health, advice and support services (ODPM 'How to Choose Choice,' 08/2002).).

Housing Options

The new scheme's objectives also include attempts to 'Empower applicants, by offering rehousing amidst a range of alternative options, choice and information which enable them to make more realistic decisions in relation to their future housing prospects' (Review of Camden's Allocation Scheme, 15/07/2005: 3.1). The emphasis is now on better educating applicants about the likelihood of securing a social housing tenancy and advising people on other "housing options," including the private rented sector. Regeneration experts are currently working within LBC's team to build a 'one-stop shop advice service. This involves amalgamating the Homeless Unit and Housing Advice service so that the public are informed about various schemes, e.g. shared ownership; low cost owner occupation, e.g. 'Homebuy'; education and training opportunities.

LBC's draft housing strategy highlights that while a Council tenancy may be part of 'a pathway enabling progression from dependence on the Council to successful independent living, it is not 'an end in itself'(Camden's Housing Strategy 2005-2010 (Draft) May 2005: 7, Para 1.5). This implies that a Council tenancy could be a *transitional* stage. The success of social housing as a tenure of transition is 'dependent on the intentions and expectations of social housing tenants, and crucially, on the alternative housing options open to them' (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 38). More options are needed for applicants if LBC is both to create sustainable communities and meet ambitious targets for housing those in greatest need, e.g. Camden has set out to reduce the number of homeless households in temporary accommodation by 50% by 2010 (Camden's Housing Strategy 2005-2010 (Draft) May 2005: 35, Para. 6.7).

Choice Based Lettings

LBC was one of the twenty seven pilots for CBLs and led 'one of the most successful schemes in the country' (Camden's Housing Strategy 2005-2010 (Draft) May 2005: 32, Para. 6.2).

The software used to deliver CBLs in Camden (and now several other London boroughs) is called 'Home Connections.' Home Connections works with local media to advertise LBC and RSL properties. All of the LBC's available homes, plus vacancies with many RSLs, are advertised on Thursdays in the "Camden New Journal" (a free publication) and can also be viewed on-line. In order to bid, applicants need to have a minimum number of points. The advert shows the number of points required and also highlights if priority will be given in particular cases. For example, the advertisement may state, 'Priority will be given to applicant assessed as having a medical need for ground floor.' Results of previous week's adverts are also given, detailing the number of bids made and the successful applicant's points.

There is no banding system (as in BANES and Cotswold): a needs-related points system is still used and the bidder with the highest points is offered the tenancy. However, RSLs which historically favour particular groups, e.g. Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) RSLs, may state who they are intending to house when they advertise a vacancy, and give priority to the applicant with the most points who conforms to their specification, provided that this information is written in their constitution and has been approved by the Housing Corporation (Siddiqui Interview, 21/07/05). The applicant with the highest number of points views the property and then may accept or decline the offer. Applicants can bid as many times as they wish and are not penalised for refusing a property they bid for.

Additional Preference (extra points) is usually only awarded in the following four instances:

1. Households who would be owed full homelessness duty if they became homeless and the Council has enabled them to stay in their home – 100 points (Group B)
2. Severely overcrowded households – 150 points (Group C)
3. Under-occupying tenants – 150-300 points (Group C)
4. **Applicants with a local connection defined as residing in Camden continuously for the last two years – 100 points (Groups A-G)**

Points are also awarded for Time Waiting: all applicants receive an additional 10% of their total number of points on each anniversary of their application (Review of Camden's Allocation Scheme, 15/07/2005: 9.1). Given the retention of the points system and the relatively short supply of housing, particularly for family-sized properties, those who can afford to wait are unlikely to secure more desirable accommodation than applicants with an urgent need to move.

LBC's nomination agreement with RSLs is such that if LBC does not get a successful nominee at the third viewing, the RSL can take the property back and give it to one of their own transfers. Boroughs differ in how they define viewings, but in Camden the top eight applicants on the list view the property together and this is regarded as one viewing. Some RSLs have reported that CBLs could lead to longer void changeovers/re-let times because of the number of viewings it takes to get a successful person signed up (Siddiqui interview, 21/07/05). Since applicants are not penalized for refusing an offer, those with more points (and more choice) may turn down properties more frequently than in the past.

Local Connection versus Sons and Daughters

Awarding additional points to all applicants who have a local connection with Camden has been recently added into the allocation scheme and comes under the title 'Building Stronger Camden Communities' (Review of Camden's Allocation Scheme, 15/07/2005: 8). In the original draft of the new allocation scheme there was a specific section relating to Sons and Daughters where children of LBC housing tenants were to be awarded as many points as a homeless applicant. The new 'Local connection with Camden' section has replaced the proposed Sons and Daughters section following widespread consultation and discussion. (There were differences of opinion between directors, RSL partners and LBC staff on this issue.)

While awarding additional points for applicants who have lived in Camden continuously for the last two years is likely to include most sons and daughters, it is not nearly so specific and will apply to many more people. The extra 100 points are also not transferable, i.e. they will not assist applicants trying to move into the borough to be near parents, children or other relatives who have lived there for a number of years.

Prior to the amendment, 'Building Stronger Camden Communities' (Group F) awarded points to all applicants within the following categories:

- **Those who are adult children of Camden Council tenants and reside with their parents – 150 points**
- Those who have dependent children living with them who are under 18 – 45 points
- Those who are Council and Housing Association tenants who wish to bid for smaller property and/or have registered for the Council's Under-Occupation Scheme – 50 points (only awarded where applicants bid for smaller properties and the resultant void will be available for re-let by the Council)
- Those who are low paid employment whose income is below that needed to access low cost home ownership opportunities – 10 points

Applicants who meet the criteria above do not receive any extra points under the new revised scheme, with the exception of under-occupying tenants who now receive between 150 and 300 points, as well as £1000 for every extra bedroom that is under-occupied as an incentive to move.¹²

¹² Under-occupation is a major factor in the shortage of affordable housing: 30% of Council housing tenants (240, 000 households) in London are under-occupying by one or more bedrooms. There were only 1507 transfers with Local Authority to dwellings with fewer bedrooms in 2003/4 (London Housing Strategy. Government Office for London, 2005: 5.84).

Rizwan Siddiqui (Policy and Performance Co-ordinator for Housing Initiatives and Regeneration at LBC) suggested to me that pressure on CBLs to succeed, and attempts to *make* them work, is likely to have led to the emphasis on building ‘Stronger Camden Communities’ and not Sons and Daughters, and to have restricted the use of Sensitive Lettings (see below). Home Connections is a popular package, used by several London boroughs, with Camden as the lead group. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) and the Greater London Authority (GLA) pushing for pan-London CBLs, supported by the Government Office for London (GOL) and Association of London Government (ALG), has increased competition between different software packages that deliver CBLs in London, e.g. Home Connections in Camden and Locata in Ealing. The transition from borough to London-wide CBLs will be easier and more feasible for RSLs that work across Local Authority boundaries if all boroughs use the same system (Siddiqui interview, 21/07/05). Giving additional preference to Sons and Daughters, as opposed to everyone who has resided in the borough for the last two years or more, could have inhibited the perceived fairness of the system. In urban, high-demand areas like Camden, applicants for years who had been living in extremely overcrowded circumstances, or otherwise very bad conditions, might find it hard to trust a system of prioritisation which gave others, who seem to be much better off, many more points (150 points more to be precise).

Sensitive Lettings

The gap between rich and poor is greater in Camden than in any other London borough (Camden’s Housing Strategy (Draft) May 2005: 6, Para. 1.3). The focus on allocating housing to those in greatest need, particular homeless applicants, led to ghettos of deprivation in the 1990s. The socially excluded became polarised spatially, with some areas demonstrating profound social and labour-market failure. 75% of Council tenants are benefit dependent (43% are not in work) (*ibid*). Sensitive lettings are an attempt to create more balanced communities, following on from the mistakes made in the past when allocating housing. LBC claims to subscribe to the view that ‘housing is about individuals, families and communities as much as it is about buildings, bricks and mortar’ (Camden Council Housing Strategy 2005-10 (Draft) May 2005: 1.1). Poor families are often clustered on estates due to the similar type of properties and because the people with the highest points share many characteristics, e.g. unemployed lone parents.¹³ In order to create more balanced communities, the Council seeks to select/not select households with particular characteristics. Regarding ‘Sustainable Communities,’ the recent draft housing strategy says,

‘This should, for example, avoid pockets of high unemployment or high numbers of people with support needs (*ibid*: 1.5).

¹³ The 2004 Index of Deprivation provided clear evidence of that many of Camden’s most deprived residents live in social housing. In nine out of ten of Camden’s most deprived Super Output Areas more than 70% of residents rent their homes from the Council or from an RSL (Camden’s Housing Strategy 2005-2010 (Draft) May 2005: 45, Para. 9.2).

Sensitive Lettings aim ‘to reduce the concentration of certain needs groups which is impacting (or in the case of a new development, may impact upon) housing management or the sustainability of the local community’ (Camden Council’s Sensitive Lettings Procedure).

Properties to be sensitively let are advertised along with other vacancies¹⁴ but will specify the target group that LBC is intending to house, e.g. stating a preference for household in employment. Applicants with the most points who fulfil the stated criteria will then be given priority. In LBC, sensitive lettings are thought to somewhat undermine the basis of Choice, as well as conflicting with the statutory responsibility to give reasonable preference to those in priority need (Siddiqui interview, 21/07/2005).¹⁵

Sensitive Lettings aim to reduce crime and other anti-social behaviour through: avoiding the clustering of lots of similarly aged children in a particular block or area of an estate; increasing the number of employed people in a block area; and reducing a high concentration of vulnerable people. Sensitive Lettings are not always about creating a mixed community: the policy may be implemented to retain the status quo, e.g. ‘where a block (although not designed as housing for the elderly) has a high concentration of elderly households and good housing management practice’ (Camden Council’s Sensitive Lettings Procedure).

The Sensitive Lettings procedure looks like a fairly arduous process for individual lettings. The Housing Officer concerned about a void and wanting it to be sensitively let has to first discuss the matter with the Area Manager. If the Area Manager agrees that it would be appropriate for the policy to be implemented, the Housing Officer inputs the details on void case notes that the property needs a sensitive letting. The Housing Officer then emails the Rehousing Manager for the team concerned who ensures that the allocator that week is aware of the need for a sensitive letting. The email should also be copied to the Policy and Quality Manager who monitors the number of sensitive lettings requested each month, and produces a quarterly report for analysis and review. The Rehousing Officer looks at the case notes for all voids offered daily and may speak to the Housing Officer to discuss the suitability of the client they propose to put forward for the vacancy. If the client is homeless or receives support, the Rehousing Officer may wish to speak to the Homeless Persons Unit or the Housing Support Team before an offer is made.

¹⁴ Only properties that are specifically nominated for disabled tenants by the Occupational Therapist are outside of CBLs.

¹⁵ N.B. This view is not widespread: a report by the JRF concluded that ‘landlords are not, in practice, forced to select between ‘choice’ or ‘social engineering’ options’ (‘New approaches to social housing allocation.’ JRF 661, 06/2001). Home Connections in LBC, Homeseekers in BANES and Homeview in Cotswold all incorporate local-lettings plans into the CBLs system by stating the client group they are intending to house when they advertise a property to be sensitively let.

Some applicants, like particular properties, may also require a sensitive letting, e.g. vulnerable households trying to remain drug/alcohol free. A member of the Housing Support Team may input details on case notes that their *client* requires a sensitive letting in order to avoid inappropriate allocations. In the past, tenancies have frequently failed because vulnerable people trying to remain drug/alcohol free were rehoused in an area where they were very quickly exposed to temptation and intimidation to return to drug/alcohol dependency (*ibid*).

New Developments and community building

Swiss Cottage

The new development at Swiss Cottage will be completed later this year. Following the Mayor's directive that all new developments need to have affordable housing, the mixed-use development will have £3m homes and affordable housing¹⁶ side by side. 'Funded with £2.5m of Housing Corporation grant, it will result in Acton Housing Association and Ujima Housing Association delivering 42 affordable homes plus a leisure centre, a doctor's surgery and 128 luxury apartments' (Housing Today, 21/11/2003: 359).

Remarkably, all 42 units are to be socially rented: 22 units on top of the leisure centre by Acton Housing Association and 20 units at the back of the development by Ujima. The units on top of the leisure centre will all be sensitively let in order to prevent young families all growing up together since lifts and other facilities will be shared. Sensitive Lettings are normally done on individual voids (not on multiple new properties at once) and in response to negative behaviour, thus the way that homes will be allocated at the new Swiss Cottage development is quite radical for LBC. Properties may well be under-occupied in an attempt to create a harmonious community by not clustering similar types of families (Siddiqui interview, 21/07/2005).

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N.B. Affordable housing refers to homes which are subsidised for those who cannot afford to pay the full cost of the property. It includes the social stock and the "intermediate" stock - owner-occupied and rented properties in which social landlords retain a stake to ensure that the property is available to people who cannot afford the full price (ODPM, 'HomeBuy – expanding the opportunity to own. Consultation Paper April 2005 Supporting Document,' June 2005: 2).

Kings Cross Central

A mixed-use quarter at Kings Cross Central, comprising all tenures of housing with other compatible uses, will be developed between 2008 and 2015. The planning is still under negotiation but up to 2000 units may be affordable housing. LBC's position is that 35% should be for social rent and 15% for intermediate and Key Worker accommodation (Camden's Housing Strategy 2005-2010 (Draft) May 2005: 14, Para. 2.4). LBC also seeks a significant amount of 3 and 4 bedroom homes since this is where there is the greatest shortfall relative to supply. To encourage successful integration with the surrounding area, LBC views it as essential that some 'existing tenants should be given the opportunity to transfer into the new homes.... **From the outset the development will be designed to cater for all ages, including the elderly**' (*ibid*: 15, Para. 2.4). **LBC proposes to develop a Sensitive Lettings policy 'to ensure that there is no bunching of ages of children'** (*ibid*).

Affordable housing

LBC seeks to address severe inequality in the housing market by increasing the supply of affordable housing. It is virtually impossible for RSLs to buy on the open market in the borough without additional subsidy because land value is so high. Following the Mayor's London plan, LBC insists, wherever possible, on a Section 106 agreement for all new developments, i.e. 50% affordable housing, with 35% for social renting and 15% intermediate and key worker housing (Camden's Housing Strategy 2005-2010 (Draft) May 2005: 12-3, Para. 2.3).

Shared ownership

It is remarkable that 100% of the affordable housing at the new Swiss Cottage development is for social renting since 30% of new housing is usually for Key Worker or intermediate housing/shared ownership. Shared ownership schemes have been a relatively low priority (high land values in Camden have excluded most people who are at or near offer level from applying) although 34 new units are now in the pipeline for shared ownership (Camden's Housing Strategy 2005-2010 (Draft) May 2005: 16, Para. 2.9).

Key Workers¹⁷

The tenant mix the LBC may want for an estate is often undermined by what the market dictates. Key Worker accommodation has sometimes been left void for weeks, and even months, at a time while LBC tries to fill it since Key Workers often decide not to live where the Key Worker accommodation has been built and find housing elsewhere. RSLs may eventually sell the property on the open market or it may go for shared ownership instead (Siddiqui Interview, 21/07/05).

¹⁷ N.B. Of all Key Workers, LBC recently identified teachers in Camden schools as most in need and thus their top priority (Camden's Housing Strategy 2005-2010 (Draft) May 2005: 17, Para. 2.11).

The Private Sector

LBC is looking to engage more with the private sector, e.g. playing a role in housing renewal ‘to help owner occupiers; private tenants and landlords improve living conditions in the private sector and encourage sustainable communities’ (Camden’s Housing Strategy 2005-2010 (Draft) May 2005: 26, Para. 5.5).

LBC seeks to bring empty properties back into use (some 1942 private sector properties are lying empty in the borough). LBC will offer owners advice and incentives but will take enforcement action to bring the property back into use where necessary (*ibid*: 27, Para. 5.6). Empty Homes Management Orders (EDMO’s), which allow LBC to compulsorily lease empty homes without the owner’s consent, will be piloted in Camden (*ibid*: 28: Para 5.6). The Rent Deposit Scheme provides a financial incentive to landlords of empty properties to rent to a vulnerable person or family with children (*ibid*: 27, Para. 5.6).

The 2004 Housing Act requires landlords of larger houses with five or more occupiers to apply for a local authority license. The law attempts to protect tenants by enhancing the management responsibilities of landlords, and establishing the maximum number of persons able to occupy in relation to the amenities provided (*ibid*: 2, Para. 5.9).

In July 2004 Camden led the launch of the London Landlord Accreditation Scheme (LLAS) ‘to increase the supply of affordable, high quality and safe accommodation for tenants in the private sector and for housing applicants waiting to be rehoused by the Council’ (*ibid*: 25, Para. 5.2). This seems to be the first step towards including private-rented properties into CBLs. A total of 190 Camden landlords should have been accredited by LBC by 2006 (*ibid*).

Working sub-regionally

The North sub-region for London comprises Enfield, Haringey, Barnet, Camden, Islington and Westminster. Members of the different Councils meet at both officer and director level. LBC aims to work jointly with the other boroughs in the North sub-region ‘to bring consistency to the way data on empty homes is gathered, held and analysed’ since they currently collect and hold data on empty homes in different ways. The North sub-region bids for Government Office for London (GOL) grants to assist owners of vacant properties with renovation costs in return for nomination rights (Camden’s Housing Strategy 2005-2010 (Draft) May 2005: 27, Para. 5.5). GOL also provides the Chair and secretariat support for the London Housing Board which is tasked with agreeing London’s housing priorities (set out in the *London Housing Strategy*) and making recommendations to Ministers for the allocation of the Single Regional Housing Pot. This includes funding for sub-regional private sector housing schemes and local authority regeneration projects (www.gos.gov.uk/gol/161428/161524/?a=42496). Applications for the ODPM fund for the development of regional and sub-regional CBLs will be initially evaluated by the relevant Government Office (GO). A panel of ODPM representatives, one GO representative and the Housing Corporation will then take the final decision on what schemes to support (‘Fund for the development of regional and sub-regional choice based lettings schemes: Bidding guidance’ ODPM, 07/2005: 3, Para. C.12.).

Housing Corporation funding

The majority of funds from the regional housing pot go to RSLs for new affordable housing via the Housing Corporation (HC).¹⁸ The Housing Corporation (HC) talks to the north sub-region as a whole. Local Authorities' power and influence when working with RSLs, or working with particular bids for HC funds, has diminished now that grants are no longer awarded to individual boroughs. The HC does not look at borough boundaries thus will tend to support new developments where it is cheaper to build. If RSLs in Camden and Enfield were both bidding for a HC grant to build 20 units, for example, Enfield would probably get the money (Siddiqui Interview, 21/07/05). Importantly, however, all new HC funded developments in London are subject to sub-regional nominations.

The HC used to look at bids primarily on a per unit basis, as opposed to per person housed. This was problematic for LBC where there is an excess of one bedroom accommodation and an acute shortage of three bedroom plus sized properties. The development of one and two bedroom units produce the most housing for the least amount of money, thus were more likely to receive financial support from the HC (*ibid*). The HC now looks at unit sizes rather than unit numbers but LBC lobbies that the HC should not only assess per unit build costs, 'but infrastructure and lifetime management and maintenance and service charge costs' (Camden's Housing Strategy 2005-2010 (Draft) May 2005: 14: Para. 2.3). The section continues,

'Although unit costs in Camden can be comparatively high, our traditional housing association developments most importantly create sustainable communities where people have access to good schools, training and employment prospects. **Care of the elderly is also enhanced when families are close by and do not have to move across London**' (*ibid*).

Among the list of reasons why LBC would like to retain an element of local allocation, the document also states, 'To sustain our Supporting People Strategy, **where schemes are provided locally to people's support networks**' (*ibid*).

¹⁸ In an attempt to increase competition so that more social housing is built, the Government has recently said that developers can bid for Housing Corporation money. (This has angered many RSLs who, although contract to developers already, have always had control the scheme until now (Siddiqui Interview, 21/07/05).)

So what does the research tell us?

ODPM and RSLs often talk about the importance of families in providing support to social housing tenants and in discussions surrounding sustainable communities. Family ties are somewhat secondary, however, to housing those in priority need, protecting vulnerable groups and increasing customer perceptions of choice.

LBC recognizes the importance of family networks and informal care from relatives, using it as part of their argument to retain a degree of local allocation. The proposed benefits of informal, local community contacts around estates were recently shown in a study of Southwark (Taper and Duffy, 11/1998)¹⁹. Informal support networks between relatives or friends do not feature, however, in LBC's allocations policy for prioritizing applicants.

In an urban high demand borough, particularly in London where land value is so high, there are clearly constraints on the extent of choice for home seekers. Households that require socially-rented accommodation with three or more bedrooms fare particularly badly if other housing options are unsuitable due to the small supply of family-sized stock. Wandsworth (which does not yet operate CBLs, only offering applicants an area preference when they complete their application form for housing) abolished sensitive lettings since they felt that given the vast majority of people on the Council's waiting list belonged to similar needs groups, compounded by the composition of their housing stock, it was more important to be fair across the borough (and not bypass many people who were in priority need and/or had been waiting for a long time).

Sensitive Lettings may prevent barracks of poverty but they are unlikely to build sustainable communities. Giving people greater choice of tenure and location, however, may lessen the feeling among social housing tenants that they are the symbolic 'other' to the private sector. Thus the perceived stigmatization attached to their housing status may be reduced if social housing is more of a 'tenure of choice,' rather than a 'tenure of destination' (Fitzpatrick, 2005). CBLs may create more harmonious communities because of the desirability of different areas for different groups. For example, some of the estates with the worse publicity in LBC are close to the borough's very good secondary schools. Factors like proximity to schools, places of worship and support networks make it very difficult to define desirability. Although the social housing stock does not change under CBLs, the social dynamics of particular areas could alter provided that households' preferences are sufficiently varied according to personal circumstances. Housing outcomes will only improve under CBLs if applicants' housing priorities are significantly diverse and unpredictable (*ibid*: 22).

¹⁹ The authors found that the main differences between more and less popular estates lay in informal, local, community contacts, not more formal social activities, e.g. visiting friends and relations ('Making Estates Work.' Niner, 11/1998).

Through giving a preference for households with or without particular characteristics, the CBLs scheme in Cotswold more readily allows landlords to exclude certain needs-groups in order to create a greater social mix of tenants. Under the old points system, there were pockets where there were a lot of children, unemployed people and people receiving benefit (Mizon interview, 30/06/2005). Although incomes are low relative to house prices and there is a shortage of affordable housing, a greater proportion of the households on the HomeView register fulfil many of the key categories thought to make up a sustainable community than those on LBC's or Wandsworth's waiting lists. In addition, CDC strongly supports helping people with a local connection to retain a sense of rural continuity in an aging population.

In Bath and North East Somerset (where there has also been a large scale voluntary transfer), tensions between the Local Authority and their RSL partners stem from the Council's suspicion that RSLs run their organizations essentially as a business and will thus aim to limit their own management difficulties. The Council is thus cautious in permitting the implementation of a sensitive lettings plan.

Epilogue

The aim of lettings has always been to match up a diverse stream of applicants with a diverse stream of properties. Choice Based Lettings (CBLs) are a new way of achieving this goal and claim to empower applicants although the Local Authority still decides how properties are allocated within the CBLs system. Councils thus continue to take different views about the relative importance of needs and, critically, waiting time. Following the abolition of “Sons and Daughters” policies, children of social housing tenants normally waited a long time for any housing (and not necessarily near their family support) if the Local Authority chose to define homelessness narrowly. Under the new system, applicants in priority need should find it easier to move near their families for support.

Applicants without high currency are still unlikely to secure housing near their families in high demand areas. Households requiring three or more bedrooms find it particularly hard to meet both their basic needs, i.e. their housing entitlement, and their preferences due to the shortage of family-sized accommodation. Where the social-need threshold for accessing social housing is higher, slightly less deprived applicants wanting to be housed near family will have very limited choices in the absence of a system that rotates between different needs-related bands and/or sensitive lettings policies favouring those which have a local connection to a specific location, e.g. an estate. Some Local Authorities’ policies, e.g. Cotswold, take the view that such sensitive lettings complement CBLs in creating more sustainable communities. Successful schemes rely on understanding the social dynamics of individual communities and then including local connection criteria on estates/blocks etc where they would bring a significant benefit. Legitimizing the implementation of this sort of local-lettings scheme (particularly in areas with an acute shortage of housing) may involve lots of qualitative and up-to-date research with tenants themselves to assess demand and the benefits it would provide. How the Local Authority defines ‘local connection’ is crucial in determining whether those with family in a specific area are given reasonable preference. Camden’s definition of ‘local connection’ gives Camden residents more choice but does little to promote informal care since it does not give priority to applicants with a local connection to a *particular location* within the borough.

Attempts to improve overall community cohesion risk strengthening individual communities at the expense of the wider community and could promote an unequal distribution of power. A balance between creating barracks of poverty and not letting one racial group or community dominate needs to be found but Local Authorities differ in the layers of complexity they think it is reasonable to add onto to a system proclaiming Choice. The basis of CBLs may be undermined, the more specific one becomes about who will get priority for particular properties.

By virtue of their transparency, CBLs may help reduce community rivalries caused by suspicions that others are being prioritized unfairly and getting housing that their communities 'deserve.' However, tensions are unlikely to dissolve just because of changes to the allocation procedure. Ensuring areas that receive asylum seekers gain some wider community advantage, for example, may be important to 'avoid the impression that only asylum seekers are being helped' (Community Cohesion – An Action Guide. Local Governments Association, 2004: 54). In addition, many different types of housing need (and many types of family), mean that social housing allocations are not the only area where family-based informal care among economically disadvantaged households is undermined. People need to be given real choice in where they want to live across *the whole range* of affordable housing options now on offer. The differences between the socially-rented sector and other forms of publicly subsidized housing have diminished with the introduction of market mechanisms into what was previously a purely administrative system.

Rather than campaigning for bureaucrats to take more account of local family ties in their allocations policies (and trying to impose more rules and regulations on an already complex system), community may be more effectively built by giving people the space to make rational decisions about where they want to live, when they want to move and under what arrangements. Cutting out uncertainty about individual preferences through enabling applicants to make informed decisions is a vast improvement on housing staff making assumptions about what an applicant would find desirable.

The suitability of housing for different household types may prevent the creation of a generational mix. Homes (on new developments in particular) may be deliberately under-occupied to prevent the clustering of families with similarly aged children but the elderly are normally housed in sheltered housing where lettings policies maintain the status quo. Given the relative abundance of sheltered accommodation, however, the elderly may have more choice in where they are live. People may 'socially engineer' themselves (thus creating a more balanced community) if the needs-based currency allows less deprived applicants to access less popular housing. Since the housing stock does not change under CBLs, applicants will only reap a net benefit from the system if their definitions of desirable are suitably different. Preferences may be sufficiently diverse if applicants prioritise factors like proximity to work or family.

Further research ideas/questions:

- The demand to be housed near family, and then what exactly ‘near’ means, is unclear. For example, a couple with children might not desire to live on the same street as their parents but would like to live within a 10-15 minute walk. The transparency of CBLs gives a geographical feel for identifying where there are unmet needs. Research into satisfaction levels under different CBLs schemes (and various other affordable housing options) could reveal where proximity to family exists on applicants’ list of priorities.

Suggested methods:

- Customer satisfaction surveys of different CBLs systems
 - Investigating how area specific applicants are with their preferences
 - Research designed to identify and understand housing needs and preferences (particularly those of communities who currently find it difficult to find social housing that meets their need)
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- ODPM pushing for greater housing options (to meet different types of need) and schemes like the First Time Buyers Initiative - which encourages people to move on after four years – prompt the question, ‘is social housing becoming a ‘tenure of transition?’ If social renting were to become more of a transitional tenure, the supply of housing for social renting would increase as turnover rates were pushed up. The perceived stigmatization attached to housing status could diminish and a wider social mix of applicants would be able to enter the sector. Increasing turnover in ‘rough’ areas or one bedroom accommodation is unlikely to bring community benefits but more rapid turnover rates in high demand properties could bring the aforementioned advantages, reducing the residualisation of social housing.
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- Local Authorities’ powers as market makers and market regulators, i.e. by matching household incomes/characteristics to the supply of (all) housing, diminish as they cease to be landlords. The changing power relations between Local Authorities and RSLs warrant further investigation. With social housing increasingly administered by RSLs (who are unelected and effectively unaccountable on social/community issues), is the public sector housing service still first and foremost a social service? Combined with Councils engaging more with the private sector (as a way of increasing the housing options available to home-seekers in need of public support), is social housing becoming more like a ‘business’ with social policies tacked on (depending on the firmness - and capacity - of the Local Authority and the shape of central government financial inducements)?

- To what extent do the level of homelessness/the proportion of applicants in priority need and the type and relative supply of housing determine how property is allocated? One would assume that a CBLs scheme can only rotate through the different needs-related bands where there are a smaller percentage of households in priority need.

Method:

- Establish the proportion of people from different needs-groups by looking at the Waiting List/Housing Register in different Local Authorities.

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Principal Contacts

Bath and North East Somerset

Flavia Baxter - Team Manager, Neighbourhood Services, Somer Housing Association

Mischi Wilk - Housing Services Manager, Bath & North East Somerset

Wandsworth

Mike Rowan - Rehousing Manager, Wandsworth Council

Camden

Rizwan Siddiqui - Policy and Performance Co-ordinator, Housing Initiatives and Regeneration, London Borough of Camden

Cotswold

Martin Hawkins - Housing Policy & Research Officer, Cotswold District Council

John Mizon – Head of HomeView, Fosseway Housing Association

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