
Fundamental review of
Social Housing Allocations
Examples of social housing allocations in
Great Britain: A snapshot from 2014

INTRODUCTION

To inform a review of social housing allocations in Northern Ireland, the Department asked the Universities of Cambridge and Ulster to conduct independent research. They produced three reports (since published by the Department):

- Report 1: [Current approaches to accessing and allocating social housing in Northern Ireland](#)
- Report 2: [Best practice approaches to accessing and allocating social housing in Britain & the Republic of Ireland](#)
- Report 3: [Final Report: Conclusions and Recommendations](#)

Report 2 looked at best practice in the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Because the Localism Act (2011) changed laws about housing in England and Wales, many of the UK allocations policies were under review when the report was written. We did some desk research at a later date to build a more up to date and complete picture of what happens elsewhere.

To note:

- This desktop research exercise was conducted in late autumn 2014. Some of the schemes may have been revised since then.
- This document does not provide an exhaustive list of scheme features; we summarised features of the 21 allocations schemes we looked at.

How we chose the areas we looked at

We chose most of the areas at random from across England and Scotland. Almost all areas used choice-based lettings, so we included three areas that do not have choice-based lettings schemes (Great Yarmouth, Barnet and Stoke-on-Trent). There is a mix of rural, urban and mixed areas. We chose four London boroughs to take account of the political leadership of the council (one each of Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat and No Overall Control). We did not see a link between allocations policy and political control. The areas were:

Barnet Homes (London)	Bath & North East Somerset Council	Bristol City Council	Cheshire East
Cornwall Council	Coventry	Cumbria Choice	Edinburgh
Exeter City Council	Great Yarmouth Borough Council	Greenwich (London)	Homefinder Somerset
Hull City Council	Merton (London)	Oxford	PropertyPool Plus (Merseyside)
Sheffield	Stoke on Trent	Sutton (London)	Tees Valley
West Lancs Borough Council			

What this document says and does not say

This document gives an overview of the schemes we looked at and gives extra information on allocations in GB. We have written briefly about interesting or novel ideas. This document is intended as a complement to, not a replacement for Report 2: [Best practice approaches to accessing and allocating social housing in Britain & the Republic of Ireland](#).

CHOICE-BASED LETTINGS (CBL) VERSUS DIRECT LETTINGS

Choice-based lettings (CBL)

18 of the 21 areas we looked at use choice-based lettings, including three of the four London boroughs. Many of these areas have very high demand for social housing. All the choice-based lettings schemes allow for direct lettings in certain circumstances. Applicants in priority need in most areas must bid for a certain number of properties within a time limit. If they do not bid for suitable properties the allocating authority will take action. These actions vary from place to place, but include:

- Making a direct offer to the client;
- Bidding **for** the applicant; or
- Bringing the applicant back for Housing Options advice.

Private Rented Sector and low-cost home ownership properties are available in the Homefinder Somerset area via their mainstream CBL.

Direct Lettings

Barnet (Conservative council), Stoke-on-Trent (Labour council) and Great Yarmouth Borough Council (No Overall Control) have direct letting systems. They all also have very few homes available (like most of the CBL areas). Two of the areas place restrictions on applicants' preferences:

- Barnet will only make one offer to all applicants. They will **only** consider the number of bedrooms when they decide if a property is suitable for an applicant. Location and property type are not considered part of need.
- Applicants in Great Yarmouth can only have a preferred property type or location for the first three months.

SYSTEMS USED TO RANK NEED

17 of the schemes use banding, two use unique systems and two use hybrids of points and banding. No scheme used points alone.

Bands

Bands vary in number from three to nine. Most schemes use time waiting to decide between applicants in the same band. People are placed in bands mostly by using descriptions of need. An applicant meeting two criteria in West Lancashire's Band B moves up to Band A; in other bands there is no movement for cumulative need. An applicant with two needs in the same band will get extra priority by backdating their application date in both Bristol and Greenwich. Some schemes restrict bidding in CBL to those in the top bands. The letting authority will take action if the applicant does not bid for appropriate properties.

Hybrids

Hull City Council uses five bands. Those with most urgent needs are in Bands A and B, which do not use points to prioritise applicants. The council allocates properties to people in Band A by the number of priority needs then time on list. They allocate Band B purely by time on list. Applicants in Bands C to E are awarded points. Allocations in these bands go to the person with most points followed by time on list. Merton uses time on list for only 2 of its 8 bands. Other applicants are prioritised within their band by pointing.

Unique

Great Yarmouth puts people in preference groups. The council wants its allocations policy to support its wider priorities. Their top priority is economic development. An applicant is most likely to get a home if they are in a preference group **and** they have a job. They use 'emergency cards' for urgent cases.

Sheffield bands the properties, not the applicants. They give applicants priority status but this is time-limited. They put most properties in the general list band. Properties in this band go to the bidder who has had priority status for longest. One quarter of properties are in a Time on List band. These properties go to the bidder who has waited longest, regardless of priority status. If the council has not been able to rent properties from these bands it puts them in a 'first come, first served' band. These properties go to the first bidder. They keep a separate band of properties for people affected by demolitions.

Other features regarding need

- Some of the schemes put time limits on an applicant's priority status (e.g. Oxford, Edinburgh, Sheffield and Homefinder Somerset).
- Income limits are used in Barnet, Bath & NE Somerset Council, Bristol, Homefinder Somerset and Oxford City Council.

Examples of social housing allocations in Great Britain: A snapshot from 2014

- Applicants must show they cannot meet their housing needs themselves (including in private rented properties) in Sutton.
- Owner occupiers are downgraded by one band if they have equity in their property in Bristol.
- Applicants who can afford to meet their own housing need or in the Private Rented Sector with no other housing need are placed in the bottom band in West Lancashire.
- All applicants with an adequate home are placed in the bottom band by Homefinder Somerset.
- Applicants in temporary accommodation are classified as having no housing need in Barnet.
- Assessments of need are carried out at the applicant's current residence in Bristol to consider if their current property is suitable.
- The lowest band in the PropertyPool Plus scheme is for applicants with no housing need and no employment. The second lowest is for those with no housing need but in employment.
- Extra priority within each band can be gained for employment or a community contribution in West Lancashire.
- Applicants taking up employment or giving care in West Lancashire receive the same level of priority as Full Duty Applicants.

Criteria to be in highest priority need

The table below shows the criteria necessary for an applicant to be in the highest priority group. As each scheme uses different terminology, often without definition, we have exercised some discretion in categorising these so the table is indicative.

Criteria to be regarded in highest priority need	Number of schemes
Urgent / exceptional circumstances / need (may be further defined, e.g. medical)	12
Overcrowding (degree of severity varies)	12
Full Duty Applicant Homelessness Status	11
Property unfit or dangerous	8
Regeneration / Demolition / Clearance / Decant	8
Underoccupation (degree of severity varies from scheme to scheme)	7
Abuse / violence / threat to applicant	4
Medical/ Disability	4
To free up adapted property	3
Multiple needs	3
Discretionary priority	2
Former military service	2

Criteria to be regarded in highest priority need	Number of schemes
Applicant is foster carer	1
Property does not meet needs, cannot be adapted and allocation will allow applicant to be discharged from hospital	1
Employment plus other need	1
Difficult financial situation	1
Supporting People move on	1
Care leavers	1
Occupying tenancy when someone died or entered care	1

TREATMENT OF HOMELESS APPLICANTS

Priority

Most schemes place 'Full Duty Applicant' Homeless (FDA) in the highest or second highest band. Full Duty Applicants in Bristol City Council are in the 4th of five bands. Applicants who declare themselves homeless in Exeter City Council move to the lowest band temporarily while the claim is investigated. In some schemes, priority gained for being homeless is time-limited.

The table below shows the priority afforded to full duty applicants across the 21 schemes:

Priority awarded to Full Duty Applicants	Number of schemes
Highest priority	9
Other high priority	7
Low priority	4
No priority / dependant on circumstances	1

Conditionality/ differential treatment for homeless applicants

Most schemes put more conditions on homeless applicants than in Northern Ireland. Homeless applicants usually have no right to refuse an offer of accommodation without losing priority status. Some CBL areas do not allow homeless applicants to bid, or they limit the time applicants may bid. These councils make direct offers to homeless applicants. Oxford's direct offers to homeless households may be for privately rented accommodation and outside the city. Bristol also makes it clear that it will offer private rented properties to homeless applicants.

Others may require a number of minimum CBL bids and will bid on the applicant's behalf if that minimum is not met. Edinburgh insists that homeless applicants bid for at least three properties a week.

The table below shows conditions placed on homeless applicants. Some schemes may place more than one condition in place so the numbers will not total 21.

Conditions placed on Full Duty Applicants	Number of schemes
Restricted period to bid in CBL followed by direct let offers or autobidding	2
Only one offer (where this is not the case for other applicants)	8
Direct offer only (no access to CBL)	2
Let to Private Rented Sector	3
Housing officer autobids for the applicant	1
Minimum number of bids required in CBL system	2
No conditions / unknown	8

Discharge of homelessness duty

Almost all the schemes discharge their homelessness duty if a homeless applicant turns down a reasonable offer of accommodation. They say the applicant is not in housing need if they turn down a reasonable offer of accommodation. Homeless applicants from council-funded temporary accommodation will be expelled from that accommodation if they refuse an offer in Greenwich. Homeless applicants who wish to refuse an offer must move in first and appeal from their new home in the Homefinder Somerset scheme.

Homeless applicants who do not have full duty status

Non-Full Duty Applicant homelessness applicants usually have lower priority but may not have so many conditions on bidding/ refusing offers of property.

TREATMENT OF TRANSFER APPLICANTS

Most schemes allocate from a single list. Many transfer applicants may not be successful in moving. They are already housed so most schemes put these applicants in the lowest bands. Most schemes have special policies in place for people whose houses are going to be demolished or redeveloped.

- Great Yarmouth only allows management transfers one offer.
- Bristol reserves up to 5% of allocations for transfers.
- Sutton has a small percentage of transfers on a separate list.

USE OF SEPARATE LISTS

There are two innovative approaches, in Oxford and Stoke-on-Trent.

1. Oxford has three lists:
 - the Homeless list (applicants will receive only one offer of accommodation which is likely to be private rented and outside the city);

- a Transfer list (applicants are unlikely to move unless they need to downsize); and
- the General Register (applicants are told they are unlikely to receive an offer quickly so should try to meet their housing need otherwise).

There are quotas for each list set out in an annual lettings policy.

2. Stoke-on-Trent has an active list for those in housing need. Anyone not in housing need is on the inactive register which is used only to fill hard-to-let properties.

LOCAL LETTINGS POLICIES

Many of the areas have local lettings policies (LLPs). These are often used in regeneration areas to ensure that existing tenants can move back in if required. Stoke-on-Trent uses LLPs to encourage employed people into areas of high unemployment and to restrict vulnerable applicants where an area already has a high concentration of vulnerable people. Applicants who make a community contribution are also favoured in Stoke-on-Trent. Homefinder Somerset also has policies in place to prevent geographical concentrations of applicants from the same category. In Cornwall, some categories of applicants cannot apply for new developments built under section 106 (developer contributions). Exeter City Council uses quotas for different categories of applicants for new-build schemes.

SPECIALISED/SHELTERED PROPERTIES

Schemes 'protect' these properties in various ways:

- they allocate these properties from a separate band;
- they do not allow people to bid unless they have already shown they need sheltered housing; or
- they mark the property with certain conditions, e.g. you must be over 55.

Owner occupiers who want sheltered accommodation might only be offered it after those in housing need.

OTHER FEATURES

- Housing Options services are quite common.
- Only existing tenants who live in houses will be considered for an allocation of a house in Greenwich. All other applicants will only be offered flats or maisonettes.
- Lettings plans in Greenwich divide up forthcoming supply between different categories of applicant. Similar annual lettings plans in Oxford give quotas to homeless, transfer and general applicants. Sutton also uses quotas and an annual letting plan.
- Low-paid applicants are prioritised for difficult-to-let properties in Greenwich.
- A five-year exclusion for anti-social behaviour is applied in Oxford.