



# **An investigation and summary report into council allocation policies**

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# About

Housing Options Scotland (HOS) is Scotland's housing information and advice charity for disabled people, older adults and members of the Armed Forces community. We offer a one-to-one casework service to clients, giving expert knowledge and advice about the different housing options available in Scotland.

This research has been completed by one of our volunteers, Tessa Brown. We are grateful to Tessa for her work.



# Background

Staff at Housing Options Scotland are finding that many people struggle with social housing application and allocation processes. Since the beginning of the pandemic two years ago it has become harder for people to find the personal support and easy access to information they need to apply for social housing.

The choice-based lettings (CBL) systems that some housing associations and council providers use are a particular challenge for people with a learning disability. They can also be challenging for people without any learning disability.

The idea is that CBL give applicants greater choice and control over their housing rather than treating them as passive recipients of a service. For some applicants this is something they welcome and they like the sense of being in control and being able to see what they are applying for.

But the sense of control can be limited if the demand for housing is greater than the supply of homes available. Choice-based lettings also need the applicant to be proactive to make regular 'bids' for housing. To make the most of their chances of re-housing they need to have a well-informed, strategic approach to bidding based on things like the relative level of supply and demand in specific areas. And the difficulties of online applications are not to be underestimated, bearing in mind that not everyone has easy access to the internet or the skills to navigate what are sometimes very complicated systems.

More traditional allocations policies are most often based on some combination of groups or categories of applicant with points awarded for different housing need and condition criteria. These policies can also be complicated and hard to understand from an applicant's perspective.

Allocations are a difficult area for landlords too. Social housing is a valued and valuable asset. Housing is a basic human right and a secure, good-quality home in the right place can transform lives. When demand for housing outstrips supply, often by a long way, the allocations policy inevitably becomes a framework for rationing the homes available.

Social landlords have to meet and balance many different legal and regulatory requirements. These include both housing and equalities laws and regulations. Within the broad legal framework, landlords have discretion to develop their own

policies. It can become a difficult juggling act to meet all the different requirements while making sure that all applicants, often in extremely difficult circumstances, are fairly treated. Policies vary in how much they emphasise different factors, but even in choice-based letting systems there is usually a strong focus on housing need. Policies generally prioritise the three 'reasonable preference' groups set in housing law: homeless people, those living in unsatisfactory housing conditions, and tenants already in social housing who are under-occupying their present home.

The Scottish Government's Practice Guide to allocations [1] gives up-to-date guidance to support social landlords in developing their lettings policy.

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[1] *Scottish Government (2019), Social housing allocations in Scotland: practice guide*

# Methodology

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This report sums up general findings from a web-based review of local councils' allocation policies carried out in 2021 by one of our volunteer researchers. It looks at the kind of policies offered by different landlords, the accessibility of information about them, and any evidence of the kind of support landlords offer to people who need help to apply for housing.

Twenty-six of the 32 local authorities in Scotland are social landlords. The other six have transferred all their stock to a registered social landlord (a housing association registered with the Scottish Housing Regulator). The review considered only the 26 council landlords' allocation policies. The stock transfer landlords were included in a similar exercise carried out by volunteers last year for registered social landlords [2].

Findings were recorded in a table to capture general impressions of:

- the availability and accessibility of the allocations policy on each council's website;
- whether a summary of the policy was available;
- the type of policy being used (choice-based or points-based); and
- whether there was any specific reference to learning disability and what the policy said about equalities issues more generally.

A summary table can be found in the appendix.

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[2] [Housing Options Scotland \(2021\), Reviewing housing association application processes for people with a learning disability](#)

# Findings

## Allocation systems

Although there is sometimes a perception that use of choice-based lettings has become quite widespread in social housing the review found only five council landlords using a full CBL system. Edinburgh was the only city council using choice-based lettings. The five landlords using CBL as their principal allocation mechanism all used a system of groups or categories of applicant, combined with priority banding according to the level of urgency and/or risk in the applicant's housing circumstances, to determine how housing should be allocated.

Most landlords (19 councils) used some variation of a 'groups plus points' system with applications assigned to a category or group, such as homelessness, transfers or general waiting list. Points are awarded to each application depending on individual circumstances or housing need (for example insecurity of tenure, medical need, housing condition). The landlord may set a percentage target or quota for the number of lets to be made to each group. Allocations within each group are then determined by the number of points awarded to each application. Two councils (Orkney Islands and Renfrewshire) were using groups/categories of applicant plus priority pass, in a similar way to the 'full CBL' landlords.

Five of the 19 councils using groups and points systems also used choice-based lettings in certain limited circumstances, for example in low-demand areas or in specific developments (see appendix).

## Common housing registers and common allocation policies

19 out of the 26 council landlords were operating a common housing register (CHR) with one or more housing associations. This means people can apply for housing with all of the participating landlords at the same time instead of having to fill in a separate form for each landlord. The 19 included three of the councils using choice-based lettings (Angus, Edinburgh and East Renfrewshire).

Eight councils shared a common allocations policy with their CHR partners, further simplifying the process for applicants.

The size and scope of common housing registers ranged from smaller councils with a single partner housing association (Midlothian, Orkney and Shetland Islands) to a large city council, Edinburgh, with 17 housing associations partners.

**Angus Council** uses choice-based lettings and operates a common housing register with three housing associations. The four landlords also share the same allocations policy. This means applicants only have to complete one form and applications are assessed in the same way by all four landlords.

Applicants are designated 'starters' (people without their own home) or 'movers' (who have a home but wish to move). They can then be placed in one of four priority bands - platinum, gold, silver or bronze - depending on circumstances. People with multiple needs are placed in the highest priority band for which they are eligible.

Once registered, applicants can 'bid' for homes advertised on the Angus HomeFinder website. The highest-ranked bidder is usually offered the property.

For applicants unable to bid online there is an option to place bids by phone through the Common Housing Register team. The allocations policy also allows the team to place bids automatically on behalf of an applicant who is vulnerable.

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**Perth and Kinross Council** operates a common housing register. After consultation with housing applicants, tenants and other organisations, it has also developed a common allocations policy with four housing associations.

The policy is based on a groups plus points system. Although a long document it is attractively presented and written in plain English. Use of the active voice and clear 'signposting' of different sections help to guide the reader through the complexities of the policy.

Applicants are placed in one of four groups:

- Strategic needs
- Homelessness
- Transfer applicants
- Housing waiting list applicants.

The 'strategic needs group' is designed to meet urgent or exceptional housing need as quickly as possible - for example looked after children, people experiencing serious harassment, or people ready to leave hospital who have nowhere to go.

A target quota is set for lets within each group, with 50 percent going to the homelessness group. The targets, and an explanation of points awarded to applicants in different circumstances, are set out in an appendix to the policy.



## Information about the allocations policy

As the Practice Guide to allocations notes, 'Allocations systems are complex and detailed and can be difficult for people to understand. It is therefore important that landlords provide easily understandable high-quality information and advice to applicants or those considering applying.' Among other things, it says landlords should publish both the full allocations policy and a summary version.

Full policies were found for all except 2 landlords (both of these had published summaries giving fairly detailed information for applicants). Summary leaflets were found for 11 landlords and a summary web page for another 6. In the case of 9 landlords no summary was found on their website.

**East Lothian Council** has clear and accessible information on its website about how to apply for housing. Contact details are prominent on each page and applicants are encouraged to get in touch if they need help to fill in the form.

Information for applicants includes a guidance note, 'How we let our council houses', summarising the allocations policy. There is also a guidance leaflet for applicants on filling in the application form. Both documents are attractively presented and written in plain English. As well as explaining how applications are assessed the guidance note includes details of supply and demand in each local area, giving a realistic picture of supply and demand.

The council offers housing options interviews and the website gives contact details for each of its six area offices. However, the website states that these are currently closed because of COVID and applicants are asked to make contact by phone.

**Moray Council** has published a plain English version of its allocations policy in a question-and-answer format. It is comprehensive and covers all aspects of the policy. Although long, at 27 pages, the use of plain English and the question-and-answer format makes the information easier to understand, and the use of examples helps to make it seem more relevant to applicants.

**Renfrewshire Council** shares a common allocation policy with four housing associations. It has published a very useful summary leaflet explaining the policy. The document is short with information summarised in six pages including:

- A clear explanation of the 'groups and priority bands' system, illustrated in a table
- Information about sheltered housing
- Contact details, office opening hours and out of hours phone number
- Website addresses and phone numbers for the housing association partners
- Information about how to ask for the information in alternative formats and languages.

## Equal opportunities

As public authorities local councils have a duty under the Equality Act 2010 to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and foster good relations in carrying out their functions. Among other things this means equality impact assessment should be an integral part of their policy development.

Disability is of course one of the 'protected characteristics' under the Equality Act. The Practice Guide to allocations says 'This means that a social landlord must anticipate the needs of potentially disabled applicants and tenants', and where disabled people are at a disadvantage compared to non-disabled people the council must take 'reasonable steps to avoid the disadvantage'. They should also 'take reasonable steps to involve people who share a relevant protected characteristic or the representatives of the interests of these people'.

The review looked at whether councils made any specific reference to learning disability in their allocations policies and at what they said more generally about equalities. Assessing councils' approach to equalities on the basis of web-based information is necessarily subjective and the following comments should be seen in that light.

Ten of the 26 policies included some reference to learning disability. Fourteen councils included a brief general statement about equalities, while a further seven appeared to have a strong focus on this area. Eight councils included a reference within their policy to an equality impact assessment. Seven said they had already carried out the assessment and one that the policy 'will be' subject to an assessment. In contrast, five policies made no specific reference to equality.

**Highland Council** operates a common housing register and common allocations policy with partner housing associations. One of the policy's aims is that 'the Highland Housing Register partners will work together to maximise housing options for people with different needs, including planning for future provision of unmet needs.' The policy includes an allowance of 50 points for applicants with an identified need for independent living, for example someone in residential care or living in their parental home with a care package.

**East Ayrshire Council** shares a common housing register and common allocation policy with five registered social landlords. Equality and diversity feature strongly in the policy, which includes examples of positive action initiatives to address historic forms of discrimination.

**East Dunbartonshire Council's** allocations performance management reports include information about equal opportunities. It monitors information by age, disability, ethnicity and gender, including:

- number of applicants on the housing list
- number of new applications
- number of offers of housing accepted and refused, and reasons for refusal
- number of applicants rehoused

The council says it monitors demand for housing from disabled people and uses positive action programmes where particular groups are under-represented in its housing.

**West Lothian Council** aims to promote equal opportunities in all its housing services. It monitors allocations to make sure there is no discrimination in practice. It also says it uses positive action programmes to promote access to the service, for example by:

- publishing the allocation policy in other formats and other languages, as appropriate;
- auditing the allocation policy against corporate equality standards (plain language, accessible formats and so on) to ensure that we promote equality objectives;
- publicising the allocation policy widely to promote access to the common housing register; and
- establishing active partnerships to promote awareness of barriers to accessing housing, for instance promoting awareness of the social model of disability.

# Conclusion

Choice-based lettings are not widely used by local councils in Scotland. Only five council landlords had a fully choice-based letting process, while the majority of landlords used some variation of a groups and points-based system.

Edinburgh is unusual in being the only city council using choice-based lettings. It also shares a common housing register with 17 registered social landlords in the city who participate in its 'Key to Choice' CBL system. Because of Edinburgh's size and highly pressured housing market, its impact is significant in terms of a large and diverse group of applicants who may experience both the advantages and disadvantages of a choice-based lettings system.

Both types of policy - CBL and points-based - can be difficult to make sense of from an applicant's point of view. Common housing registers and common allocation policies can both help to simplify things for applicants. The widespread use of common housing registers (with three-quarters of councils having these in place) is a positive finding from this point of view.

But the requirement to register online can be a barrier for some applicants. This will include people without easy access to the internet and those lacking the digital skills to negotiate online systems and forms. People with learning disabilities may well have difficulty with these systems. It is important to recognise this and make sure support is available for people who need help to apply.

There is a general impression that support for people applying for housing has been less available during COVID. As we emerge from the pandemic, we are seeing problems of pent-up demand for housing. There have also been staffing issues for landlords in terms of absences due to illness or positive test results, a lack of in-person training and development opportunities over the past two years, and managing the transition back to office-based working.

A minority of councils - less than a third - have developed common allocation policies with other social landlords. There are probably good reasons for this in many cases. It would for example be difficult if not impossible in Edinburgh to agree a single policy with a large group of landlords who have varying aims, governance arrangements and client groups.

Common housing registers and allocation policies take a significant investment of

time and commitment to develop and establish. Clear and easily accessible information, in plain English and other formats, are easier and less costly to provide and could be an easy win for all landlords.

## Recommendations

We would like to see:

- people with learning disabilities more involved in policy development and review;
- consistent use of a well-resourced mechanism for digitally excluded or otherwise vulnerable people to apply for housing and, where relevant, to bid for properties;
- councils reviewing the support available to housing applicants more generally, with well-resourced, one-to-one support in place when needed;
- all council landlords publishing a plain English summary of their allocations policy;
- Easy Read [3] versions available for people with learning disabilities and other people who need them; and
- more consistent monitoring of allocations to people with learning disabilities and other equalities groups, with positive action taken where a need for it is identified.

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[3] See <https://www.learningdisabilities.org.uk/learning-disabilities/a-to-z/e/easy-read>

Appendix: allocations policies in local authorities (summary)

Type of allocations system				In common housing register	+ common allocation policy	Allocations policy available	Web page only (N = 6)	No summary found (N =9)
Groups & points (N = 19)	Groups & priority bands (N = 2)	Full CBL, categories & priority banding (N = 5)	Partial CBL (N = 5)	(N = 19)	(N = 8)	Leaflet (N = 11)	only (N = 6)	found (N =9)
Aberdeen	Orkney Islands	Aberdeenshire	Clackmannans hire	Angus	Angus	East Lothian	Dundee	Aberdeen
Clackmannanshire	Renfrewshire	Angus	Dundee	Edinburgh		Edinburgh	East Ayrshire	Aberdeenshire
Dundee		East Renfrewshire	Highland	Clackmannanshire		Falkirk	Fife	Angus
East Ayrshire		Edinburgh	Renfrewshire	Dundee	Dundee	Moray	North Lanarkshire	Clackmannanshire
East Dunbartonshire		Falkirk	Shetland	East Ayrshire	East Ayrshire	North Ayrshire	South Ayrshire	East Dunbartonshire
East Lothian				East Dunbartonshire		Orkney Islands	East Renfrewshire	Highland
Fife				East Renfrewshire	East Renfrewshire	Renfrewshire		Midlothian
Highland				Fife	Fife	Shetland Islands		Perth & Kinross
Midlothian				Highland	Highland	South Lanarkshire		Stirling
Moray				Midlothian		West Dunbartonshire		

Type of allocations system				In common housing register	+ common allocation policy	Allocations policy summary available	No summary found (N=9)	
<b>Groups &amp; points (N = 19)</b>	<b>Groups &amp; priority bands (N = 2)</b>	<b>Full CBL, categories &amp; priority banding (N = 5)</b>	<b>Partial CBL (N = 5)</b>	<b>(N = 19)</b>	<b>(N = 8)</b>	<b>Leaflet (N = 11)</b>	<b>Web page only (N = 6)</b>	<b>No summary found (N=9)</b>
North Ayrshire				Moray		West Lothian		
North Lanarkshire				North Ayrshire				
Perth & Kinross				North Lanarkshire				
Shetland Islands				Orkney Islands				
South Ayrshire				Perth & Kinross	Perth & Kinross			
South Lanarkshire				Renfrewshire	Renfrewshire			
Stirling				Shetland Islands				
West Dunbartonshire				South Lanarkshire				
West Lothian				West Lothian				