



**Allocations and Housing Options Policy**

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## Introduction

Barrhead Housing has recently introduced our new Allocations and Housing Options Policy. This policy is how we guide our customers to navigate through their housing options and apply for housing with us. The policy also sets out how we decide to whom we offer our vacant properties (this is known as 'allocations') and the eligibility criteria for applicants to our waiting list.

The Housing Scotland (2014) Act amended section 20 of the 1987 Act and sets out three categories of applicants that we must consider, by law, when deciding to whom we offer any homes that become available. These are homeless persons and persons threatened with homelessness and who have unmet housing needs; people who are living in unsatisfactory housing conditions and who have unmet housing needs; and tenants of houses which are held by a social landlord (such as a housing association or Council), which the social landlord selecting its tenants considers to be under-occupied.

We have considered these reasonable preference categories in the development of this policy. This means that we will consider whether applicants have housing needs which cannot be met through other housing options which are available. We will consider what those other options might be and whether they are accessible to the applicant. We will offer advice and support where appropriate.

We will let our properties in a way which allows reasonable choice for our customers, makes the best use of our properties, and contributes to the overall principle of creating balanced and sustainable communities where people can thrive and aspire. We want people to feel proud to live in a Barrhead Housing property.

We will work closely with East Renfrewshire Council and other public and third sector partner organisations to help prevent and reduce homelessness, whilst offering solutions to applicants from our waiting lists and nominations from partner agencies to address overall community housing need.

This policy has been reviewed by considering best practice from throughout the Scottish Social Housing Sector, the Scottish Government's Practice Guide on Social Housing Allocations, all relevant current and draft legislation, and the Scottish Social Housing Charter. We have also consulted with our customers, our partners, our Governing Board, and our staff team to set out our priorities for this policy.

## Review

Our previous allocations policy was overdue for review by September 2022. This previous policy had been amended to take account of the COVID-19 public health emergency which led to various legislation being passed to support existing tenants to remain in their homes, whilst seeking to minimise the effects of the pandemic on those who were homeless.

As the emergency passed, we began work to review our allocations policy and understand what changes we might need to make to address the growing demand for housing during a cost-of-living crisis. We saw that demand for our properties was increasing; our waiting list nearly doubled between May 2022 and November 2023. This was replicated across the country; it was clear that a national housing crisis was emerging and that we would need to adapt to respond to local pressures.

Utilising text, email, telephone and online surveys, we asked our customers, staff, Governing Board, and external partners for their initial views on how we should prioritise to whom we allocate our properties and if there were any groups within the community who should be considered for additional support in seeking rehousing. For example, we wished to understand if we could do more to support survivors of domestic abuse or those with lived experience within the care system.

In addition to our initial consultation, we undertook research looking at the allocations policies of other social landlords. We compared the approaches of housing associations of comparable size and housing demand to our own. We also looked at the policies and local housing strategies of local Councils and larger social landlords based across the country to see what we could learn from their approach in working with large numbers of applicants.

The Scottish Government has a published best practice guide for social housing allocations, and this helped us to understand where and how we could best offer flexibility to our customers. To offer maximum choice to our customers, we spoke with Housing Options Scotland to establish best practice in identifying viable housing options for applicants so we could redesign our process for how our customers apply for housing.

Finally, we undertook an Equality Impact Assessment to ensure that any changes we considered would not negatively impact on those in our community with protected characteristics.

## Consultation Pre-Draft

Our consultation before our initial draft of the new policy showed broad support for our initial aims of prioritising those who are homeless; overcrowded; surviving domestic abuse; and with children living elsewhere. There was also broad support for the idea of having a limit on the number of offers made to individual applicants, although around 40% felt there should be no limit at all.

Our Board indicated that alleviating homelessness was their top priority, whilst our staff survey showed a broad range of views on who we should prioritise. This included overcrowded households; those with health conditions; and those facing homelessness. Our external partners favoured an approach that alleviated homelessness and addressed unmet need in the community, such as those leaving the care system; or with health conditions which meant their current housing circumstances negatively impacted on their day-to-day living.

## Draft policy

With this broad outline of priorities, we set to work on a draft of our new policy which encompassed the needs and aspirations of our customers and stakeholders. This included a mechanism where we would have an annual review of the number of offers made to our own waiting list, our existing customers and to homeless applicants referred to us by East Renfrewshire Council. In the first year, we proposed that 50% of our empty properties would be offered to homeless applicants, with 35% to our waiting list, 10% to existing customers with housing need and 5% as direct tenancies made to applicants referred to us by external partners such as Social Work or the East Renfrewshire Health and Social Care Partnership.

Allocations group	Previous target	Proposed new target
Homeless applicants	40%	50%
General waiting list	40%	35%
Internal transfer list (existing customers)	15%	10%
Direct referrals from other agencies	5%	5%

We had heard views from our existing customers who wished for a better chance of offers for our new build properties in future developments. To reflect this aspiration, the allocations of new build properties was proposed in the draft policy to be slightly different to

properties which became empty. We proposed to allocate 40% of these homes to those who are homeless, 40% to our waiting list and 20% to our own customers.

<b>New build developments – allocations group</b>	<b>Proposed new target</b>
Homeless applicants	40%
General waiting list	40%
Internal transfer list (existing customers)	20%

Our draft policy also reformed how we allocate priority to those with health conditions. We saw that applicants had been prioritised as ‘Medical C,’ which in practice led to very few offers of housing to such applicants, and in most instances the award of points would not have alleviated any housing need. However, we will honour the previous award of ‘Medical C’ for applicants for one offer of housing after the introduction of our new policy before removing these points.

To improve our offer to those with health conditions, we reduced this to two categories with points (‘Red’ and ‘Amber’), with a new category of ‘Green’ where we recognised the health condition but also that rehousing would not meaningfully alleviate the effects of the condition.

We created new categories of applicant, such as those leaving care; those exiting the armed forces; and those being discharged from prison or hospital. We also clarified who would be prioritised for housing if they were facing harassment and abuse, as well as people in insecure housing, such as those required to leave a private residential or tied tenancy. We created a separate category for survivors of domestic abuse, with guidance around how we would support those in these circumstances. As part of our ongoing commitment to support those surviving domestic abuse, we will publish a separate standalone policy on our approach to domestic abuse.

A limit on the number of offers of an applicant can receive was included in the draft, with most applicants being limited to two offers before their application is reviewed and potentially suspended. Exceptions for this are made for those facing domestic abuse and sustained harassment in their tenancy, although we would expect those in these circumstances to accept a reasonable offer of rehousing when it is made.

We want our customers to be able to make informed decisions on their housing options. We have revised our approach to housing options to enable us to offer tailored advice and

support to all applicants. We have used a conversational AI tool named ‘Vox’ to capture basic information regarding applicant’s circumstances and to understand their housing needs. Using this information, we will offer tailored housing options advice prior to an application for housing. For those unable to use our online services, we will continue to offer telephone and in-person support where required.

### Consultation post-draft

We presented our draft policy to our Governing Board at their meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2023. This was used as the basis for discussion around the draft policy, which gained broad approval from the Board on the basis we would then consult with our customers and other stakeholders on this draft. The consultation began in late January 2024, again using email, text, telephone, and online options to complete the survey. We received 38 responses to our consultation.

In responding to the consultation, respondents gave views on five key points and proposed changes. On the proposal to set our allocations targets as set out in our draft, 63% of responses to the consultation were in favour of this. 85% agreed with our plan to allow parents with overnight access to their children to apply for larger homes. 93% agreed with our plans to offer additional support to those experiencing harassment and/or survivors of domestic abuse. 75% agreed with a limit of two offers per application (with the exceptions as laid out in the draft) before a review of the application takes place. Finally, 87% of respondents agreed with proposed changes on to how prioritise those with health conditions.

Proposal	Responses in favour
New allocations targets and annual review	63%
Larger homes for parents with shared access	85%
More priority and support for those experiencing harassment and/or surviving domestic abuse	93%
Limit of two offers per application (with exceptions)	75%
Changes to priority for those with health conditions	87%

We also consulted on ways that we could incentivise people in homes too large for their needs to downsize, as this is a key aim for our policy. The respondents chose from five options, and could choose more than one option to reflect the flexibility we wish to offer:

Incentive	Respondents
Decoration vouchers	13
Removal costs	17
One-off cash payment	12
Priority for new build and / or newer style properties	23
Other (not specified)	1

We also received consultation responses from different teams within East Renfrewshire Council and East Renfrewshire Health and Social Care Partnership indicating their desire for priority of offers to homeless applicants, and those within the care system.

### **Final draft**

The consultation responses to our draft policy were overwhelmingly positive, with most responses being in favour of our proposed priorities and changes for our new policy. On 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2024, the Governing Board reviewed and approved the final draft of the Allocations and Housing Options policy. Following this, we revised our housing management system to accommodate our new allocations priority points. Our new policy came into effect at the start of May 2024.

To prepare for the changes to applications with new points priorities under the new policy, we wrote to all applicants on our waiting lists enquiring whether they wished to remain on the waiting list under the revised eligibility criteria. Applicants who failed to respond will have six months to respond or will have to submit a new application through our new housing options journey.

We will also review the effectiveness of the policy after six months and advise our Governing Board if any further changes are recommended by the Director of Customer Services.