

Westminster City Council Updated Interim Allocation of Housing Statement (Updated 20th July 2020)

1. Due to the unprecedented circumstances resulting from Covid-19, the council is using the discretion allowed in its Allocation Scheme 2020 and in other policies to let properties differently for an interim period. This Updated Statement replaces the ones published on 18th May and amended slightly on 13th July. Previous versions be found at

www.westminster.gov.uk/housing-strategies#allocations-scheme.

- 1.1 This interim approach has been developed taking into account:
 - The health, safety and welfare of applicants and staff
 - The capacity of services
 - The need to make the best use of housing stock available to the council for those in need
 - Costs and the resources available to the council
 - Government guidance¹.
- 1.2 This Updated Statement applies to the allocation and letting of:
 - **Social housing:** council and housing association² homes
 - **Temporary accommodation for homeless households:** where the council has a rehousing duty
 - **Private rented housing for homeless households:** where the council has a rehousing duty.
- 1.3 This Updated Statement only applies to people/households that the council would normally let housing to in line with its statutory duties i.e. eligible housing applicants that are on the council's housing register and those it has a duty to under homelessness legislation.

2. Letting social homes

The council is working towards letting homes in line with its Allocation Scheme but this will take time and it is recognised that the country has not returned to normal and Covid-19 still poses particular risk to certain people and households.

- 2.1 Any vacant housing, which can be let safely, will therefore firstly be offered, **by direct offer**, to applicants that need to move for urgent reasons, and/or may be particularly affected by the impact of Covid-19 and the current response. The following priority orders will be used:

¹ www.gov.uk/guidance/government-advice-on-home-moving-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak#social-landlords

² Housing associations are also known as registered providers

Table 1: Priorities for letting properties

| | Priority |
|---|---|
| 1 | Those fleeing domestic abuse/violence |
| 2 | Those with a medical need to move (and are not on the Government's vulnerable list with recommendations to remain at home) or to eligible applicants to free up accommodation for those with a medical need to move |
| 3 | Where a property is uninhabitable and requires urgent repairs |
| 4 | Those that are statutorily overcrowded |

- 2.2 Making direct offers, means the council can respond quickly to meet urgent housing needs and make the best use of housing stock.
- 2.3 Where more than one person/household meets the criteria in table 1, the property will be offered to the applicant on the housing register with the highest points. If the points are the same it will be offered to the applicant that has been registered the longest on the housing register.
- 2.4 *The type of property offered*
The property offered could be any of the housing types in 1.2, as appropriate for different needs and circumstances of the person/housing and taking into account the relevant legal framework and other council policies.
- 2.5 *One bedroom/studio social homes*
Housing applicants currently living in hostel accommodation that have been assessed as able to move on into social housing will meet the criteria for priority group 2, where their moving would free up hostel spaces for rough sleepers, currently accommodated in hotels. This hotel accommodation is inappropriate for rough sleepers beyond an emergency temporary period, while hostel accommodation provides support and it will help to minimise the risk of rough sleepers returning to the streets which is beneficial to their health and in the wider public/health interests. Hotel accommodation is also costly to the council.
- 2.6 *Accepting direct offers*
If these direct offers are not accepted, decisions about whether they should be enforced will be made on a case by case basis, taking into account all the relevant information, including the health of the applicant and the ability to move.
- 2.7 *The reintroduction of Choice Based Lettings*
Choice Based Letting is being reintroduced gradually for social housing properties and is currently only available to the groups in the table below. It will be opened up to other groups as soon as possible.

Table 2: Households that will be able to bid for properties

| Group | Reason why |
|---|---|
| Homeless households (single people and families) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Largest group in need of housing • Makes the best use of housing stock by freeing up temporary accommodation for others in need of it, at a time when procuring new supply is challenging |
| Overcrowded households living in council housing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May help to address the impact of Covid-19 could help to reduce transmissions |
| Households that need to move to enable the council's housing renewal programme to go ahead | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing renewal will increase the supply of affordable housing across Westminster, so over time will benefit all those in need of social housing • In some cases it involves the demolition of existing properties |
| Households that need to move for general medical reasons (that wouldn't necessarily meet the criteria in priority 2 in table 1) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Households with some of the highest needs to move |

2.9 Every effort will be made to ensure that other groups on the council's housing register will have opportunities to bid for social housing later in the year, so there is a balanced approach to the allocation of social housing. The council will publish a report setting out the projected number of allocations expected to each group in need of housing for the remainder of the year 2020/21 once the normal approach to allocations has resumed³.

2.10 *Community Supportive Housing (also known as sheltered)*

Given older people are known to be at higher risk from Covid-19, compared with other age groups, and as some communal facilities are currently closed to residents, lets will only be made to older people to prevent their homelessness as they are in urgent need of accommodation.

2.11 *Discretion and exceptional circumstances*

There may be times when the Director responsible for Housing needs to exercise discretion to the approach set out in this Updated Statement to respond to the unprecedented and changing situation, the exceptional needs of the applicant or other council priorities.

2.12 *Letting properties safely*

Every effort is being made to let properties as safely as possible with minimum face to face contact and this will include:

³ The council publishes a Supply and Allocation Report annually which sets out the proportion of lettings it expects to make to each group with priority for housing under the Allocation Scheme. Previous reports can be found at: www.westminster.gov.uk/housing-strategies#allocations-scheme

- Virtual or photographic viewings, or viewings where only the applicant enters the property and social distancing is achieved
- Electronic documents for sign up.

2.13 The council has worked with housing associations to understand their processes and to ensure they are as safe as possible and will only put their properties forward for direct offer or for choice based lettings where it is reassured of this

2.14 *Legal implications*

The councils Housing Allocation Scheme 2019 provides sufficient discretion for the Director of Housing to make temporary amendments to the Scheme in these exceptional circumstances and the relevant sections relied upon are shown in Appendix 1.

3. Letting private rented accommodation to homeless households

Homeless households that are placed in longer term private rented temporary accommodation (called stage 2 temporary accommodation) often need to move, if it no longer meets their needs or if the lease is coming to end and these lettings will resume. Lettings from shorter term temporary accommodation into stage 2 accommodation will also resume.

3.1 The council has a policy of making offers of private rented housing to homeless households^[1] and offers and lets will also resume. This will provide the household with more settled accommodation compared with their temporary accommodation. It will also free up temporary accommodation for new homeless households.

3.2 For both moves, assessments will be carried out to ensure a move at this time is suitable for the household.

3.3 As with social properties, these private rented homes will be let safely using the measures described in 2.12.

4. Equalities Implications

A full equalities impact assessment on this Updated Statement has been completed which has taken into account the views and experiences of registered providers as far as possible.

5. Timings

This Updated Statement applies from 20th July. The council aims to resume letting social housing in line with its Allocation Scheme 2020 from 24th August 2020, but this may not be possible given the current situation is fast moving and as a result this Updated Statement may need to be changed at short notice.

^[1] Called the Private Rented Offers Policy which can be found at: www.westminster.gov.uk/housing-strategies#homelessness-policies

6. Communications

Housing applicants will be informed where possible of the changes by all means possible such as by letter, email and text and calls are made to those with no internet. Translations are offered by request. Applicants also access the latest updates online at:

www.westminster.gov.uk/housing.

Appendix 1:

The Housing Allocation Scheme 2020: Discretion

- 1.1.8 *From time to time the scheme refers to the existence of a discretion or general discretion. Except when otherwise provided, this refers to a discretion to be exercised by the Director of Housing or by a duly delegated person(s) and shall allow the person exercising the decision to take account of all circumstances considered appropriate and/or relevant by that person including (when considered appropriate and relevant) the demand for and supply of accommodation and the general housing circumstances within the City of Westminster.*
- 1.1.9 *The Director of Housing has discretion to give such additional preference as the Director considers appropriate to any applicant who, in the opinion of the Director, has pressing housing needs.*
- 2.2.3 *Where the Council considers that it is inappropriate for the applicant to participate in Choice Based Lettings. For example, vulnerable applicants nominated by Social and Community Services where the Council will work closely with social workers and care managers to decide on the best letting method for these applicants. Other examples include cases where an applicant is subject to Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) or presents a risk to themselves or others.*
- 2.2.4 *The Council may make direct offers to applicants for the purpose of discharging a housing duty (noting that in addition section 13.2.3 may apply). This may include but the discretion is not limited to homeless households that have failed to bid or to regularly bid for properties and/or fail to view or refuse properties after bidding.*