

Research Report



Brent Council housing allocation focus group findings - Housing Professionals

Prepared for: Brent Council

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and methodology

In February 2019 Brent Council commissioned BMG Research to carry out two focus groups into proposed changes to the Council's housing allocation policy. This report summarises the findings from a session carried out with housing professionals; the other, with a group of Brent residents, is covered in a separate report. These groups form part of a wider consultation whereby Brent Council is asking for views from a range of stakeholders, such as Adult Social Care and Children and Young People, local councillors, probation services, and people who are on the Housing Register.

The group was carried out on 12th March 2019, and was moderated by BMG Research staff. An officer from Brent Council was also present to explain the proposals and to deal with any questions on the detail of the proposals.

Brent Council invited a range of housing professionals to attend, from housing associations that currently work with the Council. Six did so, each representing different housing associations. Job titles of the attendees were as follows:

- Acquisitions and Lease Renewals Manager
- New Business and Leasing Manager, temporary accommodation
- Tenancy Services Officer
- Private Sector Leasing Manager
- Allocations and Lettings Officer
- Available Homes Officer

All bar one of the attendees had already completed an earlier online consultation run by the Council on the proposals.

1.2 Note on interpretation of qualitative research and data

It is important to note that findings refer solely to those attending the group, and should not therefore be taken as representative of all housing association stakeholders. Quotations have also been included in the report (in italics, or else in quotation marks where they are incorporated in a body of commentary) to provide evidence for the views and experiences reported (both those that were more common, and minority views). Quotations were selected for inclusion in this report on the basis that they met the following criteria:

- where a quote explains an issue more succinctly than could be otherwise described in the body text; and
- where a quote highlights a key issue discussed by participant in a succinct and clear manner.

For each of the proposals, after discussion a brief 'vote' was held on who was in favour / against the proposal. The findings from the 'vote' are given for each proposal in this

report; again, it should be noted that these findings should not be assumed to be representative of all housing association stakeholders.

2 Perceived issues with housing allocations

Before discussing the specific proposals, participants were first of all asked what they consider to be the current main issues in housing allocations and what they think may be issues in the future.

2.1 Affordability

The main issue raised was affordability. Several participants referred to 'affordable' rents not being sufficiently affordable; one suggested changing such rents from 80% of the market rent to 60%, whilst accepting that this was unlikely to happen.

One participant stated that households are now being forced to move out of London to obtain affordable rents.

In the context of affordability, one participant stated that in their experience households are tempted to accept properties that they cannot realistically afford, because they have been waiting for permanent accommodation for a long period.

2.2 Universal Credit

Welfare reform and specifically Universal Credit was cited by several participants in the context of affordability. One participant referred to the built-in delay in payments for those applying for Universal Credit / switching over from Housing Benefit to UC, and the need for support during this period. Other participants also referred to individuals being trapped in benefits rather than obtaining work.

2.3 Supply

To general agreement, one participant referred to lack of supply as a key challenge for allocation policy.

2.4 Other issues

One participant stated security of tenure was an issue for those in temporary accommodation, in terms of households not knowing whether the lease would be renewed or how long they would be in temporary accommodation.

One participant was concerned about sharing of risk between housing associations and the Council in relation to the reasonable rent scheme (another participant stated this was not an issue for their organisation).

3 Proposal 1: Allow households moved from Band C to Band D to retain the time spent waiting in Bands C / D if they move up to Band C again

3.1 Proposal

The first proposal considered was:

To allow households moved from Band C to Band D to retain the time spent waiting in Bands C / D if they move up to Band C again [currently on moving back up to Band C, their registration date is the date on which they are re-accepted into Band C].

Before the start of discussion, as well as explaining the proposal, context was also provided on the Council's change in policy following the Localism Act, where a large number of households were moved down from Band C to Band D. These households retained the time spent waiting in Band C when moving down a band, and would therefore be affected by the proposal if they moved back up to Band C.

3.2 Summary of opinion

After discussion, five of the participants were in favour of this proposal whilst one had reservations.

Apart from general agreement, specific points raised were as follows:

One participant stated their housing association carries out its own banding and therefore did not see the proposal as relevant to them.

A second participant stated they thought the proposal would lead to a 'fairer' allocations policy, and that it would be encouraging for residents affected.

A third participant questioned whether the proposal would be justified in cases where the resident's circumstances had changed; for instance, if time spent on the Housing Register due to a household being overcrowded should 'count' later when the household was no longer overcrowded due to someone leaving the household.

One participant also voiced general concerns about high expectations amongst those trying to access social housing, whilst stating that their comment did not necessarily relate directly to the proposal.

4 Proposal 2: Giving priority to households who need a transfer to bid for newly-built accommodation that becomes available on their current estate

4.1 Proposal

The second proposal considered was:

Giving priority to households who need a transfer to bid for newly-built accommodation that becomes available on their current estate.

Before the start of discussion, it was explained that this proposal relates to newly-built infill accommodation.

4.2 Summary of opinion

All participants were in favour of the proposal.

Apart from general agreement, specific points raised were as follows:

One participant supported the proposal on the grounds of community cohesion, giving the examples of children not having to move school, and older people being able to both downsize and stay in the same area.

A further participant was supportive stating that she is aware of complaints from residents having to move area despite suitable new infill housing being built on their estate:

I think the anger, it's the point that people are making that I'd been a transfer resident for years and years and years waiting for my probably larger property, that's the main reason I think, over-crowding, and I think the anger is when they see new developments being built on their doorstep which would be ideal... that's where we get the angry feedback is, 'Why can't I have that property for goodness' sake, I've been waiting for x number of years'

A further participant stated that existing residents who have to deal with the disruption of infill housing being built on their estate should be able to benefit from the new housing if they wish. This participant considered that the proposal could help offset the downside of disruption associated with building infill housing in residents' minds, and increase resident buy-in when balloting takes place.

5 Proposal 3: Give priority to accepted homeless households living in Temporary Accommodation on an estate that is being regenerated, for an allocation of social housing that becomes available on the same estate

5.1 Proposal

The next proposal considered was:

Giving priority to accepted homeless households living in Temporary Accommodation on an estate that is being regenerated, for an allocation of social housing that becomes available on the same estate.

Before the start of discussion, the proposal was explained, with work in South Kilburn cited as an example of the kind of regeneration work covered by this proposal.

5.2 Summary of opinion

All participants were in favour of the proposal.

Support was expressed for the proposal on the grounds, as with Proposal 2, that it is likely to increase resident support for regeneration schemes when balloted, thereby increasing supply not only to homeless households living on the estate but potentially also for other households not currently living on the estate. South Kilburn regeneration was cited in this context.

I think that the new supply that will be generated which is over and above the existing will then be available for other people then to access. So you have to look at the whole bigger picture.

One participant questioned whether the proposal would be fair to households living on a nearby street property, more in need than homeless households on the estate, who nonetheless would not receive the same priority under the new proposal. However, the predominant view was as expressed above, namely that increased supply would result to all households not just on the estate; and this participant 'voted' in favour.

One participant also stated they had heard positive feedback from homeless households now classed as tenants, who were able to pick colour schemes for their new home.

Again mirroring the response to Proposal 2, support was also expressed on the grounds of community cohesion:

It's good because it's like everybody knows everybody, so it's a nice community.

And you feel, 'Right, at least I know who's going to be living next to me,' because people always worry about their neighbours.

6 Proposal 4: Introduce a new nominations agreement with Registered Providers

6.1 Proposal

The next proposal considered was:

To introduce a new nominations agreement with Registered Providers (also known as the reasonable rent scheme).

In summary, the Council leases temporary accommodation from private landlords to help meet its homelessness duty. However, the supply of such accommodation is dwindling, as private landlords are increasingly unwilling to renew leases given the rent caps involved. The proposal would enable the Council to lease properties from private landlords as permanent homes, enabling the landlord to obtain a higher rental income. (Such properties would be managed by RPs, as is the case currently for most of the temporary accommodation referred to above).

6.2 Summary of opinion

All participants were in favour of the proposal.

Participants agreed that much detail would need to be agreed in terms of how risk would be shared between RPs and the Council, whether the new agreement could be put in place with the existing occupant in situ or whether it would need to wait until they moved out, etc. However, participants supported the principle of the proposal. It was seen as a positive way to increase or maintain supply, for example:

Yes, I think for us to be able to retain stock at the level we've got, let alone grow, we need something like this because... the stock that we already have is dwindling and dwindling and our grasp on the private landlord market within this borough dwindles with that.

I think that it definitely seems a good idea to deal with the demand... we can't build our way out of this.

Another participant saw the proposal as, in principle, "a winner all around" for the Council, landlords, and RPs:

You're securing possible long-term accommodation for the family while they are not on your discharging duty, they're not on your homeless person list any more. Landlords are getting the benefit of higher rent. Housing associations are getting more stability in their temporary accommodation stock, if you like, as well.

7 Proposal 5: Revising the quota system

7.1 Proposal

The next proposal considered was:

To revise the quota system.

It was explained that currently quotas are in place whereby different services have direct access to a capped number of homes for their clients. These services are: Brent Social Services (who have one quota for children leaving care and another quota for other child welfare-related cases); the Probation Service; Adult Social Care; the voluntary sector; and young people in employment or apprenticeships. Under the new proposal, the caps would be removed and nominations considered on a case-by-case basis.

7.2 Summary of opinion

Five participants were in favour of the proposal, the other was 'in the middle'.

As indicated above the response to this proposal was broadly positive, for example:

That is a better option because you have a lot of people who have been incarcerated who tend to get a lot of the housing, as it stands now, the one-beds over the last five or six years. Most of the people that I give a tenancy to for, like, somebody's leaving a care home or has been incarcerated or has support needs.

However, there was recognition that increasing supply of units will be key, as will continuing support for vulnerable tenants, for example:

The new way sounds better but overall vulnerable residents or tenants, they need continuing support. Because a high percentage of them, we have to evict them because they are just not engaging and they've got no social worker, no support worker. So, this is all fine, but we need to carry on with the support because what's the point in somebody going through all of that, getting a tenancy and within a year they've lost it.

Specifically, one participant envisaged the need for support increasing as a result of the roll-out of Universal Credit and vulnerable tenants now being responsible for making their own rent payments.

It was also suggested that decisions in such cases were 'big decisions' for a panel of three to take.

8 Proposal 6: Prioritise unaffordability

8.1 Proposal

The next proposal considered was:

That residents who have no reason to be on the Housing Register other than low income or being dependent on benefits are now allowed to bid for social housing in Brent.

8.2 Summary of opinion

Three participants were against the proposal, two were in favour, and one neither in favour nor against.

As indicated above, this proposal attracted the most negative, and also most polarised, reaction.

Two participants were in favour because they have a number of one-bedroom hard-to-let properties that could be rented to some of those who would go on to the Housing Register under this proposal. On this basis, benefits were seen for the housing association, in terms of increasing rental income and reducing voids, together with the issues relating to voids (squatting and ASB were specified in this context). Similarly, benefits were seen by these participants for households added to the Housing Register under this proposal, who would now be able to pay below the market rent.

Another participant also stated that whilst they too have one-bedroom properties that are hard to let, "I find myself rejecting a lot of applicants based on affordability because we take into consideration the overall cost of living".

By contrast, other participants opposed the proposal because they felt that supply was insufficient to meet the needs of those who would join the Register under this proposal. One of these participants stated this would give 'false hope' to affected residents and another stated that the proposal could lead to the waiting list becoming 'never ending'. The latter participant also stated that affected residents 'don't have any reason to be on the list'; that some could be in a position to live in a less expensive area; and that some choose to live on benefits.

One participant also described the proposal as 'judgmental', in terms of placing households in a band on the basis of their income / dependence on benefits.

Appendix: Statement of Terms

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