

# Who gets housed?

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Social housing may have been a universal service once, but the people who are applying for it now are likely to be poor. Better off tenants and applicants have been able to buy houses instead of renting them; poorer people go to social housing because they have no choice.

If the property is going to people who need it, does it matter which people? The answer has to be 'yes'. In the competition for decent housing, the people who lose out are often those with the worst problems, those who are most in need, those who are most disadvantaged. This can only be countered by positive action.

## **The problems**

The situation is largely beyond the control of the agencies. There is a major shortage of houses to let, and a desperate shortage of houses available to people on low incomes. But this is only part of the problem. Much of the available housing is of the wrong type. Councils built to house families, but standards have changed - many houses are too small for large families, and flats are generally unsuitable for families. The applicants have also changed; many are single, elderly, or people with special needs. Much of the housing is in the wrong place - physically isolated, on the edges of towns. And the council stock is deteriorating - particularly much of the non-traditional building of the 1960s. The worst houses become vacant most often; they are much if not most of what councils have to let. Councils often face the irony of having property which is difficult to let at the same time as they have growing waiting lists and homelessness. The least desirable properties generally go to the people who are least able to choose.

The problems of social housing are deeply entrenched; they are not likely to be solved by changes in procedure. The issue is, at best, how councils and housing associations adapt to these pressures.

## **The policies**

For those who are disadvantaged, social housing has not been particularly effective or equitable in distributing resources. Many allocations policies still reflect the conditions of thirty years ago, when there was lots of clearance, little homelessness and only broad priority groups had to be defined. Councils were able to rely on a high number of lettings to deal with most of the problems; it did not seem to matter if there was some 'rough

justice', because there would always be another opportunity for people to be rehoused. The effect of such policies now is to make it difficult for councils to respond appropriately to needs. Some councils try to get around their own rules, introducing a stream of 'special cases'; there are still local authorities where councillors insist on personally being involved with lettings, a system which tends towards patronage, sometimes even corruption. Others hold to the principle of 'first come, first served'. This may make sense when everyone can expect to be housed within three to six months; but when most people who apply for housing will never be housed, large numbers of homeless people have to be dealt with straight away, and there are few really good houses, it breaks down. Waiting lists work against the people least able to wait, who end up in the worst housing.

Some non-traditional policies, often formed with the best of intentions, don't always help either. Decentralisation sounds like a good idea - make things local and they'll be more responsive to needs - but it can create obstacles for people who don't have local links. Homeless people can't afford to have their choice limited by area - there aren't enough houses in one place. Women at risk of domestic violence may need to be out of the area altogether. And many people who are vulnerable need to be considered for any location, without taking second place to those with strong local preferences. Another popular nostrum is tenant participation. The tenants want priority for themselves, so that they can improve their housing conditions, and for their sons and daughters, who live with them and have nowhere else to go. These are reasonable aspirations; but tenants are competitors in the struggle for scarce resources. Some groups, including many racial minorities, are underrepresented among tenants; and the claims of tenants have to be balanced against other needs - people who are evicted from private accommodation, young people leaving care, or discharged psychiatric patients.

### **The principles**

There is no single ideal policy which can fit all agencies in every circumstance. Local conditions differ; a policy which is right for a large, inner city housing authority can't be taken and applied directly to a small, rural housing association. But there are some principles which are generally important.

1. The procedure for allocations policy has to be accessible. This means that people in need have to be aware of the options, which requires publicity and information. Equally, the procedure will not help if the effect is immediately to deter people in need. Barriers to access, like minimum waiting periods or residential qualifications, are unacceptable.

2. There has to be some method of giving priority to people who are disadvantaged. Social landlords have to make some assessment of need. Application forms can be used as a rough sieve to identify people in need, though for some agencies (e.g. those who provide housing for disabled people) referrals from other agencies working in the field are sometimes more effective in identifying prospective tenants. The most effective methods used so far to define priorities have been points schemes, but the existence of a points scheme is not enough in itself; what matters is what the points are given for.

3. Social landlords have to make the best use of the housing they have. The stock is limited, and much of it is ill-suited for general purposes, but it doesn't have to be

unsatisfactory for everyone. High-rise building, for example, was generally inadequate for poor families with children. But it has increasingly been used for different kinds of tenant, like pensioners, and the majority of the occupants are now happy with it. Flats that are unsuitable for families can be used for single sharers. Isolated areas can be used for temporary rented accommodation for younger, more mobile people - who otherwise occupy houses in the private sector which could be used by families.

4. The consequences of policy are at least as important as the procedures which are used. The long-standing criticisms of racial disadvantage in council housing - criticisms which could be extended to much of the housing association movement - point to the problems when insufficient attention is paid to the consequences of allocation policies. Social landlords have to monitor their policies and practices. Fair procedures are not enough; there must also be fair results.

The main test of social housing has to be how successfully it can serve people in need. There are those in council housing and housing associations who would like to preserve the universalist aspirations of the service; a stress on needs may have the effect of residualising social housing further. However, where disadvantaged groups stand little or no chance of obtaining adequate housing in the private market, there may be no alternative. For many people, social housing is all there is.