Research to inform a fundamental review of social housing allocations policy

Executive Summary

December 2013

Paddy Gray, Michaela Keenan and Ursula McAnulty
University of Ulster

Anna Clarke, Sarah Monk and Connie Tang
University of Cambridge

The views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and do not necessarily represent those of the Department for Social Development or the Social Development Minister
In 2012, the Minister for Social Development announced a Fundamental Review of social housing allocations in Northern Ireland. The purpose of this review was “to ensure that the current ways of accessing the social housing waiting list and allocating social housing make the most effective use of scarce public resources in identifying and meeting housing need in the context of Government’s policy priorities”.

This document summarises the final report and the recommendations from the review, which were developed following detailed discussions with local key stakeholders and an analysis of best practice in the allocation of social housing in the UK and Republic of Ireland.

The research aimed to develop recommendations which would enable social housing need to be prioritised whilst also balancing the need for government priorities to be met in the short, medium and longer terms. The recommendations that follow strike this balance and are made with an emphasis on housing need with the aim of securing the best possible outcomes for households, enabling choice in relation to housing options and providing support where necessary.

The key statistics below provide critical information in relation to the social housing allocations system and help to contextualise the backdrop to the research and recommendations.

- 110,800 homes in the social housing sector in Northern Ireland
- 41,871 applicants on the housing waiting list
- 22,675 of the applicants on the list in housing stress
- 263 applicants on the list had 200 points or more
- 9,878 applicants found to be statutorily homeless
- 11,701 homes were allocated across the social housing sector in 2012
- 5,771 allocations (49%) were to statutorily homeless households
- 10,180 households were on the transfer list for rehousing
- 3,378 transfers were made (29% of all allocations) in 2012

(These statistics relate to 1 January 2013 unless otherwise indicated)

Research carried out by NIHE in 2006/7 found that:

- 29% of offers were accepted
- 34% of offers were refused (with a reason for refusal supplied) of which 12% had refused between 4 to 6 offers and 3%, seven or more offers
- a further 33% of applicants did not reply or give a reason for refusal
KEY MESSAGES FROM THESE STATISTICS

- Demand for social housing persistently outstrips supply in Northern Ireland.
- The social sector would need to grow by one third (37%) for it to house all those currently on the waiting list for social housing in Northern Ireland (or by one fifth (20%) if only those classified as being in housing stress were to be housed).
- Many stakeholders in Northern Ireland were of the view that the waiting list was not an accurate reflection of housing need and indeed there were applicants on this list who were already adequately housed.
- There may be geographical areas where people do not apply for housing as they know they have little chance of being housed, yet they may still be in housing need. This demand is currently latent but would become apparent if more houses were available.
- There is particular pressure to accommodate those found to be statutorily homeless. The number of ‘full duty’ homelessness cases represents over four-fifths (85%) of the total available lettings. ¹
- It is crucial to ensure that the processes of applying for, and letting, social housing make the most effective use of scarce public resources in identifying and meeting housing need and these should take account of broader government priorities.
- Evidence from elsewhere suggests that adopting a proactive approach through the use of Housing Options and Enhanced Housing Option Services allows housing providers to meet a range of housing need without sole reliance on the social housing sector.

The recommendations were developed for the medium to long term as a means of future-proofing any new allocations scheme. It is therefore critical that the recommendations are considered in light of this as we deliberate where we need to move to in relation to social housing allocation in Northern Ireland rather than solely thinking about current, immediate need.

¹ The NIHE need not discharge its duty to homeless applicants by housing them in the social rented sector, although this has been the NIHE’s custom and practice.
RECOMMENDATIONS

PRE-APPLICATION

1. A Housing Options Service should be introduced in Northern Ireland

APPLICATION

2. Universal access to social housing should be retained

ASSESSMENT

3. A needs-based approach should be used to prioritise applicants for social housing

4. A banded approach should be adopted for prioritising applicants
   
   A. Bands should be ranked to prioritise applicants
   B. A date-order system should be used to prioritise applicants within bands
   C. A Priority Dates Scheme should be used for changing circumstances

5. A separate Transfer List should be established
   
   A. The proportion of lets to transfers should be set by SIASP (see ‘Mechanisms for Implementation’ below for more information on SIASP)
   B. There should be transfer-led allocations for new build properties
   C. Management Transfers should continue

6. Mutual exchanges should be promoted as a mechanism to meet housing need
   
   A. Transfer applicants should be opted-in to the mutual exchange register
   B. The inclusion of registered private rented sector properties within the mutual exchange scheme should be explored

ALLOCATION

7. A Choice Based Letting (CBL) system should be introduced for the allocation of social housing properties in Northern Ireland
   
   A. To widen access, there should be— support for those who may be disadvantaged in the CBL system
B. *There should be use of an ‘Assisted List’ approach as a mechanism to support vulnerable and excluded groups*

C. *CBL bids should be monitored*

8. There should be a review of the classification of properties with specialist accommodation which will sit outside the principal scheme

9. Local Lettings Policies should be used to meet identified local circumstances

10. There should be a facility to make direct lettings in prescribed exceptional circumstances

11. Applicants that have committed Anti-Social Behaviour should be suspended from the list for up to 2 years

12. Applicants should receive a maximum of two reasonable offers

   A. *There should be suspension from the list for a period of one year for those who refuse two reasonable offers*

**MECHANISMS FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

13. A Strategic Independent Allocations Scrutiny Panel (SIASP) should be established

14. Allocations should be monitored using Housing Market Areas

**LONGER TERM**

15. There should be work towards developing Enhanced Housing Options Services

16. The introduction of a Quota System should be explored

   - *There should be provision for quotas to be varied between HMAs*
On the basis of the evidence reviewed in Reports 1 (Current approaches to accessing and allocating social housing in Northern Ireland) and 2 (Best practice approaches to accessing and allocating social housing in Britain and the Republic of Ireland), the final report (Conclusions and Recommendations) has made a series of recommendations. Taking a ‘blank sheet’ approach means that it may not be possible to implement recommendations under current legislation and new legislation might need to be considered.

These recommendations reflect best practice in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. If they were implemented in full, new ways of addressing responsibilities for homelessness, accessing the social housing register and operating the social housing allocation system would be integrated in the following way:

- Establishment of a Strategic Independent Allocations Scrutiny Panel;
- A Housing Options Service that includes the private rented sector;
- The continuation of a single housing register with universal access;
- A simple banded system to replace the current more complex points system to prioritise applicants, using time on the list within each band to determine priority; and
- The introduction of a Choice-Based Letting scheme across Northern Ireland with detailed information on lettings accessible to applicants.

The benefits of such an approach would be a system that is transparent, fair, and easily understood so that everyone can engage with it. Applicants would be empowered to make informed decisions about their housing options and would have more realistic expectations regarding the length of time they would have to wait. Social landlords would see a reduction in refusal rates because applicants would actively bid for properties they were prepared to live in. Staff would be released to provide a Housing Options Service, which would itself manage expectations and encourage applicants to explore other realistic solutions to their housing needs.