

Westminster City Council Interim Allocation of Housing Statement

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.
 - 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 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
 - 1.3 This 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.

2. Letting properties

The council is working towards letting homes in lines with its Allocation Scheme but this will take time so in the interim any vacant housing, which can be let safely, will 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:

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

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

- 2.1 Making direct offers, means the council can respond quickly to meet urgent housing needs and make the best use of housing stock.
- 2.2 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.
- 2.3 *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.
- 2.4 *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.
- 2.5 *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.
- 2.6 *The reintroduction of Choice Based Lettings*
Choice Based Letting will be reintroduced gradually for social housing properties and will firstly be available to applicants accepted as homeless and needing family sized homes of two bedrooms or more, where the council has a full housing duty towards them.
- 2.7 Over time it will be opened up to other groups and for other sized homes. The initial focus on homeless households needing family sized homes is because:
- They are the largest group in need of social housing
 - It 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.
- 2.8 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.
- 2.9 *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 Statement to respond to the

unprecedented and changing situation, the exceptional needs of the applicant or other council priorities.

2.10 *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:

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

2.11 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

3. 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.

4. Equalities Implications

Under normal circumstances, any changes to the Allocation Scheme 2019 would be subject to a full Equalities Impact Assessment and would be subject to a consultation. Due to the exceptional circumstances and the urgency of the situation, a full consultation (aside from informing housing association partners) and a full Equalities Impact Assessment has not been carried out.

4.1 Initial equalities screening has been completed and a full assessment will be completed when the Statement is reviewed at 8 weeks from implementation. At this time housing association partners will be asked to comment on any further changes.

5. Timings and Review

This Statement applies from 18th May 2020. Given the fast moving situation it may be updated at short notice and a full review of it will be undertaken at 8 weeks from implementation. Housing applicants will be informed where possible of the changes by all means possible.

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.*