



**Allocation of
social housing
in Swansea**

Executive
Summary

June 2020

Our Vision

Everyone in Wales should have a decent and affordable home: it is the foundation for the health and well-being of people and communities.

Mission

Shelter Cymru's mission is to improve people's lives through our advice and support services and through training, education and information work. Through our policy, research, campaigning and lobbying, we will help overcome the barriers that stand in the way of people in Wales having a decent affordable home.

Values

- Be independent and not compromised in any aspect of our work with people in housing need.
- Work as equals with people in housing need, respect their needs and help them to take control of their lives.
- Constructively challenge to ensure people are properly assisted and to improve good practice.

The report was written and researched by Paul Bevan with the help of Danielle Williams of Shelter Cymru

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Who is social housing for? In a time of an undersupply of affordable social housing is it for everyone, is it for people in the most desperate need of housing or is it for a mix of people somewhere in between? How do we balance creating sustainable communities with meeting need?

This report contributes to these debates by examining the extent to which the allocation of social housing in Swansea works for people trying to get a home. Funded by the Oak Foundation, it analyses the ways in which Swansea council, Coastal, Family and Pobl housing associations allocate and decide who gets social housing. Swansea council is the largest landlord with 68% of general needs housing, with Coastal and Pobl each having 13% and Family 6%.

The researchers spoke with people who had applied for social housing, including people who were homeless, to understand their experience and perspective. Managers of the social landlords and supported housing organisations were interviewed; housing, allocations and homelessness staff were shadowed and observed in their daily work; and local policies and procedures and national legislation and guidance were examined.

People's comments led to the conclusion that, from an applicant's perspective, applying for, and obtaining, social housing in Swansea can be complicated and difficult to understand. Whilst individual landlords may seek to provide person-centred services, the overall system for obtaining housing across the whole authority area is not as person-centred.

The routes to a home

There are seven main routes to obtaining social housing in Swansea: direct application, council nomination to a housing association, being housed due to homelessness, transfers, move-on from supported accommodation, exchanges and via ADAPT for adapted housing.

Each landlord has its own application, assessment and allocations process, and these can differ significantly. Applicants need to register or apply separately to each landlord that has the appropriate types of properties in the areas in which they want to live. They also need to contact them individually for updates about their application (or in the case of Coastal to directly apply for new vacancies).

The housing associations provide approximately 35-50% of their homes for households who are nominated to them by the council, some of whom are owed a homelessness duty. The percentage of homeless households that are housed by housing associations appears to be proportionately significantly lower than those housed by the council.

Who gets a home?

There is not a common approach to deciding who gets a home. Each landlord has a different way of prioritising people, and places different levels of emphasis on housing need, date of application and trying to create sustainable communities.

Restrictions to getting a home

All landlords have policies that mean some people are unable to access social housing. Former rent arrears, other housing debts and former anti-social behaviour can result in people being excluded. The landlords have varying degrees of flexibility in how they respond to applications from people who have former rent arrears and other housing debt. Usually they expect former rent arrears

to have been reduced and evidence of regular repayments to have been made before an offer of housing will be made. The Housing First model adopted in Swansea has an approach whereby social landlords do not prevent allocations as a result of outstanding arrears or housing debt.

The landlords usually expect applicants to be able to sustain a tenancy or have support in place to sustain a tenancy before they offer a person a home.

The landlords penalise applicants on their waiting lists who turn down offers of accommodation to varying extents, by limiting the number of offers they can receive, temporarily stopping them reapplying for housing or lowering the points they are awarded when reapplying. Coastal's choice based approach to lettings does not involve penalties for turning down offers.

Accessing housing associations' homes through referral by the council

The housing associations offer housing to people who are referred (nominated) to them by the council. There are some practical difficulties associated with the process which can frustrate applicants and staff, such as inaccurate contact details causing applicants to potentially lose an opportunity to be housed, wrong information being given to applicants about the nominations process, and the need for new application forms to be completed when a household is shortlisted. These difficulties lead to wasted time and resources for applicants and landlords, and may be a factor inhibiting some successful nominations.

Move-On from supported housing

The Move-On Strategy is a formal process whereby people in supported housing can move into social or private rented housing in a planned way. The landlords form a Move-

On Panel to consider applicants. People can wait over a year to be rehoused after being accepted by the Panel. Some people find that living in supported housing for long periods whilst they wait for a home can be very damaging to their mental health and wellbeing.

People need to be 'tenancy ready' in order to be accepted by the Move-On Panel. Some respondents said that this unnecessarily restricts people's referral to the Panel and delays them obtaining a home.

Common Housing Register, Common Allocations Policy and Choice Based Lettings

The social landlords in Swansea do not operate a Common Housing Register or Common Allocations Policy; Coastal is the only landlord that operates a choice based approach to lettings which allows applicants to see the properties on line. Although the landlords had mixed views about whether a Common Housing Register is required, some staff expressed strong views against the idea.

An advantage for applicants of Common Housing Registers is that there would be one application form to be completed to cover all landlords and one applications process. Information about the progress of applications should be much simpler than needing to contact all four landlords.

Most housing staff saw administrative benefits and increased choice for applicants from a choice based approach to lettings; however, some staff expressed concern about ensuring that people without internet access are not disadvantaged.

Recommendations

1. The social landlords must ensure that their policies on former tenancy issues (such as rent arrears, housing debt and anti-social behaviour) do not create obstacles to accessing social housing. Social landlords should ensure that all general needs allocations policies adopt the Housing First principles which promote easier access to housing for people who had difficulties with former tenancies.
2. The social landlords should move away from assessing the need for tenants to being fully 'tenancy ready' in order to move into social housing, and instead put more emphasis on trying to ensure that people are 'tenancy supported' by the most appropriate range of agencies in their homes.
3. The social landlords should relax their policies on the number of times applicants can refuse reasonable offers of housing. People should not be penalised for turning down offers of housing.
4. The council should explore opportunities with the housing associations to allocate more of their homes to homeless households.
5. The social landlords should collect statistical data in a more unified manner, and should consider widening the information that is collected to a level such as the CORE social housing lettings data collection in England.
6. The Welsh Government should introduce a data gathering system such as the CORE social housing lettings data collection in England. As an immediate step the Welsh Government should review the data collection on social housing allocations to ensure it is accurate, particularly for allocations due to homelessness.
7. As part of the review of the Move-On Strategy the council and partner agencies should address the following issues:
 - increase the number of homes offered by each landlord
 - replace the concept of being fully 'tenancy ready' with being 'tenancy supported' in line with a rapid rehousing ethos
 - create opportunities for the voices of people referred to the Panel to be heard more directly
 - shorten the length of time between acceptance of applications by the Panel and allocation of suitable housing
 - regularly update people who have been accepted by the Panel on when they are likely to be rehoused.
8. The social landlords should review the system of applying for and allocating social housing to make it simpler for people. An immediate improvement would be to develop a single entry point/one stop shop to make it easier for people to apply for social housing.