

The housing waiting list game - keeping the numbers down

Social housing tenants' groups, homeless organisations, and journalists often pore over the increases or decreases in annually published housing waiting lists to seek evidence of the need for social rented homes and how well need is being addressed or not.

But to what extent are these really helpful to those of us seeking the evidence? As the need for social rented housing continues to grow, will housing waiting list numbers also grow?

Legislation requires councils to produce allocations policies that explain which groups of people might apply for social housing in their areas, which of them get priority, and how the offers of any available homes would occur.

They must permit legally homeless and overcrowded households and those who need to move because of a disability, medical, welfare, or hardship reasons to register on their waiting lists.

Most either allocate points to applicants or place them in different priority 'bands.'

Policies vary from authority to authority - with no standardisation to enable comparisons between them - regarding the need for social rented housing or how well any might be meeting that need.

Even if a household can only meet the cost of a social rented home, it doesn't mean that they can register on the list. Many assume they will never get a home through applying to register on the list, so don't bother. At times, local authorities remove relatively large numbers from their lists.

The term 'waiting list' recalls a situation from the past, when perhaps a young, newly formed family living with their parents would add their names to their council's housing waiting list. Assuming good delivery of new council homes, they could reasonably expect to, gradually, move up the list and eventually get a home.

In reality, this expectation was disappearing from the 1980s with reductions in public funding for new council homes and governments suggesting that private finance would fill the gap in supporting the delivery of housing association homes. There were predictable failures in this strategy regarding social housing need and supply. It also commenced soon after local authorities had become legally obliged to house 'priority' homeless households (in 1977) and the Right to Buy had been introduced (in 1980).

There have been policy changes since then. None, however, have resulted in a return to adequate funding to build the public homes needed.

In 1996 the local authority duty to house homeless households ended, but they had to give a 'preference' to specified groups of people in allocating council or housing association homes.

From 1997-2012 the number of people or households registered on housing waiting lists in London more than doubled - from 181,080 to 380,301.

Later though, the 2011/12 Localism Act gave local authorities greater freedom to set their own policies on who might register on their waiting list. They were able to consider local connections to their areas and the financial resources and behaviour of an applicant in their preference categories. In discharging their duties to homeless households, they could also provide private rather than social rented accommodation, as long as it was for at least 12 months.

As a result, by 2014, 124,572 had been rapidly sliced from London's waiting lists.

Despite ongoing increases in the need for social rented homes in London, there were still fewer numbers on its housing waiting lists in 2020 than in 2014.

Housing needs surveys or Strategic Housing Market Assessments, which have been required thorough planning policy, provide far more accurate assessments than housing waiting lists.

The Mayor of London's analyses show that unmet or backlog need for social rented homes almost trebled from 61,000 in 2013 to 163,000 in 2017.

His 2017 analysis suggests that, even if an additional 31,000 social rented homes were built annually in the capital, it would take 25 years to address both the backlog and newly forming need. That annual figure equates to more than the 30,000 social and affordable rent homes delivered in London in 2012-20.

Last year, several housing organisations suggested a need for a post-pandemic building boom for social rented homes, which London Tenants Federation would support.

In reporting this, the Royal Town Planning Institute magazine *The Planner* said 'Covid-19 is set to double council housing waiting lists.'

We suspect that, to the contrary, we will see more local authorities playing the waiting list game. In other words, they will find ways to cut the numbers off their lists as - Barnet, Enfield, and Westminster Councils appear to have done in 2019-20 and, [Hackney](#) and [Newham Councils](#) have just agreed to do.

London councils' housing waiting list numbers '2012-2020										
YEAR	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	plus or minus
LONDON	380,301	344,294	255,729	263,491	227,549	243,668	232,409	243,551	250,922	-129,379
Barking and Dagenham	13,671	11,596	11,024	13,579	6,704	6,795	4,587	4,856	5,350	-8,321
Barnet	815	981	1,045	3,065	3,213	2,683	2,648	2,914	1,678	863
Bexley	9,765	9,579	3,481	4,612	5,017	6,022	6,613	6,553	6,589	-3,176
Brent	16,735	17,580	5,102	3,737	3,630	3,274	3,498	3,319	3,051	-13,684
Bromley	1,064	2,335	3,126	3,228	2,793	3,777	3,438	3,501	1,634	570
Camden	18,974	20,720	22,409	24,644	2,930	2,967	3,074	5,991	6,364	-12,610
City of London	1,147	1,312	476	693	771	853	656	780	782	-365
Croydon	8,758	8,848	5,102	5,009	4,530	5,052	5,138	5,468	5,819	-2,939
Ealing	13,870	9,213	10,676	10,607	11,452	12,684	13,685	8,670	9,545	-4,325
Enfield	6,956	6,315	2,237	1,945	1,843	3,246	3,444	4,424	3,712	-3,244
Greenwich	11,656	12,490	11,375	11,468	11,562	12,826	13,618	15,386	16,982	5,326
Hackney	14,171	15,090	7,926	10,715	11,238	12,372	12,766	12,951	13,440	-731
Hammersmith and Fulham	8,171	768	433	518	1,402	1,577	1,644	1,893	1,929	-6,242
Haringey	17,763	9,838	9,203	10,902	8,290	9,194	9,650	10,347	10,884	-6,879
Harrow	3,953	3,676	687	762	1,050	1,637	1,883	2,012	1,915	-2,038
Havering	9,365	11,592	2,271	2,354	2,615	2,204	2,234	1,987	1,995	-7,370
Hillingdon	9,948	10,879	3,606	3,567	2,314	1,826	1,687	1,738	2,229	-7,719
Hounslow	12,284	9,640	6,842	8,504	3,130	3,376	2,157	1,833	1,930	-10,354
Islington	13,690	19,178	17,860	19,196	20,733	18,033	14,469	14,567	14,164	474
Kensington and Chelsea	7,551	8,867	2,677	2,599	2,753	2,718	3,330	3,311	3,243	-4,308
Kingston upon Thames	7,374	5,515	6,436	7,105	8,542	9,732	0	1,755	2,867	-4,507
Lambeth	27,534	15,070	15,264	17,076	18,792	20,438	23,364	25,198	27,674	140
Lewisham	17,772	7,830	8,294	8,442	9,058	9,596	9,921	9,512	9,768	-8,004
Merton	7,295	8,196	7,625	8,229	8,938	9,581	9,802	10,215	9,678	2,383
Newham	30,975	24,179	15,582	16,755	17,453	25,729	26,139	27,635	28,020	-2,955
Redbridge	11,290	13,338	7,804	7,779	7,901	8,335	5,408	5,434	5,979	-5,311
Richmond upon Thames	5,587	4,415	4,008	4,101	4,908	3,068	3,944	4,336	4,467	-1,120
Southwark	14,112	14,713	13,436	7,832	7,096	6,665	6,778	6,772	8,088	-6,024
Sutton	5,493	979	1,496	1,319	1,162	1,375	1,587	1,591	1,999	-3,494
Tower Hamlets	23,406	24,428	20,425	19,783	19,124	18,616	18,808	19,826	20,073	-3,333
Waltham Forest	21,864	25,054	20,635	15,405	8,306	8,795	7,330	8,379	8,409	-13,455
Wandsworth	5,208	5,919	2,788	3,399	3,846	4,400	5,202	6,399	7,199	1,991
Westminster	2,084	4,161	4,378	4,562	4,453	4,222	3,907	3,998	3,466	1,382