

Throwing people off the Housing list cannot disguise the depth of the housing crisis

Slavishly following coalition government policy Swindon Borough Council's new Housing Allocations Policy is being implemented. **Swindon Tenants Campaign Group**, other tenant groups and the Council's own **Housing Advisory Forum** opposed these changes (see our [response](#)¹ to the proposals). We believe that the only serious way to address the housing shortage is to start building a new generation of Council homes (See "[Tackling Swindon's Housing Crisis](#)"²). However you police the list there is an acute shortage of 'social housing' that can only be overcome by reducing the shortage by new build.

One of the proposals which the Council has now implemented is the closure of Bands C ('in low need') and D (people who for various reasons cannot bid for properties). The Council has written to around 8,000 households telling them that in order to remain on the Housing Register they have to meet the new criteria in the Allocations Policy (see Appendix below) or they would be removed from the list. As we shall see later some of those on Band C have been reassigned to Band B, but the list has **shrunk by 7,845 households** to 8,272. The numbers on the previous list, in October of last year were 16,117.

There were two reasons given for closing Bands C and D somewhat at odds with each other. The Lead member for housing said that most of the people on Band C shouldn't be on the housing list and probably could afford to buy a house. He had no evidence to support this opinion and was forced to admit as much at a Cabinet meeting. The Council officer in charge of housing said that since most of the people on Band C stood no chance of getting a tenancy it was "more honest" to tell them as much and to remove them from the list. It would be less "disappointing for them". On the contrary, we don't believe that people who had been on Band C for a long time had any great expectations of getting a tenancy. A tiny number of people on it have got properties when bidding for flats or homes in areas with 'a bad reputation', but, in the absence of a major building programme the overwhelming majority of households on Band C stood no chance. That's a different matter, however, to saying or implying that those on Band C have 'no need' for housing, as the Council has suggested in the documents associated with introducing its new policy. Whilst most of the people on Band C may have adequate housing, whether or not they can easily afford high private rents is another matter altogether. In addition the private rented sector has the highest percentage of 'non-decent' homes, around 33% according to the latest English Housing Survey.

The Council's current computer system doesn't enable reports which give much in the way of information about the people on the list. Some of them might have been on there for a long time without bidding for a property, some might have bid and seen how far down the list they were and given up, concluding they stood no chance. One officer suggested to me that some people put their name down for when they need accommodation in the future. Of course, family circumstances change; more children are born, children leave home.

1 <http://keepourcouncilhomes.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/hapstcgsubmission.pdf>

2 <http://keepourcouncilhomes.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/stcgshousingsubmission.pdf>

There should be a new system in place in September which will enable the changes to be tracked. That should give more accurate evidence as to why people are on the list. Making assertions without evidence is worthless.

The Council's political administration *has sought to downplay the depth of the housing crisis* facing the town. Closing down Band C has virtually halved the waiting list, yet that has done nothing whatsoever to address the housing crisis. Indeed an extra 775 households have been added to Bands A and B since October. Probably a majority of these are those re-designated from Band C, though we don't have the detail to see the balance between them and new applicants. When you look at the breakdown of the households on the new list you can graphically see the scale of the problem. The ruling administration has no serious policy to tackle the crisis.

Here is a breakdown of the April 2014 list, according to qualification for the number of beds.

	Qualifies for	October 2013	April 2014	Increase/decrease
OAP Family with 1 dependent	2 Bed	29	32	+ 3
OAP Family with 2 dependants	3 Bed	0	0	-
OAP Couple (i.e. 1 partner 60 or over)	1 or 2 Bed	165	313	+ 148
OAP single person	1 Bed	417	712	+ 295
Parent(s) with 1 dependent	2 Bed	1,141	1,121	- 20
Parent(s) with 2 - 4 dependants	2 or 3 Bed	1,260	1,290	+ 30
Parents with 5 or more dependants	4 or more Beds	55	74	+ 19
Couple	1 Bed	532	564	+ 32
Single Person	Bedsit/1 Bed	3,898	4,156	+ 258
Total		7,497	8,272	+ 775

If you break that down in terms of the numbers qualifying for the type of property, you find:

OAPs		Working Age	
1 Bed	712	Bedsit/1 Bed	4,720
1 or 2 Bed	313	2 Bed	1,121
2 Bed	32	2 or 3 Bed	1,290
3 Bed	0	4 or more beds	74

The 'bedroom standard'

The number of bedrooms that people qualify for is based on the 'bedroom standard' which originates from 1935. In the Table above, where it shows 1 or 2 Beds in the case of OAP's, this is where one partner might have to have a separate bedroom for medical reasons. In the case of Working Age tenants where it shows 2 or 3 Beds, what they qualify for depends on the sex of the children and their age³.

³ Boys and girls are supposed to share a room until the age of 10, the same sex until 16.

We believe that the 'bedroom standard' is unrealistic. Its rigid application to working age tenants in receipt of housing benefit means that they will be constantly moved from one property to another as the size of their family changes, creating more 'voids' and disrupting people's lives. Couples only qualify for one bedroom. Before the introduction of the 'right to buy' and the loss of millions of Council homes (7,605 in Swindon) young couples would be given a two or three bedroom home on the grounds that they would most likely utilise the one or two other bedrooms as they started having children. This saved the Council from having to move people about on a large scale as their family size changed⁴. On the list now there are 564 couples deemed by the Council to be in need of a 1 bed property. However, there are over 4,000 single people qualifying for the 1 bed properties as well.

What is the Council proposing to do to tackle this need? Their bid for money from the government's Homes and Communities Agency includes 55 one bed properties, though the Sussex Square regeneration includes the demolition of 18 one bed flats so they will add only 37 more than currently available.

Over 7,000 working age households are chasing after around 500 'general needs' tenancies which are given out each year (excluding 'sheltered' accommodation for OAPs). What chance have they?

It remains to be seen what the impact of closing down Bands C and D will be. This change will be combined with the introduction of 'earnings thresholds' above which applicants will be refused a place on the list. We still don't know what these thresholds will be. We will see whether these two factors stop the rise in the numbers on the list. Over the last year the numbers on Bands A and B have increased from 7,292 to 8,272. This figure may have been swollen by the process of closing down Band C. Yet the rise in the numbers on Bands A and B has been without pause. Only 2 years ago in May 2012 the numbers were 6,668, then in April 2013 7,010. This provides stark evidence of the scale of the crisis. What is crystal clear is that there is insufficient stock available for those on Bands A and B, even in the unlikely event that their numbers do not increase.

Martin Wicks
May 3rd 2014

Appendix

The criteria include:

- Continuous residence in Swindon of 2 years
- Employed in Swindon Borough for more than 16 hours per week
- A member of the Armed Forces or previously served in the Armed Forces in the last five years.

With the following questions:

- Are you attending further education/training programme that will lead to you

⁴ The more moves there are then the more 'voids' are created which means weeks of lost rent until a new tenant is moved in.

achieving accredited qualifications and/or a certificate by a registered awarding body?

- Are you working as a volunteer for a not-for-profit organisation or registered charity for a continuous period of at least 6 months?
- Are you over state pensionable age requesting sheltered housing only?
- Do you have serious medical issues which are affected by your current accommodation?