

Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee

10.00am, Tuesday, 27 August 2024

EdIndex during the Housing Emergency

Executive/routine Wards	Routine All
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1. Recommendations

- 1.1 Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee is asked to:
- 1.1.1 Agree to discharge the actions agreed by Committee on [5 December 2023](#) to prepare a report, within three cycles, on EdIndex during the Housing Emergency;
 - 1.1.2 Agree that the key data set out in Appendix 4 be included in the next Cyclical Assurance report and all future reports, rather than the Edinburgh by Numbers report;
 - 1.1.3 Note a review of the Allocation Policy is underway as part of the Housing Emergency Action Plan (HEAP) and that an update will be presented to Committee in December 2024; and
 - 1.1.4 Note the temporary changes made on how the Allocation Policy is applied in a Housing Emergency to support an increase in allocations of available homes to those experiencing homelessness. This will be kept under review, with the next review planned for September 2024.

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EdIndex during the Housing Emergency

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 The report provides information in response to action agreed by Committee on 5 December 2023 in response to the motion by Councillor Caldwell. It includes a short summary of the allocations model, current performance and the benefits of EdIndex, in the context of the challenging supply and demand issues in the city.
- 2.2 The report outlines some of the improvement work currently underway and notes the opportunities arising from the Allocations Policy review to engage with customers and further improve support for applicants who do not have online access or require additional support in relation to the allocations process.
- 2.3 The report also outlines temporary changes to the application of the Allocations Policy for Council homes in response to the Housing Emergency declaration.

3. Background

- 3.1 EdIndex is a partnership between the City of Edinburgh Council and 18 partner landlords (housing associations/co-operatives). It was established as the first common housing register in Scotland in 2003. The EdIndex Partnership is managed through the EdIndex Board which is made up of representatives from the Council and partner landlords (listed in Appendix 2).
- 3.2 Legislation states that landlords are required to operate a fair and open housing list ('register'), and anyone aged 16 or over is entitled to be admitted to a 'register'. These requirements are met in relation to the operation of EdIndex.
- 3.3 A briefing on EdIndex was provided to Committee members on 5 June 2024, which partners from the EdIndex Board also attended.
- 3.4 The Council and Registered Social Landlord (RSL) partners own and manage around 40,500 social rented homes in the city. In 2023/24, just over 2,500 homes became available for social rent through Key to Choice. In the same period there were over 3,900 homeless presentations and around 5,000 households are currently being supported in temporary accommodation. These pressures, among others, led to the Council declaring a Housing Emergency on 2 November 2023.

4. Main report

EdIndex partners: how homes are allocated

- 4.1 The EdIndex landlords have two different ways of allocating their homes. Sixteen landlords (including the Council) use a Choice Based Lettings scheme called 'Key to Choice'. On 31 March 2024, there were 25,226 applicants registered on EdIndex. There was an average of 242 bids for each property advertised for let through Key to Choice in 2023/24.
- 4.2 Applicants for social housing in Edinburgh need only complete one application and can apply for houses provided by all 19 EdIndex landlords across the city. Three landlords, Muirhouse Housing Association, Hanover (Scotland) Housing Association Ltd, and Trust Housing Association use a Group Plus Points (GPP) system (Trust moved to Group Plus Points on 1 July 2024).
- 4.3 Key to Choice allows applicants registered on EdIndex to place "bids" or "notes of interest" for available properties. Properties are advertised on Key to Choice each Sunday morning and are advertised for one week. Applicants can bid for up to three properties that meet their household needs each week.
- 4.4 Depending on their circumstances applicants may be awarded a priority for bidding for homes on Key to Choice. Priority is only awarded for certain circumstances and to meet legal requirements to give reasonable preference (as stated in the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 as amended) to certain groups of applicants. Prioritising also aims to make the allocations system as equitable as possible in the context of high demand. The Priority categories are outlined in Appendix 3 and detailed in section 3.5 of the Council's Letting Policy. Applicants *who do not meet the criteria for a priority* will have their waiting time calculated differently depending on whether they are classed as a 'Starter' or a 'Mover'.
- 4.5 A Starter's waiting time will begin from the day they registered with EdIndex. For every day they are registered with EdIndex they accrue one waiting day. A Mover's waiting time will begin from the day they moved into their current home. For every day they are registered with EdIndex they will accrue one waiting day.
- 4.6 Under Key to Choice, once the weekly adverts close, the eligible applicants who bid for a home are ranked by priority awarded and how long they have had the priority for. Applicants with no priority are ranked by the waiting days on their application. Applicants that do not meet the criteria for the homes set out in the advert will not be considered. The applicant with the highest priority/waiting time that meets all the criteria is then offered the home. If this applicant does not want the home, it is offered to the next person on the shortlist.

- 4.7 One of the main aims of choice-based letting is to increase transparency in relation to availability of homes. Advertising homes means that applicants can see what is available for let each week and actively participate in the allocations process. Ideally, applicants should note interest in homes that meet their needs and that they would accept if offered the home. This can also improve tenancy sustainment levels and reduce refusals and re-let times.
- 4.8 It is acknowledged that the bidding process can be frustrating for applicants, particularly where there is high demand for each home advertised, as in Edinburgh. However, it does enable applicants to see what is available each week. The EdIndex website has a [Supply and Demand Tool](#) provides information on size and type of homes, alongside turnover and bidding information for the previous year.
- 4.9 The landlords using the GPP System do not advertise their homes in this way. They will contact an applicant directly if a home becomes available that meets their household's needs.
- 4.10 To allocate a home, the GPP landlord will run a search on the system for applicants who have selected they wish to be housed in the relevant letting area, and who are in the specified category of need for the home being advertised. Points are awarded for different categories of need according to the household's living circumstances. Categories include homelessness, overcrowding, under occupation and others such as medical and unsatisfactory housing conditions. The system ranks applicants by the number of points they have, similar to choice based letting. The applicant with the most points is then offered the home. If this applicant does not want the home, it is offered to the next person on the shortlist.

Alternative ways of allocating social rented homes

- 4.11 The two main allocation models available to landlords are a choice-based lettings scheme or the traditional housing allocations direct matching system (similar to GPP). Most landlords will use one or the other, but it is possible for landlords to use a mixture of both within their allocation policy.
- 4.12 Landlords can also make direct lets to help match homes to those in greatest need or to meet an applicant's specific assessed need. Some landlords use this method for their accessible housing stock for example, which means available properties can be more easily matched to applicants who would benefit most from the particular features of a property.
- 4.13 Some organisations, such as Aberdeen City Council, use choice-based lettings but do not have a common housing register while others, Fife Council for example, have a Common (Fife) Housing Register with partners but do not use choice-based lettings. Regardless of the allocation model used it would remain difficult to meet demand and expectations in Edinburgh due to supply challenges.

Customer Feedback

- 4.14 The most common queries received from applicants on the application and bidding process are around the length of time it is taking to be rehoused and why they do

not have priority status. Many of these can be responded to using the [Frequently Asked Questions](#) (FAQs) information available on the EdIndex website.

- 4.15 For other issues such as difficulty logging in, registering, bidding or for bids being rejected, the EdIndex team will liaise with applicants to work out or explain what the issue is and send them the step-by-step guidance.
- 4.16 The number of bids received for homes advertised each week means that individual feedback cannot be provided to every applicant. Improvements to the NEC online portal mean applicants can now view their application online and see how many points they have. Further improvements are due to be introduced, including an online application form and applicants will be able to change their contact details and upload documents relevant to their application.

Allocation Policy Review

- 4.17 The Housing Emergency Action Plan includes an action to review the Allocation Policy for Council Homes to ensure it continues to enable fair access to housing, including consideration of protected characteristics.
- 4.18 This will be a longer-term piece of work, engaging with EdIndex partners, partner agencies and tenants/housing applicants. The first phase of the review will include research on different allocation models, best practice, and an options appraisal, taking into account the high demand for social housing in Edinburgh.
- 4.19 Engagement with current and successful applicants will inform how information and outcomes on the allocations process is better communicated to applicants. It will also provide opportunities to review support for applicants who do not have online access or who need additional support to fill in the application form and navigate the allocation process.
- 4.20 Currently, applicants without online access can initially ask family and friends for assistance. If this is not possible, assistance can be found in libraries and bids can be placed at local offices and through their housing officer.
- 4.21 Committee requested that this report set out plans to resource a trial programme of application support – for example, via scheduled drop-in sessions in libraries, community centres, or over the phone – with oversight of this programme given to the Home Accessibility Referral Team (HART).
- 4.22 Officers are reviewing the current support available for applicants within locality settings and the EdIndex Team. Initial discussions have been held with colleagues in Library Services, Housing, Customer Contact and Homelessness to discuss the capacity of teams to provide regular support including through drop-in sessions (in community centres for example). A refresher training programme will be put in place to support Housing Officers and Library Advisers who already offer some support. Locality homelessness teams have confirmed that additional support could potentially be offered by their Housing Assistants and investigations are on-going on how locality housing teams can offer additional support following the implementation of the service review and the launch of the online application form.

- 4.23 The HART team specifically focuses on people with mobility issues so it would be a significant deviation from their role if they were to support any applicants to apply and bid for homes.
- 4.24 The Browsealoud accessibility tool is available on the EdIndex website. Functions such as the translation options, text to speech functionality and options to magnify text or change text colours can be helpful to applicants who do have online access. Autobidding is also due to be introduced, which is primarily aimed at helping applicants who are digitally excluded.

Temporary changes to application of the Allocation Policy for Council homes

- 4.25 Temporary operational changes have been made to the Allocation Policy in a Housing Emergency to support an increase in allocations of available Council homes to those experiencing homelessness. The temporary changes (as outlined in Appendix 5) were implemented in October 2023. For the financial year 2023/24, the percentage of lets to homeless households across all EdIndex partners sat at 60%. For Quarter 1 of 2024/25, this had increased to 65%. Lets to applicants with Gold Priority and Urgent Exceptional Housing Need Priority remain the next highest percentage. The next review of the operational changes is planned for September 2024.
- 4.26 Permanent changes to the Policy would require Committee approval. A revised Allocation Policy will be presented to Committee for formal approval following engagement and consultation on the policy review.

5. Next Steps

- 5.1 It is proposed that the EdIndex statistics set out in Appendix 4 be included in the regular cyclical performance reports to Committee rather than Edinburgh by Numbers (which is a statistical report using national data sources for comparison with other UK cities) rather than a Council performance report.
- 5.2 The Housing Emergency Action Plan includes an action to review the Allocation Policy for Council Homes to ensure it continues to enable fair access to housing. The first phase of the review will include research on different allocation models, best practice, and an options appraisal, taking into account the high demand for social housing in Edinburgh. An update will be provided to Committee in December 2024.
- 5.3 Alongside the review, officers are continuing to look at improving support for applicants who require additional assistance within the current allocations system and resources available in various locality teams and EdIndex Team, as outlined in paragraph 4.22.

6. Financial impact

- 6.1 This report does not currently put forward any recommendations for decision or change; therefore, there are no direct financial impacts arising from this report.

7. Equality and Poverty Impact

- 7.1 This report does not put forward any recommendations for decision or change; therefore, there are no direct Equality and Poverty Impacts arising from this report.
- 7.2 An Integrated Impact Assessment will be undertaken when reviewing the Allocations Policy. As highlighted by Committee, this will include consideration of the challenges related to digital exclusion and/or comprehension felt most acutely by older adults and some disabled people.
- 7.3 Working together on EdIndex has also stimulated partnership working between the Council and RSL partners in other areas. For example, approaches to dealing with anti-social behaviour, domestic abuse policies and procedures and Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan commitments.

8. Climate and Nature Emergency Implications

- 8.1 This report does not put forward any recommendations for decision or change; therefore, there are no direct Climate and Nature Emergency implications arising from this report.

9. Risk, policy, compliance, governance and community impact

- 9.1 A briefing on EdIndex for Committee members took place on 5 June 2024.
- 9.2 The EdIndex Partnership is managed through the EdIndex Board made up of representatives from the Council and partner landlords. The Council manages EdIndex and the choice-based lettings system 'Key to Choice' on behalf of partner landlords, who contribute to the costs of the service based on the social housing stock they have in the city.
- 9.3 Over time, EdIndex partners have worked together to streamline some aspects of their allocation policies and simplify the application form, although individual landlords have their own lettings policies and retain some autonomy on allocation decisions.
- 9.4 Reviewing the Allocations Policy provides an opportunity to ensure we are making best use of social rented homes in the city and maximising social equity in the context of limited supply. Any proposed permanent changes to the policy would be presented to Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee for approval.

10. Background reading/external references

- 10.1 Responding to the Housing Emergency Declaration – Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee, [27 February 2024](#).
- 10.2 Allocation Policy for Council Homes – Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee, [18 March 2021](#).

11. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Action agreed by Committee on 5 December 2023.

Appendix 2 – EdIndex Partners.

Appendix 3 – Key to Choice Priority Categories.

Appendix 4 – EdIndex Statistical Information.

Appendix 5 - Temporary changes on the application of Council Lettings Policy in a Housing Emergency.

Appendix 1 – Decision of Committee on 5 December 2023

Committee approved the following adjusted motion by Councillor Caldwell

1. To note that Edinburgh Council and Housing Associations ran EdIndex as a single portal to try and match residents with social-rent properties, with over 24,000 registered applicants (RRTP Aug 23).
2. To note that EdIndex utilised a points-based system and bidding to match residents to potential homes, and to note that FY22/23 saw 185 average bids per property (EPC Oct 23).
3. To note that Edinburgh Council declared a Housing Emergency on 2nd November 2023 which requested progress monitoring and further partnership working with RSLs.
4. To request a report in three cycles which outlined:
 - a. Key statistics from EdIndex over FY 23/24, including: a. number of applicants registered on EdIndex.
 - b. total number of successful and unsuccessful bids in the FY. c. average number of days applicants on different priority tiers. b) A full list of partner organisations who were associated with EdIndex and the benefits that EdIndex partners, including the Council, received.
 - c. What alternative systems comparable local authorities used.
 - d. A general summation of feedback from applicants over the last year and any relevant mechanisms/proposals to collect feedback from unsuccessful and successful applicants and third sector partners, as well as any proposals to maximise social equity in the system in the context of the Housing Emergency.
5. To request the information requested in 4. a, b, and c be appended to the annual 'Edinburgh in Numbers' report to ensure transparent public monitoring during the Housing Emergency
6. To request prior to the publication of the above report, a meeting between any elected members, relevant Place Directorate officers and EdIndex Board members (who wish to participate) be arranged to better understand the successes and challenges around EdIndex in the context of Edinburgh's wider Housing Emergency declaration.
- 7) To note that there were a number of challenges reported with using EdIndex related to digital exclusion and / or comprehension, felt most acutely by older adults and some disabled people, and request that this report paid particular attention to these issues.
7. To recognise that individual, 1-1 support to help individuals to submit an EdIndex form was the best way of addressing this problem and that, whilst training had been put in place with some services within the Council to signpost people to the EdIndex site – for example, within the library service – proactive support for individual applicants to complete an EdIndex form was not currently offered.
8. Therefore, to request that this report would also cover detail on what resourcing could be put in place to trial a programme of application support – for example, via scheduled drop in sessions in libraries, community centres, or over the phone – with oversight of this programme given to the HART team, who already worked closely with disabled applicants or those with additional support needs, to ensure consistency in support for applicants from the point of application through to offer and post-offer support / tenancy sustainment, recognising that this was an important tenet of trauma informed working.

Appendix 2 – EdIndex Partners

- Ark: People, Housing, Care
- Blackwood Homes
- Cairn Housing Association
- City of Edinburgh Council
- Harbour Homes
- Hillcrest Homes
- Home Scotland Ltd
- Link Housing Association Ltd
- Lister Housing Co-operative Ltd
- Manor Estates Housing Association
- Places for People Scotland
- Prospect Community Housing
- Sanctuary Scotland Housing Association Ltd*
- Viewpoint
- West Granton Housing Co-operative Ltd
- Wheatley Homes East
- Hanover (Scotland) Housing Association Ltd**
- Muirhouse Housing Association**
- Trust Housing Association Ltd**

*** Joined on 1 April 2024**

**** Are part of EdIndex but not Key to Choice (use Group Plus Points system to allocate homes. Note that Trust HA moved to Group Plus Points system on 1 July 2024)**

Appendix 3: Key to Choice Priority Categories

Priority awards are assessed as follows:

Urgent Gold Priority

Awarded when someone in the household is assessed as a delayed hospital discharge and can't leave hospital until they have suitable accommodation. May also be awarded to prevent permanent hospital or care home admissions. This ***Criterion must be met.***

Gold Priority

Applicants whose current home no longer meets their mobility needs and it cannot be adapted. Gold priority is generally only given to people who have been assessed as requiring a ground floor home. This ***Criterion must be met.***

Silver Priority – Homelessness

Applicants who have been assessed by the Council as statutorily homeless.

Silver Priority – Overcrowding

Awarded where applicants require to move to a larger home as they are 2 or more bedrooms short for the size of their household or are living in a one-bedroom home with one or more children under the age of 16.

Each of the partner landlords operate their own allocation policy, therefore their bedroom sharing guidelines may be different.

Silver Priority – Under occupancy

Applicants who currently live in a Council or Housing Association home with 3 or more bedrooms, no longer need all of them and would like to downsize.

Silver Priority – Urgent/Exceptional Housing Need

May be awarded when applicants are living in extreme circumstances that are not covered by the other priority categories. This priority is not common and is reserved for unique and exceptional situations.

Appendix 4: EdIndex Statistical Information

The [Guide to Waiting Times](#) on the EdIndex website shows the average length of time applicants waited to receive the offer of housing for the home they moved into between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024, split by locality. The average waiting time will be dependent on how regularly applicants bid for homes and the areas and types of homes they bid on.

Table 1: Number of applicants on EdIndex at 31/03/24 by age

Age Band	Number of applicants	%
16-17	123	0.49%
18-24	2,323	9.21%
25-35	6,549	25.96%
36-59	12,169	48.24%
60+	4,062	16.10%
Total	25,226	100%

Table 2: Applicants by Priority Category 31/03/24

Choice Priority Category	Number	%
Gold	497	1.97%
Silver - Homeless	6,545	25.95%
Demo & Officer Panel	242	0.96%
Overcrowding	1,038	4.11%
Underoccupation	155	0.61%
Waiting Time	16,749	66.40%
Total	25,226	100%

Table 3: Lettings by Key to Choice landlords 1 April 2023-31 March 2024

CHOICE LANDLORD	Total adverts	Total bids	Average bids
ARK	3	953	318
BLACKWOOD HOMES	17	3,441	202
CAIRN	19	4,474	235
CEC	1,368	303,185	222
HARBOUR HOMES	151	60,250	126
HILLCREST	77	21,894	284
HOME SCOTLAND	28	10,279	367
LINK	118	29,675	251
LISTER	6	1,984	331
MANOR ESTATES	55	11,435	208
PLACES FOR PEOPLE	266	74,514	280
PROSPECT	32	6,033	189
TRUST	32	1,727	54
VIEWPOINT	114	10,882	95
WEST GRANTON	16	5,388	337
WHEATLEY HOMES EAST	202	60,133	298
TOTALS	2,504	60,6247	242

Appendix 5: Temporary changes to application of Council Letting Policy

These temporary changes are intended to have a positive impact on the percentage of lets being allocated to homeless households, while still ensuring that those who have urgent priority need for other reasons, including Urgent Gold, Gold and those with Silver Priority for Urgent Exceptional Housing Need, can continue to bid and secure housing.

Consideration can still be given to individual cases where there is a strong case for a “management transfer” to another property and officers will continue to use this discretion when appropriate.

- **Cease advertising Council properties for “movers only” and prioritisation of those with Silver Priority for homelessness**

This means that all properties advertised for let will be advertised only for “starters” or “starters/movers”. This reduces the opportunity for existing tenants to move to another Council home, unless they otherwise have Urgent Gold, Gold or Silver priority for homelessness. The effect of this is that more homes available for let are allocated to starters, which includes those with silver priority for homelessness. Properties that are suitable for those with Gold priority will be advertised for starters/movers to ensure existing tenants who require a move to a home more suitable for their needs continue to be prioritised.

- **Temporary suspension of the “local lettings policy” for outlying areas.**

The Local Lettings Policy applies to a number of small communities, specifically South Queensferry, Dalmeny, Kirkliston, Newbridge, Ratho Station and Ratho and dates back to changes arising from local government re-organisation in 1974 when these areas transferred to the Edinburgh District Council area at that time. It sets out that applicants for housing in these areas must show a local connection to the area. In practice, this means that it is more unlikely that a person experiencing homelessness will be able to secure a home in one of these areas as they are unable to show a local connection. Operationally, officers report that the process of shortlisting for available properties in these areas is exceptionally time consuming, with officers often spending several days working through a bidding list to identify a suitable applicant. Whilst only a temporary change at this time, this mirrors the change in legislation in November 2022 which removed the requirement for people to demonstrate local connection to the area when they present as homeless.