



Cllr Kieron Williams  
Council member for housing  
London Borough of Southwark  
**By email only**

1<sup>st</sup> October 2019

Dear Kieron,

### **Overcrowding cases in Southwark**

Thanks for your tweet about overcrowding and the housing register and your invitation to look into the cases. Yes, we agree with you that overcrowding is one of the main housing issues that is given priority on the housing waiting list and one of the main reasons people get a council home.

This has certainly been our experience over the last few years. However, in the last few months we have noticed this has changed dramatically, and suddenly our members are being told they have deliberately caused their overcrowding and have been placed into band 4 (the bottom of the waiting list) instead of band 3 for overcrowding.

We are deeply worried about this sudden change of practice which does not follow the council's housing allocations policy or previous practice. It is also discriminatory (all the people we know in our group affected by this are migrant families) and morally wrong.

Previously, if our members who live in overcrowded housing met the local connection criteria (5 years resident in the borough or employment criteria), they would qualify for band 3 for overcrowding. If they were statutory overcrowded they would get the priority star for statutory overcrowding. Depending on their circumstances, sometimes they would qualify for band 1 for statutory overcrowding. These policies meant that overcrowded families in the private rented sector were able to bid for council housing and their priority on the waiting list reflected their high and urgent housing need. But now we are getting decision letters saying that families have 'deliberately' caused their overcrowding and are placed into band 4. This is devastating for the families and denies them any chance to successfully bid for council housing. It is also a deeply unfair approach for the council to be taking.

We have not come across this problem before when supporting our members who are overcrowded in the private rented sector, which suggests it is a new practice. We made a Freedom of Information request about this issue which showed that in the last year fewer than 10 households have been given band 4 for 'worsening circumstances'. However, in the last few months we have come across 4 cases where our members have been given band 4 for 'worsening circumstances'/ 'deliberately causing overcrowding'. The fact that so few people are given band 4 and yet we have come across so many of these cases strongly suggests that our members are being targeted.

How these cases have been handled is also particularly concerning. I will send each case in a separate email for data protection reasons. However, in one case, our member was given

her housing register account in band 3 for overcrowding. A housing officer wrongly said that her adult daughter could not be on the housing register application. We successfully challenged this decision (which was wrong and the housing officer had not been following the council's policy). However, after getting this issue resolved, the council then demoted her to band 4 with no explanation. We asked why she had been moved down into band 4 and we received a decision letter saying that the overcrowding was caused by the family themselves. The council's actions in this case seems particularly punitive in approach. When this member contacted the council to assert her right to have her daughter included on her housing register application, the council responded by demoting her priority.

There is no justification for these decisions from Southwark council. But it is particularly frustrating that the council have taken this victim blaming approach and the punishment of band 4 when the council themselves are housing families in temporary accommodation that is overcrowded. A number of our members are in temporary accommodation provided by Southwark council that is overcrowded. Yet, when our members challenge the council on this, the council will use the housing crisis for themselves to explain that there are no other options.

We hope that you can help us to quickly resolve these cases (there are 5 at the moment). They are all very urgent as they are living in unacceptable conditions and are being denied their rightful place on the housing register. We hope that you can assure us that overcrowded families will not face this treatment again. We will be publicly campaigning on this unjust treatment of our members and all overcrowded families if this discriminatory practice continues.

Kind regards,

**Elizabeth and HASL**