

There has been a lot of chat in the paper recently about how council houses are allocated and who gets priority. Prompted by the dreadful story of a young mum, driven to illness by her and her family's housing situation, we have all been quick to give an opinion on housing allocation policy.

I know little about her situation and nor do I know how deserving or otherwise her family are. What I do know is that no matter how dreadful their current accommodation is, or how deserving they are, there is a reason (or reasons) they are still stuck where they are.

They made it to the front page of the RSJ, but we all know of other families in similar circumstances whose problems are not being highlighted in this way. There are all sorts of reasons why people end up in unsatisfactory housing, just as there are all sorts of reasons why some people end up in poorly paid jobs or unemployed. Their ability to get themselves out of their situation depends on a number of factors, personal and societal.

Firstly, are there even any houses available that are suitable? What do we even mean by suitable? Do they want a house or a flat? Does it matter what area it is in? How far away from her work and/or her family or friends will they live? I know I wouldn't want to move even to the next village. Other people might be less choosy (or more desperate).

And if there are no houses, what then? Westminster is willing to leave Highland Council with a huge housing debt simply because our tenants chose to remain with the council as a landlord rather than leap into the sexy world of the Housing Association. Until they can be persuaded not to hold us all to ransom in this way, there will be no money to build enough houses to meet the needs of Ross-shire residents.

But just suppose a house does come up. Who would get it? I know of people who check the death notices in this paper, and contact the council about the deceased's property the very day the notice appears. You can hear the disappointment in their voice when they discover there is a spouse remaining who fully intends to remain in their own home. Even more horror if they discover the tenancy will pass to one or other of the children.

There was a time when houses were allocated on the whim of an individual or committee responsible for housing. Homes were given to the deserving and withheld from those not considered suitable. Applicants for houses were visited when they applied and notes made about the quality of their housekeeping. If your home was untidy, you could be sure you wouldn't be offered a house in a 'good' area. And woe betide those who dare to have children out of wedlock. Or a single person with living parents who might choose to live independently of them.

Now there are strict rules designed to be fair and, importantly, to be seen to be fair. Applicants are awarded points according to their circumstances; for example overcrowding, health problems or poor housing conditions. There does not appear to be any credit for how long you have been 'on the list' all of which mean that if a house comes up and someone else gets it, then they must be in worse conditions than you are.

I don't know how I would cope if I had to live in such cramped conditions. It's a situation no family should have to endure. But let's make sure the responsibility for this sits on the right shoulders. The staff in the housing office allocating properties are not to blame – they are simply following the rules they have been given in an attempt to stretch a scarce resource across ever increasing numbers.

Look instead to the councillors who made these rules. Look to the Government who control the legislation that restricts our councillors' powers to shape the rules. Look to Westminster who decides how much money is made available to provide the homes. Look to our European representatives who can influence how human rights are implemented. The next time you vote, attend a ward meeting or most likely do nothing at all, remember that it is you and I that are responsible for a world that allows many, many families to live in sub-standard housing in our own communities.