Housing Options Scotland

Meeting the Housing Needs of Autistic Children in Scotland

A review of social housing allocation policies

April 2026

Housing Options Scotland

We are Scotland's housing information and advice charity for disabled people, older adults and members of the Armed Forces community.

Our purpose is to help people make informed decisions about their housing.

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Language

This report uses identity-first language (autistic person) rather than person-first language (person with autism). Identity-first language is generally preferred among autistic communities[1].

It is important to note that individuals will have different preferences and that these preferences should be respected. Everyone has the right to decide the language they choose to use to describe themselves.

Some definitions

Scottish Autism defines **autism** as “a lifelong neurodevelopmental difference that determines the way a person communicates, interacts and processes information”[2].

NHS Scotland defines **neurodiversity** as “the term that explains the natural variation in everyone’s brain, including thinking processes, information processing and learning approaches”[3]. The population is neurodiverse; individuals can be **neurodivergent**. “A neurodivergent person’s brain processes information differently from what is considered typical for most people”[3].

Autism, ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia are some of the most widely recognised minority neurotypes. Autistic people are neurodivergent. Not all neurodivergent people are autistic.

[1] Kenny et al. (2015)
[2] Scottish Autism. Accessed at: https://www.scottishautism.org/about-autism/what-is-autism/
[3] NHS Scotland (no date) Right Decision Service. Accessed at: https://www.rightdecisions.scot.nhs.uk/autism-meeting-the-needs-of-autistic-people-and-people-with-other-types-of-neurodivergence/what-is-neurodiversity/

Summary

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental difference that affects the way a person communicates, processes information and makes sense of the world. Autism is a lifelong condition which affects people of all ages, genders, ethnicities and backgrounds.

The level of support an autistic person may need to live the life they choose will vary from person to person and throughout an individual's life. Autism is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act. This means that autistic people are legally entitled to support and protection from discrimination.

The housing needs of autistic adults and children may differ from those of neurotypical individuals. No two autistic people have the same sensory profile. The ways that autistic people experience physical environments can cause sensory challenges, for example, with sound and visual stimuli in the home, spatial layouts and sleeping environments.

Autism has been the focus of governmental strategies over recent decades. The *Scottish Strategy for Autism* was launched in 2011. Most recently, the Scottish Government consulted the public on the creation of a new *Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence (LDAN) Bill*. This Bill will not be introduced to Parliament before the May 2026 Scottish Parliament election.

Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and local authority housing services in Scotland operate housing registers. They have a duty to work within relevant legal frameworks to develop allocation policies, manage housing lists and allocate housing. Landlords have discretion to develop allocation policies in line with local priorities, but reasonable preference must be given to certain groups of applicants with unmet housing needs.

This research project assesses what consideration is given to the housing needs of autistic children in social housing allocation policies in Scotland. To do this, allocation policies covering 26 local authorities and 129 RSLs in Scotland were analysed, alongside local authority five-year housing strategies.

Overall, the allocation policies examined do not give a great amount of consideration to autistic children and their families. Just under 8% of local authority allocation policies featured the words ‘autism’ or ‘autistic’, compared to 69% of the Local Housing Strategy documents. 16% of RSL policies featured the words ‘autism’ or ‘autistic’; 3% stated that medical priority or points would be awarded specifically in reference to the medical needs of autistic people.

In Housing Options Scotland’s experience as a housing charity and advice service, housing providers will usually award some kind of points or priority to families with autistic and neurodivergent children who need more space, even if their allocation policy does not explicitly state this. However, for a variety of reasons, this does not necessarily mean they will actually be offered a house with an additional bedroom.

From the findings of this research project, more work needs to be done to better understand autism and the needs of individual autistic people. Professionals and practitioners must get the language right. It is also important that strategy is better translated into policy and practice. Involving autistic communities in the development of strategy, policy and practice should be considered essential. This would produce improved and experientially informed outcomes for everyone.

Introduction

More than 1 in 100 people in Scotland are autistic*. According to the latest pupil census, 5.24% of children attending school in Scotland are autistic**. Autistic children and their families have specific housing needs. In the experience of Housing Options Scotland, finding the right home to meet these needs can be challenging.

Many of Housing Options Scotland's clients come to us for help and advice when applying for social housing. Social housing provides a stable, affordable home for people who have specialist housing needs. However, previous research has found this is not always the case. When reviewing housing association application processes for people with a learning disability, we found that people who have a learning disability have a harder time applying for social housing than people who do not have a learning disability.

The central aim of this paper is to assess the consideration that social landlords in Scotland give to the housing needs of autistic children and their families. It answers this aim by examining three questions:

- How does the social rented sector in Scotland accommodate the housing needs of autistic children and their families?
- What can allocation policies tell us about how social housing providers in Scotland consider applications from families with autistic children?
- How many allocation policies specifically offer priority or additional support for these applicants?

[*] Different Minds. One Scotland
[**] Scottish Government, 2025, Pupil census supplementary statistics

Background: Autism

What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental difference. It affects the way a person communicates, processes information and makes sense of the world.

Scottish Autism[4] outlines three key areas where the developmental profile of an autistic person may differ from that of a neurotypical person:

Social communication and interaction

Including how people use verbal and non-verbal language and the ways they form friendships & relationships.

Social imagination and thinking & processing styles

This includes the ways someone connects to the people and the world around them, for example, differences in attention.

Processing sensory information

Including sounds, tastes, smells, light, colours, touch, temperatures and pain.

No two autistic people are the same. Autism can present in people in a range of different ways. Autistic individuals will have different sets of traits, and some of these traits may function in similar ways to neurotypical individuals[5].

Autism is clinically defined as '**Autism Spectrum Disorder**' or 'ASD'. Organisations such as Scottish Autism prefer to see autism as **a difference, not a disorder**.

Is autism a disability? Autism is a very varied condition, and everyone experiences the world in unique ways. Some autistic people experience autism as a disability. Others say that living in a society that does not fully understand autism is what disables them.

Autism is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act. Official guidance accompanying the Equality Act specifically includes autism as a disability. Autistic people are therefore legally entitled to support and protection from discrimination.

The level of support an autistic individual may need to live the life they choose will vary from person to person and throughout their life. It is important to take an individualised approach to supporting autistic people.

[4] Scottish Autism. Accessed at: https://www.scottishautism.org/about-autism/what-is-autism/
[5] See The Art of Autism for more information: https://the-art-of-autism.com/understanding-the-spectrum-a-comic-strip-explanation/

Autism is...

- A neurological difference
- A lifelong condition which affects people of all ages, genders, ethnicities and backgrounds
- A spectrum condition that affects individuals in different ways

Autism is not...

- A mental health condition
- A learning disability
- Easily identifiable or visible

Visit the Different Minds One Scotland website or more information about autism. This was created by the Scottish Government and written in partnership with autistic people.

Housing needs

If we understand autism as a processing difference, we can start to understand how the housing needs of autistic adults and children may differ from those of neurotypical individuals. No two autistic people are the same, and no two autistic people have the same sensory profile; the different types of sensory processing difference include hyper-sensitivity (more sensitive than others), hypo-sensitivity (less sensitive than others), and a mixed and/or varying sensory experience. The ways that autistic people experience physical environments can lead to sensory challenges. Some examples are given below.

Sound

- Many autistic people experience hyperacusis, an intolerance to ordinary environmental sounds. Household items such as electricals, appliances and heating systems can create challenging auditory environments.
- The building structure and physical materials affect how sound travels. For example, some houses may be more echoey than others, and therefore more challenging.
- External noise can significantly impact internal auditory environments. Autistic people may prefer to live in quieter locations.

Sight

- Fluorescent lights can be challenging and overstimulating. Many autistic people prefer natural, diffused light or incandescent bulbs.
- Flickering lights can be especially distracting for autistic people.
- Plainer colours help create a more sensory-friendly environment, although some young people may prefer brighter, more vibrant colours.

Space

- Sharing space with other people can create unpredictable sensory and social environments. Autistic people can find this particularly challenging, and it can be anxiety-inducing.
- Access to private internal spaces and outdoor spaces can contribute to improved sensory regulation, health and well-being of autistic adults and children.
- Sleep problems are more common in autistic individuals[6]. Good sleep hygiene can aid better sleep; the sleeping environment is an important factor in sleep hygiene. The quality of the bedroom environment should meet the sensory needs of the autistic person sleeping there.

Government strategy

The Scottish Government is committed to the social model of disability[1]. This model "sees the barriers created by society, such as negative attitudes towards disabled people, and inaccessible buildings, transport and communication, as the cause of the disadvantage and exclusion, rather than the impairment itself […] "[7].

> **"As the social model of disability suggests, reducing the barriers autistic people may face in the housing sector could mean they reach the best possible outcome in housing and consequently their overall well-being"**
>
> *Autism: A guide for practitioners within housing and homelessness services, Neurodivergence Wales, 2019*

The Scottish Strategy for Autism (2011)

The Scottish Strategy for Autism was launched as a national plan to improve services and support for autistic children and adults, and their families, in Scotland. The vision of the strategy was that autistic people "are respected, accepted and valued by their communities and have confidence in services to treat them fairly so that they are able to have meaningful and satisfying lives"[8]. This vision was underpinned by six values: dignity, privacy, choice, safety, realising potential and equality and diversity.

In 2015, the strategy was reframed to focus on four key outcome areas: a healthy life, choice and control, independence and active citizenship. The strategy was further refined when it moved into its final phase in 2018[9]. The strategy acknowledged the role housing can play in achieving positive outcomes for autistic people.

[6] K. J. Aitken (2014)
[7] Source: https://www.gov.scot/publications/learning-disabilities-autism-neurodivergence-bill-consultation/pages/6/
[8] The Scottish Strategy for Autism (2011)
[9] The Scottish Strategy for Autism: Outcomes and priorities 2018-2021 (2018)

> **"The Scottish Government wants everyone to have a home that is the right size, in the right location and able to meet their needs and to ensure people are able to live independently. Local authorities have a key role in planning for the housing needs of everyone within their local community, including [autistic people]."**
>
> *The Scottish Strategy for Autism, Outcomes and Priorities 2018-2021, page 14*

Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill (in consultation)

From December 2023 to April 2024, the Scottish Government undertook a public consultation on the creation of a new Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence (LDAN) Bill. The consultation was designed to seek views on how the Scottish Government can best protect, respect and champion the rights of people with learning disabilities and neurodivergent people. Proposals were put forward under several overarching themes.

Section 4 covers Housing and Independent Living. Five proposals were put forward with the aim "to better protect and uphold rights around housing and independent living". The proposals were on the following topics:

1. Providing advice, advocacy and guidance
2. Developing neurodivergence and learning disabilities strategies
3. Introducing mandatory training for housing professionals
4. Improving data collection
5. Providing inclusive communications

420 respondents provided feedback on this section. Nearly two-thirds supported all five proposals. Below are several extracts from the *Consultation Analysis Report*[10] that are particularly relevant to this research project.

> "Several respondents felt that people with learning disabilities and neurodivergent people should be considered as high priority on housing lists alongside disabled people, those who are homeless, and asylum seekers. It was mentioned that the points-based system for housing often does not include neurodivergence and respondents felt that this should be corrected to provide a more holistic approach and to ensure such individuals do not become homeless.

[10] Scottish Strategy for Autism: evaluation (2021)

> Several also highlighted the need for autistic people in particular to have their own space in family homes and/or to live alone upon becoming an adult. They stressed the difficulties and inappropriateness of shared accommodation provisions. However, it was noted that current allocation of social housing for families did not take account of neurodivergence and would often result in room sharing between siblings. […]
>
> Again, several respondents detailed how sensory issues can result in people being overwhelmed, and therefore noise, light and smells needed to be understood and considered within housing design, adaptations considered, and in relation to housing allocation." (p100-101).

The proposed LDAN Bill in Scotland will not be introduced to Parliament before the May 2026 Scottish Parliament election.

Background: Social housing in Scotland

The legislative and regulatory framework for the allocation of social housing in Scotland has evolved over time. Statutory duties were first consolidated in Scotland with the *Housing (Scotland) Act 1987*.

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2014 changed aspects of the law. Social landlords have a duty to work within a legal framework when developing allocation policies, managing housing lists and allocating housing. They must publish these policies.

Landlords have discretion to develop allocation policies in line with local priorities and are encouraged to build flexibility into the policies. They must clearly outline how priority is awarded to applicants, and they are expected to make the best use of their available housing stock.

In Scotland, everyone aged 16 or over has the right to join a housing register. After admitting an applicant to the housing list, social landlords determine the priority of the applicant in line with their allocation policy. Current legislation requires that 'reasonable preference' should be given to three categories of applicants:

1. Homeless people and people threatened with homelessness who have unmet housing needs.
2. People who are living in unsatisfactory housing conditions and who have unmet housing needs.
3. Tenants of houses held by a social landlord who considers the property underoccupied (the tenants are not using all the bedrooms in the property).

Landlords can decide how much weight to give each reasonable preference group. The 2014 Act qualifies these groups with the requirement that they have unmet housing needs. This depends on the circumstances of the applicant and the housing options available and accessible to the applicant.

There is no legal definition of 'unsatisfactory housing conditions'. The term covers a wide range of circumstances, including overcrowding, the physical condition of a property, unsuitability due to health and disability, harassment and abuse and social or family support. The *Social Housing Allocations in Scotland: A Practice Guide* (2019) lists the types of abuse and harassment landlords may want to consider. This list includes the harassment of autistic people and people with a learning or physical disability.

Landlords should ensure that their allocation policy complies with relevant equality and human rights duties. They should also carry out Equality Impact Assessments to consider how their allocation policies will impact different people in different ways.

Allocation policies should also reflect the *Scottish Social Housing Charter*, which was introduced in the *Housing (Scotland) Act 2010*. This charter sets the standards and outcomes that all social landlords should be meeting. These include:

- **Outcome 1: Equality**. Every tenant and other customer has their individual needs recognised, is treated fairly and with respect, and receives fair access to housing and housing services.
- **Outcome 2: Communication**. Tenants and other customers find it easy to communicate with their landlord and get the information they need about their landlord, how and why it makes decisions and the services it provides.
- **Outcome 7: Housing options**. People looking for housing get information that helps them make informed choices and decisions about the range of housing options available to them.
- **Outcome 8: Housing options**. Tenants and people on housing lists can review their housing options.
- **Outcome 10: Access to social housing**. People looking for housing find it easy to apply for the widest choice of social housing available and get the information they need on how the landlord allocates homes and their prospects of being housed.

Research methods

This research project aims to assess what consideration is given to the housing needs of autistic children and their families by social landlords in Scotland. To do this, policy documents from local authorities and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), including housing associations and co-operatives, were analysed.

The research was web-based. Allocation policies were found by searching the websites of each local authority and RSL. Some of the RSLs operate common housing registers. This means that some policies are created and implemented by partner landlords, and findings were duplicated across multiple RSLs.

The following findings were recorded for each allocation policy:

- **If there are specific references to autistic people** (keyword search for 'autism', 'autistic' and 'neurodivergent').
- **The kind of allocation system the policy uses** (for example, choice-based, groups or points) and whether they were part of a common housing register.
- **Any relevant comments** (for example, details about occupancy standards or medical needs points).

Many of the policies available were out of date, some by more than five years. Additionally, some policies are under review or consultation at the time of writing. This may mean that the research does not capture current practice and policy.

Local Authorities

Of the 32 local authorities in Scotland, 26 are social landlords. The other six have transferred their social housing stock to RSLs. Despite this, they may still be partners in common housing registers and work closely with RSLs, for example, by assessing homelessness applications.

Local authorities have a statutory obligation to develop and deliver five-year Local Housing Strategies. Because of this, Local Housing Strategy documents were also analysed using the same method of analysis as the allocation policies.

Registered Social Landlords (RSLs)

A list of 129 RSLs was produced from the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations' (SFHA) member directory. SFHA is the membership body for housing associations and co-operatives in Scotland. 286k homes are provided by SFHA member organisations.

A copy of the Allocation Policy for each of these housing associations or co-operatives was consulted for this research. These documents were found by searching the website of each organisation. Two of the RSLs listed on the SFHA website did not have a policy available online.

Of the 127 allocation policies consulted, 21 (17%) made specific reference to autistic people. Of these 21, 4 made specific reference to the housing and medical needs of autistic people. These 4 housing associations were contacted by email to see if they could share any case studies, best practice examples or working knowledge of helping autistic people and their families access suitable housing. One housing association replied, and their comments are included in this report. The response has been anonymised.

A web-based approach, as outlined above, has limitations. The work of social landlords is not wholly captured in their allocation policies, which cannot detail every decision that is made when allocating and letting properties, or the day-to-day work of supporting people to find housing. Many of the allocation policies reviewed recognise that every application is unique and make a commitment to assess them according to individual circumstances.

Findings and discussion

Overall, the allocation policies examined do not give a great amount of consideration to autistic children and their families.

Of the 26 local authority allocation policies, 2 (or just under 8%) featured the words 'autism' or 'autistic'. None of them featured the words 'neurodiversity' or 'neurodivergent' / 'neurodivergence'. References to autism were made in the following ways:

- 1 local authority (4%) offers Supported Tenancies for autistic adults.
- 1 local authority's policy (4%) references developmental disabilities and autism as a reason why an applicant may be awarded an additional bedroom above what the occupancy standard would normally allow. *See Case Study 1*.

22 of the 32 Local Housing Strategy documents reviewed featured the words 'autism' or 'autistic'. This equals 69%. Four of these strategies also featured the words 'neurodiversity' or 'neurodivergent'. This indicates that there is a gap between the understandings of autism and the housing needs of autistic people in strategy and policy.

Of the 129 housing association allocation policies, 21 (16%) featured the words 'autism' or 'autistic'. These references were made in the following ways:

14 policies (10%) awarded priority or points to autistic people who faced abuse or harassment.
Example: The term "unsatisfactory housing conditions" can cover a range of housing needs. In this policy, we consider the following circumstances as unsatisfactory: […] domestic or other abuse or harassment – this would include […] harassment based on autism and learning or physical disabilities.

4 policies (3%) awarded medical priority or points in reference to the medical needs of autistic people.
Example: Where an applicant requires an extra bedroom due to medical needs (i.e. autism, sleeping problems, storage for medical equipment, etc.) they will be awarded Medical D points.

1 policy (0.8%) stated that autistic applicants could be allocated supported living, and outreach properties could be allocated to autistic applicants.
Quote: "Supported living and outreach properties ensure adults with learning disabilities and autism spectrum conditions have the opportunity to live in an independent tenancy within the community."

1 policy (0.8%) states that, in the operation of the housing list, available properties will be advertised with Scottish Autism.
Quote: "Available properties will be advertised weekly on the website as well as in the office. A copy of the advert will also be sent to other partner organisations, including the Local Authority, Citizens' Advice Bureau, Scottish Autism and Women's Aid."

1 policy (0.8%) lists autistic people in the definition of disabled people.
Quote: "When we say 'disabled' people, we mean people with physical impairments, learning difficulties, autistic spectrum disorders, mental ill health, sensory impairments, and any other long-term or chronic conditions which result in housing need and disadvantage."

Just under 15% of the 155 policies reviewed specifically consider autistic people. Two-thirds of these references are in relation to the priority or points given to an autistic person who is experiencing harassment because of their disability.

3% of the available policies stated that an applicant could be awarded an additional bedroom because of the medical needs of autistic adults and children, and their families. Two examples of this good practice are explored below.

Good Practice Case Study 1

- Housing Association A is city-based. Tenement flats comprise around 45% of its stock, and houses comprise less than 1%.
- Housing demand significantly exceeds supply. In 2019, the HA offered accommodation to approximately 10% of those who applied.
- The HA operates a Points Based System. This means that points are allocated to an applicant based on their housing need. Housing Application Forms are assessed according to each applicant's individual circumstances.

The occupancy standard determines how many people can live in a home and whether it is under- or overcrowded. According to Housing Association A's occupancy standard, one bedroom is required by:

- A single person aged 14 and over
- A couple
- Two children of the same sex under 14 years, unless the age
- difference is 10 years or more
- Two children of the opposite sex, unless one or both is aged 8 or over, when each child will require a separate bedroom.

Applicants will be admitted to the housing list for only the size of property they are eligible for. There are some circumstances which allow for an additional bedroom to be awarded, including medical need:

> "An additional bedroom may be awarded [...] where medical evidence has been provided which documents the need for an additional bedroom (such examples may include persons who require an additional bedroom to receive medical treatment at home or have a **developmental disability such as Autism Spectrum Disorder that would have an adverse impact on another child who shared a bedroom).**"

A member of the Housing Association's Tenancy Team confirmed that an additional bedroom would always be granted to an autistic child where required, and where there was confirmation from a GP or healthcare professional. Further, staff will check with the applicant if their child has any specific requirements for appropriate rehousing, for example, a house that is not on a busy road or a flat that is not on the top floor.

Good Practice Case Study 2

- Local Authority A operates a Common Housing Register with various Registered Social Landlords.
- They rent houses across multiple letting areas. Each area has its own Letting Policy, and applicants can apply for housing in any area(s).
- Local Authority A operates a points based lettings system.

Local Authority A's occupancy standard states that a separate bedroom is required by:

- A single person aged 16 years and above
- A couple
- Two children of the opposite sex, unless one is aged 8 or over, in which case each child will require a separate bedroom
- Two children of the same sex under 16 years, unless the age difference is 10 years or over.

Applicants are limited to the size(s) of properties they can apply for based on how many bedrooms their household requires. For example, if one bedroom is required, the applicant can choose to apply for a bedsit, a one bed or a two bed property.

Local Authority A's Allocations Policy references "special circumstances" in which the medical needs of the household require that an additional bedroom be allowed.

> "For instance, if applicants or a member of their household requires an additional room to receive medical treatment from home, or has **a development disability such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) that would have an adverse impact on another child who shares a bedroom."**

Local Authority A's Local Housing Strategy references autism once: as part of the consultation process, the council engaged with members of the **Autism Strategy Group**. This group supported the delivery of an **Autism Action Plan**, designed to improve services and help meet the housing and support needs of individuals and families affected by autism. The Local Authority also has a dedicated **Autism Resources Coordination Hub**. Work has included the delivery of autism awareness-raising training for housing and property service staff. Successful housing outcomes have also been achieved, for example, the provision of a new build council home for a family of five who were potentially facing homelessness.

Only one policy went further and referenced another housing need of autistic children and their families, namely the potential need for a private garden. This policy is outlined below in Case Study 3. In the experience of Housing Options Scotland's brokers, the need for a garden or private outdoor space is overlooked or perceived as desirable rather than something that is needed for sensory regulation.

Good Practice Case Study 3

Housing Association B is community-based and city-based. Their housing stock totals over 5000 properties. The Association operates a points and priority system for allocating its housing.

The Association considers several factors to determine the size and type of accommodation that an applicant requires. The size of property required is determined by the following occupancy standard. One bedroom is required by:

- Applicant/applicant and partner
- Any other couple
- Single adult (aged 16 and over)
- Any 2 children of the same sex under 16 years of age
- Where there are 2 children of different sexes, they can share a bedroom until one of them reaches the age of 10

Other factors are considered. For example, applicants may request an additional bedroom if they require a carer to occasionally stay overnight. Levels of priority are also awarded according to a range of housing needs, including medical.

> **"Priority Two – Medical**
> Medical 'A' priority will be awarded where the applicant (or someone in their household) has a serious medical condition or disability, and their present housing is unsuitable. This means the quality of the applicant's life is seriously limited by their current housing and would be greatly improved by moving to more suitable accommodation.
>
> Where a household has a member with Autism Spectrum Disorder, consideration will be given to the needs identified by the medical assessment. **In particular, the need for children/dependents to have their own room and, in some circumstances, a private garden."**

In Housing Options Scotland's experience as a housing charity and advice service, housing providers will usually award some kind of points or priority to families with autistic and neurodivergent children who need more space, even if their allocation policy does not explicitly say this. However, also in our experience, this does not necessarily mean they will actually be offered a house with an additional bedroom. Reasons for this could include the lack of availability of larger properties or more suitable properties, especially if other household members have different medical and mobility needs. Further, in the context of the housing emergency, a family that is homeless or at risk of homelessness would be given priority, or reasonable preference, over a family that requires an additional bedroom.

Below are three examples of the way medical needs and points are discussed in allocation policies. Case Study 4 is also an example of when autism is considered in relation to supported living. Case Studies 5 and 6 are examples of instances when autism is not referenced in allocation policies but is referenced in the relevant local authority's local housing strategy.

Case Study 4

- Local Authority B operates a Common Housing Register with one other Registered Social Landlord. Houses are allocated using a points based system.
- Local Authority B holds a varied housing stock, including bed-sits, flats, semi-detached and detached houses and single-storey houses.

The size of house a household can apply for will depend on the number of people in the household, their relationships, sex and/or age:

Double room

- Couple
- Single parent
- Pregnant woman
- Two children of the same sex, under 15 with age difference less than 6 years

Single room

- Household member aged 15 and over
- Children of different sexes over 4 years old
- Children of the same sex where age difference is 6 years of more

Applicants may be able to apply for larger properties than the occupancy standard would normally allow if a member of the household has medical needs:
"You may be considered for a larger property if you have certain needs, which mean you need additional rooms or additional space. In these circumstances, we will seek appropriate advice from relevant professionals, with your permission."

According to Local Authority B's Allocations Policy, an applicant must complete a 'medical needs form' to be awarded medical points. Medical points may be awarded when an applicant's current home is having a negative impact on the health of a household member, and a move could alleviate this. Points are awarded depending on the level of impact: no impact (0 points); low level impact (20 points); moderate impact (50 points); significant impact (75 points); property not suitable long term (100 points). Medical points forms are assessed by Local Authority B's Medical Points Panel.

When completing an application for medical points to support a housing application, the applicant is asked whether the health condition affecting the household member is related to physical health, mental health or a learning disability. Developmental disability is not listed as an option, making it difficult to categorise autism according to current understandings of what it is. The next questions on the form include text boxes for freeform answers, where an applicant is asked to provide full details of their health condition and why their current home or location is not suitable.

In Local Authority B's Allocations Policy, autism is referenced specifically in relation to supported living. The council's Local Housing Strategy (2022-2027) also lists the Scottish Strategy for Autism in relation to the outcome of promoting independent living.

Within the local authority area, supported housing is available for tenants who require additional assistance to live in an independent environment. Supported Tenancies are available to help "adults with learning disabilities, autistic spectrum disorder and complex needs" to live as independently as possible in their communities. These tenancies are available for people aged 18 years or older (or 16 years or older in exceptional circumstances).

Case Study 5

Local Authority C operates a Common Housing Register with Housing Association C. This means they hold a joint waiting list for housing. The policy is based on a group and points system.

When an applicant applies to the housing register, their application is placed into the homeless group or the general needs groups. Points are then awarded based on individual circumstances and housing need.

Applicants will only be offered housing suitable to the size and housing needs of their household, dependent on demand for housing:

- A single person requires a single or double bedroom.
- A couple, single parent or pregnant single person requires a double bedroom.
- Two children of different sexes under the age of 10 require a double bedroom.
- Two children of the same sex under the age of 16 require a double bedroom.

Medical points can be awarded to households whose health and medical needs are unmet by their current accommodation. For medical points to be awarded, one of the following criteria must be met:

- A member of the household cannot access essential areas within the home.
- A member of the household cannot access the property, for example, if they cannot manage the stairs in an upper floor home.
- A member of the household cannot use standard facilities to bathe, and it is not possible or practical to adapt the home.
- An additional room is required for a live-in carer or other exceptional circumstances relating to a member of the households' health needs.

The Common Housing Allocation Policy does not reference autism, autism spectrum disorder or neurodevelopmental disabilities. Local Authority C's Local Housing Strategy (2021-2026) does, however, consider the housing need of autistic people and children:

> *"Clearly, the housing need of households with specific conditions will vary according to their specific requirements.* ***For instance, a family including a young person with autism may only need an extra bedroom specifically for the young person."***

The Allocation Policy does not reference an applicant being able to apply for a house bigger than the occupancy standard would normally allow. This is an example where strategy is not translated into policy and practice.

Local Authority C launched an Autism Strategy in 2016 to support and develop services for and with autistic people.

Case Study 6

- Local Authority D operates a Common Housing Allocation Policy with four partner landlords in the central belt region. Each landlord operates their own housing list.
- The council is the largest social rented sector landlord in the area.
- The policy is based on a group plus priority points approach.

When an applicant applies to the housing register, their application is placed into one of five groups: homelessness, mobility group, general applicants group, transfer applicant group (with housing need) and transfer applicant group (no housing need). After being placed in a group, an application can be awarded a level of priority according to housing need.

The size of home an applicant needs will be assessed according to the composition of the household. According to the occupancy standard, one bedroom is required by:

- A couple.
- Single adults.
- Two children of the same sex under the age of 16.
- Two children under the age of 10, regardless of their sex.
- Children of different sexes over the age of 10.

The policy acknowledges "that some applicants may prefer that children do not share bedrooms. [Applicants] can request that the bedroom requirement be assessed based on children aged 10 or over having their own bedroom".

The policy also acknowledges that there are other circumstances that may affect the number of bedrooms a household needs. An applicant may be entitled to an addition bedroom...

> *"if there is a health, care or mobility reason for needing [one]. For example, for a carer (or team of carers) that provides someone in the household with overnight care or if a long-term condition (such as dementia) makes it difficult for a couple to share a room. This bedroom entitlement would be used to assess any priority based on overcrowding".*

Health and Social Care Priority is awarded to applicants who have housing or support needs. This could include applicants who:

- Have received or are receiving treatment for serious health issues.
- Have a learning disability.
- Have mental health needs.
- Have medical needs not addressed by the mobility priority.
- Have any other significant health and social care needs not covered elsewhere in this policy.

The Common Housing Allocation Policy does not reference autism, autistic spectrum disorder or developmental disabilities. However, Local Authority D's Local Housing Strategy (2023-2028) does refer to the housing needs and housing related support requirements of autistic people and children:

> *Children with autism may need specific adaptations at home. [The area's] Common Housing Allocations Policy takes a person's particular needs into account through the Housing Options process to ensure accommodation better meets their needs.*

Conclusion

To conclude, we can consider the three questions outlined in the Introduction.

How does the social rented sector in Scotland accommodate the housing needs of autistic children and their families?

Overall, the analysed allocation policies do not provide much indication of how the social rented sector accommodates the needs of autistic children and their families. Comments from the *Consultation Analysis Report* for the *Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill* support this conclusion:

> "...it was noted that the current allocation of social housing for families did not take account of neurodivergence and would often result in room sharing between siblings."

Anecdotally, many social housing providers will try to accommodate the housing needs of autistic children and their families, for example, by awarding medical points. However, this does not necessarily mean they are placed in a house that meets their needs. Further, without professional support and advice, many families may not know that this is possible.

What can allocation policies tell us about how social housing providers in Scotland consider applications from families with autistic children?

There are three main ways that autism is referenced in the allocation policies analysed:

- **Harassment**: when autistic people who face abuse or harassment where they live may be awarded priority or points.
- **The need for an additional bedroom**: when autism is considered a medical need, and additional medical points are awarded. Notably, some policies reference the adverse impacts room sharing may have on the siblings of autistic children, rather than the benefit an additional bedroom would have for the autistic children themselves.
- **The availability of Supported Living Tenancies**: some local authorities offer Supported Tenancies for autistic adults.

How many allocation policies specifically offer priority or additional support for these applicants?

Just under 15% of the 155 policies reviewed specifically reference the housing needs of autistic people. Two-thirds of these references are in relation to the priority or points given to an autistic person who is experiencing harassment because of their disability. 3% of the available policies state that an applicant could be awarded an additional bedroom because of the medical needs of autistic adults and children, and their families.

Looking ahead, the sector should...

Do more to better understand autism.
Autism is often misunderstood. In the social housing sector, this can mean that families are allocated a home that does not meet their needs. More training and research would help prevent this. This should always be done with input from autistic people and communities.

From public consultation on the *LDAN Bill*, "the general feeling was that specialist training regarding both physical and sensory needs would bring significant improvement to the system. Some stated that improved specialist training would result in a 'kinder', more understanding, person-centred approach, with more suitable homes being offered since support staff would be more aware of individual needs." (p97).

Translate strategy into policy and practice.
Only 2 of the 26 local authority allocation policies consulted feature the word(s) 'autism' or 'autistic'. None featured the word(s) 'neurodiversity' or 'neurodivergent'. Compare this to the 22 Local Housing Strategy documents that feature the word(s) 'autism' or 'autistic', and a gap between strategy and policy becomes visible.

Get the language right.
As noted at the beginning of this paper, it is important to get the language right. Everyone is unique and will identify themselves in different ways, but some identifiers are more widely preferred than others.

Kenny et al (2015) found that, within autistic communities, identity-first language is generally preferred over person-first language. And, while autism is clinically defined as 'autism spectrum disorder', Scottish Autism prefers to view autism as a difference, not a disorder. A mix of language and terms was used in the allocation policies.

Involve autistic communities.
One way to ensure that the right language is used is to work in partnership with autistic communities. Housing providers and professionals should commit to 'neuro-affirming' practice, recognising and including autistic ways of thinking and lived experience. Involving autistic communities will lead to better housing outcomes for everyone.

Resources

Websites

- Autism Toolbox (Scottish Government and Education Scotland)
- Different Minds. One Scotland
- Housing Options Scotland
- National Autistic Society
- NHS Scotland Right Decision Service
- Scottish Autism

Scottish Government

- Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill: consultation
- Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill: consultation analysis
- The Scottish Strategy for Autism
- Scottish Strategy for Autism: evaluation
- Scottish Strategy for Autism: outcomes and priorities 2018-2021

References and further reading

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