

BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION

RADIO 4

TRANSCRIPT OF "FILE ON 4" - 'SOCIAL HOUSING'

CURRENT AFFAIRS GROUP

TRANSMISSION: Tuesday 17th July 2007 2000 - 2040

REPEAT: Sunday 22nd July 2007 1700 - 1740

REPORTER: Gerry Northam

PRODUCER: Ian Muir-Cochrane

EDITOR: David Ross

PROGRAMME NUMBER: 07VQ3917LHO

THE ATTACHED TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING AND NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

“FILE ON 4”

Transmission: Tuesday 17th July 2007

Repeat: Sunday 22nd July 2007

Producer: Gerry Northam

Reporter: Ian Muir-Cochrane

Editor: David Ross

BROWN: Mr Speaker, putting affordable housing within the reach not just of the few but the many is vital both to meeting individual aspirations, and to securing a better future for our country, so for housing and

NORTHAM: A new Prime Minister and a new burst of political interest in Britain's housing crisis. Which is good news for those struggling to buy and also for the record numbers of people growing increasingly frustrated on waiting lists for social housing, to rent from councils and housing associations.

NORTHAM: How long have you been waiting?

TOOLE: Actually I've got the original application here and it's 30th of June 1993 so it's 14 years as you can see.

NORTHAM: So what hope do you have?

TOOLE: Very little actually but you just got to keep on trying.

NORTHAM: The Government's housing Green Paper is about to be published with proposals to tackle supply, by freeing up land and having thousands more new houses built, both private and social. But for many local authorities there's another equally urgent problem, deciding which of hundreds of applicants should get each of the few council homes that come vacant. It's an issue that can become politically explosive when those who get housed are relatively recent migrants. But File on 4 has learned that in Parliament and town halls, there's more widespread doubt as to whether the current system is working fairly.

WALES: Essentially what we've got at the moment is a race to the bottom, and it ends up with whole estates of people that basically have just come in and say 'oh please house us' and we end up giving priority and we end up with places where there isn't the aspiration for the young people and the kids that are around that that we used to have on council estates.

SIGNATURE TUNE

ACTUALITY IN HOUSE INCLUDING FOOTSTEPS

MRS WARD:this is the landing,...we go straight round erm this is one of the bedrooms, this is the kids room. Lewis is 12, he sleeps on the top bunk, Jordan's 9 she sleeps on the bottom.....(footsteps on stairs) Louise and Ray enter room.

NORTHAM: Ray and Louise Ward live in a 2-bedroom house in Birkenhead and face a serious problem of overcrowding with their 2 children.

MRS WARD: All the clothes are just piled into that wardrobe and that small chest of drawers.

NORTHAM: So this is about what, 9 feet by 7 something 9 feet by 8 perhaps?

MRS WARD: It's just not healthy for them is it. I mean Jordan's a pre-teen so is Lewis so they are developing.

MRS WARD cont: There wouldn't be a problem with them sharing a room but it's not right for a brother and sister, coming up to their teenage years to be sharing a bedroom. And they need their own privacy just to get dressed and things like that.

NORTHAM: What does all this do to you?

MR WARD: It makes me stressed and depressed all the time, because the kids...sometimes it's murder. They're just bickering and that and it seems to be getting worse as they're getting older.

NORTHAM: For the past 8 years, since their daughter was a baby, Mr and Mrs Ward have seen this trouble coming, and repeatedly applied to the Council for a 3-bedroom house. As the children have grown, the Borough has recognised the necessity of rehousing them.

MR WARD: We were just been given urgent need status 2 years ago

NORTHAM: And has that helped?

MR WARD: No. We've applied for numerous properties...erm and we haven't been successful with any of them.

NORTHAM: How often have you applied for a move?

MR WARD: Once every week. Err, we've got all receipts for the ones that we've applied for.

NORTHAM: A wad of them.

MR WARD: Yeah.

NORTHAM: And how far have you got?

MR WARD: Nowhere. We haven't heard off anybody.

NORTHAM: Heard nothing at all?

MR WARD: Nothing at all.

NORTHAM: When you were put on urgent need status what did you expect to happen?

MR WARD: We expected to....because we've already been on the list for 6 years anyway, we expected with the urgent need status that we'd get a property within 6 months which hasn't happened.

NORTHAM: And what chance do you think you've got of getting a property?

MR WARD: Well we've been told from the Council we've got next to no chance.

NORTHAM: What do you think about that?

MR WARD; I think it's disgusting. We've been told to apply for other No Go areas, where people don't want to go because of the drugs and stuff problems. I went in and spoke to somebody and I said to them so you've got to be a drug addict or just come out of prison or an immigrant to get anywhere on the list. They just turned round to me and said yes.

NORTHAM: And your view of that is what?

WARD: I think it's totally disgusting. The decent people, decent British people just getting pushed right to the back all the time. So I don't think it's right, I don't think it's fair.

NORTHAM: Wirral Borough Council wouldn't comment on Ray Ward's allegations, saying they don't discuss individual cases.

ACTUALITY ON BIDSTEN RISE ESTATE

DAVIES: Clover Drive, this area is part of Bidsten Rise which is the North end of Birkenhead. The houses were built somewhere in the region of about the 1930's. They're well built and they have been good family homes for lots of people since then.

NORTHAM: The Council Cabinet member for Housing is George Davies, who also chairs the North West Housing Forum. Day after day, Councillor Davies hears from angry constituents waiting for their turn to come up on the housing list and finding that it never does. The cause isn't hard to identify. The Wirral has an acute shortage of social housing. Under the Right To Buy scheme introduced by Mrs Thatcher in the early 80s, most of the best properties have been sold off, leaving Councillor Davies with a diminishing stock to manage and, over the past 3 years, a rapidly growing number of applicants.

DAVIES: The waiting list was somewhere in the region of about 10,500. It's now approaching 15,000.

NORTHAM: 15,000!

DAVIES: 15,000.

NORTHAM: Families waiting or people waiting?

DAVIES: People waiting to come on the waiting list, yes.

NORTHAM: And how many social houses are there in the Borough?

DAVIES: Across the whole Borough there'll be in the region of about the same. About 15,000.

NORTHAM: So your waiting list is as many as the number of houses.

DAVIES: That's quite correct. If a property becomes available on the Mounts Estate for example I'd find in that there's at least 500-600 people that are putting in for that 1 property, which means 499 people do not get a look in.

NORTHAM: What does this mean about the length of time that some people wait before they get a council property?

DAVIES: People that are on this waiting list now are becoming so desperate for housing and I think that one of the things I've witnessed over the past 2 years is an increase, by some 400% of Bed & Breakfast.

NORTHAM: You're saying families are being put up increasingly in Bed & Breakfasts accommodation?

DAVIES: Increasingly over the last 2 years we have had to resort to Bed & Breakfasts.

NORTHAM: But didn't we learn decades ago that families and Bed & Breakfast accommodation simply can't go together.

DAVIES: I think you're absolutely right. Desperation. I think it's desperation, it is the correct word.

NORTHAM: The plight of The Wirral is typical of Councils up and down the country. Nationally, waiting lists are getting ever longer and now

total 1.63 million people. Facing this growing shortage, the Government commissioned a report on the future role of social housing from one of Britain's leading experts, Professor John Hills of the LSE. Recently, he published his findings.

HILLS: I think the best way of looking at what's led to the greatly increased pressure on social housing in the last 6 or 7 years is to look at the ability of the sector to take in new households. One of the really remarkable things was that through the 1970's, 1980's, 1990's as many new households could enter the sector each year by in large, as before. And that was happening because the stock was turning over.

NORTHAM: How do you mean turning over?

HILLS: That some tenants were moving out into owner occupation even without exercising their right to buy and also the tenant population was really quite old. People had moved into social housing in their 50's and 60's. As they became older and eventually moved into either care or they died, that property became available for new tenants. And we were able to take in ¼ million new households into social housing each year, who hadn't been there the year before. But that's changed. We're seeing a delayed effect of the right to buy. Eventually those properties would have become available and they no longer are. But also the ability of people to move into owner occupation, move elsewhere has become much, much more restricted because prices have risen so much. They've doubled in the last 10 years. So there's much, much lower turnover of the existing stock than there used to be. 60-70,000 fewer new households can get into social housing each year now, compared to 6 or 7 years ago. That's what's driving the pressure cooker situation we're now in. There's much smaller ability of housing associations and councils taking in new households. That means they have to look evermore tightly at who it is that's getting access.

NORTHAM: At the heart of the problem of allocating social housing is a longstanding dilemma: which should be given top priority, the length of time people have been on the waiting list, or the urgency of their need? The law

defines categories of people in need, including the homeless and those suffering overcrowding or disability, and it says that they must be given 'reasonable preference' in the queue, meaning, in practice, that they should have a fair head start. This may seem common sense, but it's proving increasingly contentious. And nowhere more so than in places where the scarcity of social housing becomes entangled with issues of migration or race.

ACTUALITY AT BARKING MARKET

MARKET TRADER:in our sale this afternoon ladies and gentlemen come along and have a word with our guys, it's clearance time now.....CD radio cassette player guys, they're a nice item this afternoon....

NORTHAM: This lively street market is at the heart of Barking in East London. And it was this area which hit the headlines a couple of months ago when the local MP, the Government Minister Margaret Hodge, raised concern over the priority being given to some economic Migrants in the allocation of social housing. She asked if it's right that local people who've lived in the Borough for generations should lose their chance of a house in favour of families who've recently arrived and are in more urgent need.

These remarks attracted a blizzard of criticism, with another Minister saying she was using the language of the British National Party. Margaret Hodge wasn't available for interview for File on 4. But among some of her constituents, she seems to have struck a chord.

ACTUALITY OF COMPUTER LAPTOP

ELSEY: Barking & Dagenham Council has got a website. Basically I'm logging in to see my bids, my last bids. I'm putting in my code for logging in, my date of birth, tick on the history of bids, it comes up.

NORTHAM: Wow. How many are there?

ELSEY: It goes 2005.

NORTHAM: There must be....25-30 bids, going back to June 2005.

ELSEY: Yeah.

NORTHAM: Peter Elsey is 42 and has been on the council's waiting list for 6 years. He's too old to stay with his mum, but when he puts in bids for properties advertised on the official website, he's always been disappointed... coming well down the list in each case.

ACTUALITY OF TAPPING ON LAPTOP

ELSEY:gives me a history of bids I've been on.....84.

NORTHAM: So position in the queue and you were 84th.

ELSEY: Yeah.

NORTHAM: That was back in 2005.

ELSEY: That's right yeah.

NORTHAM: What's your most recent bid?

ELSEY: Recent bid was last week....36.

NORTHAM: 36.

ELSEY: Yeah.

NORTHAM: Is that the best you've ever been?

ELSEY: I've been 14.

NORTHAM: 14th.

ELSLEY: I'm 14th on that one.

NORTHAM: When was that? That was....

ELSEY: That's in err....

NORTHAM: In May this year.

ELSEY: Yeah. Thames View Estate.

NORTHAM: So you're going backwards.

ELSEY: I'm going backwards. I've wrote to the Council, spoke to them and it just seems they don't care. I get fobbed off with err....a letter, a standard letter saying well you got to open your horizons. Now I've tried to put in for high rise flats on the....I think it was...12th floor and am getting absolutely no-where.

NORTHAM: Where are you living at the moment?

ELSEY: At the moment I'm living at my Mum's, around my friend's and around my Brother's. But sometimes I got to live in the back of the van.

NORTHAM: You sleep in the back of your van.

ELSEY: Only once or twice.

NORTHAM: Do you think you ought to be in this position?

ELSEY: No. Well I've been living in the Borough for the last 42 years, I think that's ridiculous.

NORTHAM: Are you going to keep bidding, next week and the week after?

ELSEY: Oh yeah, I'll still keep on bidding but I know for a fact I'm not going to get anywhere.

NORTHAM: Barking and Dagenham Council say Peter Elsey's case is typical of many single people in the Borough, but point out that he's only been waiting on the priority list for housing since March this year.

NORTHAM cont: Mr Elsey told me he doesn't know who is getting the social housing, but his mother Betty has a clear idea who she thinks it is.

MRS. ELSEY: From what I can see and hear quite a few Eastern Europeans are living in the area. Quite a few people from South London and so on seem to have moved here. Just....not English. I just feel that they could do more for those that have been born and bred here.

NORTHAM: So do you think the system is currently working fairly?

MRS. ELSEY: No. Because everybody else seems to have come before those born and bred here. People that have only been in the country a few months or a year, they just seem to get everything first. They seem to get first in the queue for everything.

NORTHAM: There's no doubt this is widely believed in Barking and Dagenham. But it's flatly denied by the Council, which has a chronic shortage of accommodation. At the far end of the computer link, in the local Housing Office, we found officials juggling bids for the weekly allocation, of just 13 vacant properties. There were 2,286 bidders, an average of 176 for each.

ACTUALITY OF COMPUTER

THOMAS:there we go. Gives us details of the property that we're actually going to consider for this particular one, which is a 2 bedroom high rise flat in Dagenham on the 12th floor.....

NORTHAM: The senior Allocations Officer, Russell Thomas, has just signed off all 13 of this week's properties, and selected one to show us how the system works. A list of bidders ranked in order flashes up on his screen. The first 25 of them have all been awarded priority status because of their housing needs. The Gentlemen on the top of the list, what do you know about him?

THOMAS: Basically everything we need to know. The system would need to know for example, all the details about his application, members of his household, the address he's registered from.

NORTHAM: It says he's got 1 need.

THOMAS: Yep.

NORTHAM: That would give him priority. Can you tell me what that is?

THOMAS: Let's have a quick check on the system. His household comprises of himself, his partner and two daughters. In the accommodation he currently occupies he doesn't have access to any bedrooms whatsoever. It more than likely means, in this particular case that he's sharing accommodation with either friends or relatives and doesn't have exclusive use of any bedrooms at that property.

NORTHAM: Which gives him a priority.

THOMAS: For overcrowding.

NORTHAM: and he's that priority need for how long?

THOMAS: Basically since the date he's been registered, which in this particular case is June of 2006.

NORTHAM: From his surname...East European?

THOMAS: Obviously one of the things we have to check for is their eligibility through their immigration status. There's a couple of written notes on their saying his immigration status...he's from the Ukraine...

NORTHAM: So is he going to get this property?

THOMAS: Unfortunately for him No. Yes. He's overcrowded. Yes he's been waiting in that overcrowded for that period of time. One of the things we can also check for which current legislation allows us, does he have a local connection to Barking and Dagenham. And the simple answer for this particular case, is no he doesn't.

NORTHAM: Where's he living at the moment then?

THOMAS: In Newham. London Borough of Newham.

NORTHAM: The Ukrainian man is found to be ineligible only because he currently lives in the wrong Borough and doesn't have a local connection. So in the event the flat goes to the next on the list, a young single mother who describes herself as White British. The way the Council's system works is this: within the priority band of people with urgent needs, your place in the queue is determined by the length of time you've been waiting on the list. But bidders in the lower band, without urgent needs, might as well be in a different queue since no amount of waiting will ever put them ahead of those who have been awarded priority. So is Margaret Hodge right when she says that economic migrants with urgent needs, will usually be housed in place of local families who've just been waiting a long time? The Borough's Director of Housing, David Woods says Yes, but...

WOODS: That statement needs to be qualified. First of all, people who've recently arrived here don't get access to council housing. If you're

coming from abroad first of all you have to have the right to live in the UK, secondly you have to have been here for at least a year and in some cases have worked here for a year.

NORTHAM: And if a migrant family has been in the borough for at least a year, would Margaret Hodges' case then be right that they would usually get priority if they had multiple housing need?

WOODS: Yes they would, but they wouldn't get priority over other local people who've got the same priority need and who've been here longer.

NORTHAM: So when she says that a recently arrived migrant family with multiple housing needs will usually get priority over a family who may have lived in the borough for three generations and are stuck at home with the grandparents, she's right?

WOODS: She's right provided she means by recently arrived, people who've been here for the qualifying period.

NORTHAM: Do you want to rethink that policy as Margaret Hodge clearly thinks you should?

WOODS: I think it's very difficult to move away from a position where we allocate housing on the basis of need.

NORTHAM: The Borough's Housing Director is acutely aware of the strength of local feeling about his policy. Last year, Barking & Dagenham elected 12 councillors from the BNP... the party's best showing in the country. The principal issue by far in its success, according to the local leader Councillor Richard Barnbrook, was dissatisfaction over social housing. Councillor Barnbrook took me to an example of what he sees as a growing dominance of foreign-born residents.

BARNBROOK: What we have is 3 tower blocks, 15 high, err they are either nicknamed Legoland because of the sort of design of the exterior. Or otherwise known as Kosovan Towers.

NORTHAM: Kosovan Towers because..?

BARNBROOK: I think the majority of people moving in here or a large percentage are from Kosovo.

NORTHAM: Refugees?

BARNBROOK: Refugees or people that have been here in the country for 1 or 2 generations that simply homed in towards Barking & Dagenham.

NORTHAM: How do you know that most of the people living here come from Kosovo?

BARNBROOK: Well, I wouldn't say most I would say a fair majority of them. The reason is because people have told me. And they say a fair percentage of the people here are Kosovans or related to East Europe.

NORTHAM: In other words it's street talk?

BARNBROOK: It's street talk and ok you get Chinese whispers, I appreciate that but this has to start from something. There must be some grounds of evidence for that comment to start in the first place.

NORTHAM: And as a Councillor, you think that's good enough evidence do you?

BARNBROOK: Well no but I'd like to have more information but I have actually seen people coming in here, that are East European. I don't understand the language the Kosovan language but you can normally have an educated guess that it is from East European.

NORTHAM: Refugees, whether from Kosovo or anywhere else, were specifically excluded from Margaret Hodge's critical comments about social housing. She made clear that she was questioning only the priority given to economic migrants in urgent need. But Councillor Barnbrook of the BNP goes further, arguing that Council policy actively favours migrants even over local people with equally urgent needs.

BARNBROOK: They're getting preferential treatment over local people that have been on the waiting list for 1, 2, 3, 5, 10 years.

NORTHAM: When you say preferential treatment do you mean....

BARNBROOK: ...jumping the queue. Simple as that.

NORTHAM: You mean that they are taking the place of someone who has equivalent need but has lived here locally.

BARNBROOK: Yes. There is a criteria for people, given immediate housing, they feel they can be threatened by being a minority or being somebody that could be vulnerable or they could have been victimised.

NORTHAM: But they're not in equivalent positions to local people then because those threats wouldn't apply to local people. What you're saying now is that migrants may have greater need because they're under threat.

BARNBROOK: No. What I'm saying is, is that the Council's explanation is, is if someone does not speak English they consider that to be a handicap and they could be intimidated threatened.

NORTHAM: So they're not in the same position as local people.

BARNBROOK: Of course they are. The point is the need for the housing is exactly the same. The aspect of special needs because of they cannot

communicate with the local people, that I do not consider to be any more important than that of a dire need.

NORTHAM: But your concern is that they shouldn't have this housing in the first place?

BARNBROOK: Yes. Definitely. The housing should go to people that live here, work here, pay tax here. It is a loaded and a deliberate manipulation of the bidding system by the Council.

NORTHAM: Councillor Barnbrook's allegations carry weight in the Borough. Because of the BNP's tally of 12 seats, he's the official Leader of the Opposition.

But the Housing Director, David Woods, rejects out of hand the accusation that the waiting list is manipulated to help migrants.

WOODS: No he's absolutely wrong. The system is quite clear, it's quite transparent you can read it all on the council's website it's all there for you. Once people are placed in an allocation band in this instance, priority home seeker it is time on the waiting list that takes precedence when it comes to a bid. And in fact, we do ethnic monitoring of people on the waiting list and of lettings and those figures if you study them show a very, very strong correlation in terms of allocation as compared to numbers on the waiting list. And we're absolutely satisfied that the system is fair in that respect.

NORTHAM: You don't have to talk to many people on the streets of this Borough before you hear somebody say you haven't got a chance of a council house unless you're a recently arrived immigrant, where have they got that from?

WOODS: I think they've got that from the stories that have been put around from some of the political campaigning...

NORTHAM: Not from watching what actually happens on the waiting list?

WOODS: Well they can't have got it from seeing what happens on the waiting list because as I've said there's a very strong correlation of allocation against waiting list membership from the various ethnic groups. Those figures are available and I'm happy to supply them to anyone.

NORTHAM: It isn't solely in Barking & Dagenham, and not only in the campaigns of the BNP, that a link is made between the growing shortage of social housing and the arrival of migrants. At national level, the pressure group Migration Watch UK raises similar concern. It doesn't claim that migrants are given special treatment, but its Chairman, Sir Andrew Green does point to migration as an important factor driving the current housing crisis.

GREEN: The Government say continuously that asylum seekers do not qualify for social housing that is correct.

GREEN cont: For so long as they are asylum seekers but as soon as they are granted asylum or some form of protection they become qualified for council housing. At the same time they become qualified to bring their families over to the UK, which would of course move them up the priority list. So there's no question that the flow of people from the asylum system into refugee status is adding to pressure on council houses and what we have done is a little arithmetic. We've taken the total number of people granted that kind of status which comes to 228,000 in the last ten years and then looked at how many social houses were built in that period, and the answer is 188,000. So the number of people granted that status is greater by 40,000 than the total number of social houses built in that period.

NORTHAM: Are you assuming that they would all have gone into social housing?

GREEN: One doesn't know if they have all gone into social housing, some might have gone to stay with relatives. No set of statistics is absolutely clear.

NORTHAM: It might be misleading mighten it?

GREEN: Well I think what you can do is look at the totals on both sides and quite clearly this is a significant factor. I'm not saying it is necessarily wrong, we have always supported granting refugee status to genuine refugees. Our point is that the Government has just not been joined up. One hand has been dishing out refugee status. The other hand has failed to build the housing that they are likely to need.

NORTHAM: And you're saying that in gross numbers forty thousand fewer new social houses have been built than the number of people granted refugee status in the past ten years?

GREEN: Precisely.

NORTHAM: File On 4 wanted to put Sir Andrew's criticism to the Government. We were told the Housing Minister would not be available for interview. In a statement, her department says:

READER IN STUDIO: This crude comparison is doubly flawed as it ignores recent increases in the supply of new social homes to rent and fails to recognise that the vast majority of immigrants either rent privately or live with friends or relatives.

NORTHAM: In Barking and Dagenham, despite strong political pressure, the Council applies the law on housing allocations strictly, giving priority to those in greatest need. But across the border in a neighbouring Borough, they take a very different approach.

ACTUALITY AT CUSTOM HOUSE STATION

ANNOUNCER AT STATION:this is Custom House.....

NORTHAM: The Docklands Light Railway can whisk residents of this part of East London off to the shining towers of Canary Wharf or the heart of the City of London, an attractive proposition for a young affluent set. This is the edge of Canning Town in the Borough of Newham, a former dockside community where a massive regeneration project is in hand to turn decaying 60s council estates into vibrant mixed areas including substantial developments of social housing. But the law here is seen as an obstacle.

The elected Mayor of Newham, Sir Robin Wales, regards the needs-based allocation system with nothing short of disdain.

WALES: Essentially what we've got at the moment is a race to the bottom, What we do is we allocate properties on the basis of how you present yourself to a local council, so you walk in and say I'm homeless you get a greater priority then you walk in and say I've managed to do something for myself but I'm still looking for a council property. And so the whole way we allocate is unfair, it doesn't necessarily enable us to support aspiration.

NORTHAM: Are you telling me that you don't think there are people who are genuinely homeless and need urgent housing?

WALES: Well what do you mean by that, do you mean there...

NORTHAM: I mean they haven't got anywhere to live?

WALES: Yeah and then we'd house them, we've got private sector accommodation we'd get them in. We've got almost, we've got...

NORTHAM: But they wouldn't have access to council housing?

WALES: Ah they would, they'd have access to council housing on exactly the same basis as everybody else...

NORTHAM: They'd have to wait?

WALES: They'd have to wait the same as everybody else, but what they would do is get into the private sector. That seems to me right and we should support that.

NORTHAM: Even an elected Mayor can't instruct his housing department to break the law. But the Council has devised a way of trying to minimise the impact of the law giving preference to needs. It crams as many applicants as it can into the priority band, well over two-thirds of its 28,000 strong waiting list, and then treats them strictly in order of waiting-time.

WALES: We've got 19,000 in priority and we try and put as many people in there as possible so that we can have a fair system...

NORTHAM: A fair system meaning?

WALES: The fair system would be the longer you wait the higher up the list you are. Now I think people understand that, if you say look we've all got to wait it's a queue, you wait in the queue and when your turn comes you have a chance that's the right way to do it at least partially.

NORTHAM: And the way that you're doing it is to put as many people as possible into the priority band?

WALES: Yes, yes absolutely.

NORTHAM: And you're allowed to do that within the law are you?

WALES: We operate absolutely within the law but we try and push it the furthest we can because we believe that everybody should have the same fair access.

NORTHAM: So you say that you're pushing the law as far as possible does the law need to be changed?

WALES: Absolutely, the law should be changed to allow us to do the allocations policy we want, we think we should have local discretion but even if the Government doesn't want to do that we think something round queuing is fair. People understand queues. The British people are essentially fair minded people and if you say to them it's a queue you've got to wait your turn they understand that.

NORTHAM: Other local authorities have devised their own ways to help people who've spent years on the waiting list. In Coventry, a new system is about to be introduced which will open every fourth property to competition purely on the basis of waiting time. On The Wirral, that's already the policy with one property in three. One senior local politician there, Frank Field the MP for Birkenhead, has become a trenchant critic of the current housing law. He argues that the system of allocation according to need serves to make losers out of the very people who should win.

FIELD: I object to the way council houses are allocated. The vast majority of my constituents in Birkenhead do and my guess is in the country as a whole in that they feel the form of allocation is unfair, people believe that it's wrong as a primary aim to give that scarce resource on the basis of need rather than on the basis that I've actually earned my right to that.

FIELD cont: That society goes round because people work, because people play the game, because people are decent citizens and that should be rewarded rather than 'ah look I'm actually homeless or I've managed to persuade people that I am deemed to be homeless therefore I should shoot to the top of the list'.

NORTHAM: So your view is that the law which currently places emphasis, great emphasis on the priority of people in need, your saying that law is simply wrong?

FIELD: I'm saying the law is wrong, I'm saying that we in Parliament should actually change that law, that we should reward citizenship we should give it a greater weight than we should award being deemed homeless.

NORTHAM: Are you recreating the 19th century distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor here?

FIELD: Well we've got it and that is that the decent citizens are deemed undeserving and I think that's wrong.

NORTHAM: In local Government, some elected officials are privately scathing about what they call 'the housing lobby' for insisting that the law should continue to favour need. When you ask who they mean by 'the housing lobby', they say Shelter, the influential charity set up 40 years ago to campaign for the homeless. Adam Sampson, Shelter's Chief Executive, recognises that there is opposition to the current law but argues that there really can be no alternative to it in a civilised society.

SAMPSON: In the end, we have a choice to make, a choice between whether we meet people's needs or we meet their aspirations and their sense of entitlement. And in the end in my day job, I see people in desperate housing need, I see people whose lives are falling apart because they haven't got anywhere to live. I see kids that are sleeping 4 or 5, 6 to a bedroom, I see people on the streets and you cannot see that stuff and think that it should not be society's response to house them.

SAMPSON cont: Of course that must take priority even over people sense of entitlement, but what needs to change here is not the law but the supply of housing.

NORTHAM: But while there is a shortage of council housing and the choice has to be made between need and entitlement through waiting time, you're saying the law should continue to put need first?

SAMPSON: Housing is one of the basic planks of the welfare state. The welfare state exists to guarantee a basic minimum standard of life to people

in this country in poverty in desperate need. Those are surely the individuals for whom social housing, note the word 'social' here exists. They are people to whom we should at least guarantee a minimum standard of quality of life. And to say that we should be nodding at people who are in the most desperate need and ignoring their needs in favour of people who maybe adequately housed, but not housed as well as they would like seems to me to be perverse.

NORTHAM: We wanted to ask the Government whether it sees any need for change in the current law on social housing priorities, but the Housing Minister wasn't available. Her department's statement says:

READER IN STUDIO: We believe it is right that priority for social housing should be based on housing need.

NORTHAM: The criticism that the current law tends to create concentrations of the most disadvantaged residents is shared by Prof John Hills, Director of the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion at the LSE, whose recent report to the Government pointed to a dramatic change in the composition of social housing estates since the 1980s.

HILLS: The chances of somebody living in 1 social housing unit, council house or housing association property that both their neighbours also in social housing were in fulltime work has now fallen to 1 in 10.

HILLS cont: If those units are in particular areas that means whole streets and whole neighbourhoods may have very few people in them in fulltime work, and that is a very big change from 25 years ago. The proportion of social tenants who are not so much unemployed these days but who are receiving incapacity benefit or they're lone parents or have other reasons to be out of the labour market has greatly increased. The knock-on effect of that in terms of the connection possibly of whole neighbourhoods with the labour market can have very serious ramifications.

NORTHAM: Ramifications meaning what?

HILLS: A society in which all the people with low incomes live in one corner and all the people with high incomes live in another corner means that the divide in terms of peoples understanding of how other people live and therefore the way Society works as whole is bound to diminish.

NORTHAM: From the Government's restatements of policy in the past week, it's clear that it wants more and more new houses, including a revival of the lost art of council house-building. But how far will this go towards solving the acute dilemma facing authorities across the country as they try to decide fairly who should get the few vacant social properties available? Prof Hills, the Government's own housing expert, argues that difficult decisions over who should get social housing are going to remain centre-stage.

Is it possible that by building more houses we could build our way out of the problem?

HILLS: It seems to me unlikely that any Government would be able to build or decide to build on such a large scale as to make social housing at a low rent, available to anybody who wanted it. To put it in perspective even if, and I think it rather unlikely, the effect of this year's spending review is to increase new supply from where it's been, below 20,000 units a year upto 60 or 70,000 units a year, that by itself would only take us back to where we were in the 1990s, in terms of the pressure on the system, rather than removing those pressures altogether. We can't do all that through new supply.

NORTHAM: So allocation policies remain a critical issue do they?

HILLS: Allocations policies remain critical so what we do with the things we've already got to meet the overall objectives that social housing has traditionally had, is crucial.

SIGNATURE TUNE