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Home in on Housing Programme – Phase 1 project

Version control:

Version	Date	Changes	Circulated to	Produced by
V0.1	12-09-2025	Minor amendments	Louise Capaldi-Tallon	Jenny Howard
V0.2	23/10/25	Minor amendments	Sarah How Martin Short Lee Hardy	Jenny Howard
Vo. 3	4/11/25	Amendments, further research	Sharon Attwater	Jenny Howard

Subject of Report	Housing Register Downsizing Initiative
Purpose of Report	**Information / Recommendations / Decision Making**
Background Papers	Housing Strategy - Housing Strategy January 2024 to January 2029 - Dorset Council https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/w/dorset-council-housing-allocations-policy-2021-to-2026-revised-august-2024-duplicate-3

Contents

Summary

Project Purpose

This project forms part of phase 1 of the 'Home in on Housing' (HIOH) programme to deliver the Housing Strategy (2024-2029).

A property can be considered 'right' in terms of size, cost, design and attached support. Providing the right property ensures residents can access homes that meet their needs and having a well-designed home, sensitive to its surroundings, is also a key component of a successful, sustainable home.

The 2021 census data, cited in Dorset Council's Housing Strategy, states that whilst many Dorset social housing tenants have the right number of bedrooms to meet their household needs, not all do. Approximately 38% said that they have a least one bedroom more than they need and 6% stated that they're living in overcrowded conditions. According to the National Housing Federation and The Health Foundation, overcrowded conditions are linked with development issues for children. It can worsen mental health and physical conditions and can significantly impact air quality by increasing humidity and promoting mould growth which is linked to respiratory conditions. Our registered providers tell us that, whilst they support and promote downsizing, they have limited resources to financially incentivise this. Instead, those wishing to move are often signposted to our housing register, or to mutual exchange sites like Homeswapper. Home swap sites are where tenants can 'swap' their properties with other social housing tenants regardless of which social housing provider is their landlord. This means tenants have the opportunity to look outside of their own landlord's stock.

The Housing Strategy identified that there might be social housing tenants looking to downsize to smaller properties, and already on the housing register, which could lead to the matching of existing social tenants with each other. The housing register does have a category for social tenants who are under-occupying, but it is possible that many of these tenants do not actively seek to downsize. Phase 1 of this project will research the downsizing issue and make recommendations. There could be an opportunity to have a further phase to look at our current housing system, Huume, to see if a matching system between under-occupiers and over-crowded households is viable and needed.

Aim

The aim of this project is to research and identify the scale of under-occupying households in social housing. This is done using data from the housing register and work with tenants and registered providers to identify households who are not on the housing register, but are under-occupying, and to understand the barriers to downsizing. It is also an opportunity to research what other local authorities are doing and schemes that work well.

Objectives

The project objectives are:

- Review housing register data for under-occupying residents
- Review registered housing providers data for under-occupying residents
- Cross reference data
- Research existing housing provider schemes/initiatives, locally & nationally
- Resident engagement
- Review and report of current data

What We Did

Scoped and Researched

- Desktop research on other local authority downsizing incentive schemes
- Desktop research on other local authority allocation policies for under-occupancy bandings
- Engagement with Hull City Council & Islington City Council to discuss their downsizing initiatives

- Scoped Dorset Council's Housing Allocation Policy for under-occupancy banding & the new version's consultation closed in August 2025 with 713 responses
- Engagement with local housing providers via email, phone and Teams meetings
- Resident engagement through Facebook posts, newsletters, posters and town parish communications
- Resident survey & analysis
- Benchmarking review for downsizing schemes
- Review of housing register data for those registered as wanting to downsize

Over-crowding & under-occupying

The national picture

As of 2022 there are 4 million social rented households in England, with a higher proportion being housing association homes, compared to local authority homes, according to the English Housing Survey 2021-22 by the Department for Levelling Up (Housing & Communities). Levels of overcrowding and under-occupation are measured using the bedroom standard this is the difference between the number of bedrooms needed to avoid undesirable sharing and the number of bedrooms available to households. Those who are overcrowded are those that have one or more bedrooms below standard and those who under-occupy have one or more bedroom above standard.

Dorset Council's Housing Allocation's Policy 2021-2026 assesses over-crowding based on bedroom entitlement (local housing allowance), ages and composition of household occupants, as defined in the Housing Act 1985. A notional number of bedrooms are allocated to each household in accordance with age, sex and status compared to the actual number of bedrooms available. The Dorset Council Draft Housing Allocation scheme 2026 to 2031 proposes to access bedroom entitlement in a similar way, using the 'bedroom standard' bedroom criteria, which allows a separate bedroom each for:

a) any adult/couple

b) a person aged 21 years or more

c) two persons of the same sex aged 10 years to 20 years

d) two persons (whether of the same sex or not) aged less than 10 years

e) two persons of the same sex where one person is aged between 10 years and 20 years and the other is aged less than 10 years

f) any person aged under 21 years in any case where he or she cannot be paired with another occupier of the dwelling so as to fall within c, d or e above.

Data from the English Housing Survey 2021-2022 looked at overcrowding and under occupied properties according to tenure, for their survey they based under-occupying criteria as **having 2 or more bedrooms** above standard. The report highlights that:

- Those in social housing are more likely to be overcrowded, with the national average being at 8%
- It is estimated that 10% of social renters live in under-occupied accommodation, nationally

Why is under-occupying a problem?

There's a housing crisis and there are not enough social homes to meet the needs of people, locally and nationally. Under-occupied homes can reduce the overall availability of social housing and making it harder for families who need larger homes to find suitable accommodation. It is thought that the proportion of under-occupied homes increases with age (of the lead tenant) with reluctancy to move from long-term homes. The Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) states that 40% of under-occupied homes are older tenants (65+). Their research states that 1 in 10 (10%) general needs properties are under-occupied. Like other research they class under-occupation as having 2+ spare bedrooms. Legally, downsizing cannot be forced if the original tenant still lives there, even with some succession cases on secure tenancies. Another study, in 2011, by the Cambridge Centre for Housing & Planning Research looked at 8 local case studies to understand the reasons for under-occupation. They concluded that under-occupation was a national problem and recognised the need for under-occupation to be addressed. They discuss how downsizing schemes can be successful, alongside support, to free up family-sized homes. They note that persuading tenants to downsize is challenging and how dedicated, long-term partnership working with local housing providers is key. They acknowledge that having a good supply of bungalows is attractive for downsizers. Right-sizing can be an effective step forward in addressing the housing crisis, by freeing up larger properties and increasing the overall supply available to residents on the housing register.

The local picture

The 2021 Census data tell us that there is a large proportion of older people within the Dorset local authority area, and that a large proportion of older people under-occupy homes, both owner-occupied properties and social rented homes. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) 'Populations Projection' Report's key findings for Dorset suggest that population for Dorset (2022-2032) is set to increase by 13.2% and that the population will continue to age, with a significant increase in those over state pension age by 13.8%. It is thought that the ageing population leads to the increase in under-occupied homes and is a contributing factor in the housing crisis (Intergenerational Foundation Research 2023). This is because staying put in under-occupied homes reduces the supply of family homes and pushes further demand onto homelessness services and waiting times on the housing register. This could also lead to increased demand and prices in the private sector too.

According to the 2021 Census, across the Dorset local authority area approximately:

- 12.3% of residents live in social housing, 16% live in private rented and 71% own their own home
- For all tenures only 20.5% of households are adequately housed, 44% of residents are under-occupying (2 or more spare bedrooms), and 1.5% of residents are living as overcrowded
- There are currently 825 overcrowded applications on Dorset Council's housing register

We looked at data in the Statistical Data Return (SDR) reports, provided by the Regulator of Social Housing, and compared this with data from the 2021 Census. The data tells us that:

- There are 23,687 social housing properties in Dorset

- These are made up of general needs properties, supported housing, housing for older people and low-cost-homeownership (see appendix Table 4)
- It is estimated that there are 2011 under-occupied 2+ bedroom social housing properties and 5938 under-occupied 1+ bedroom social housing properties, totalling 7949 under-occupied social properties in Dorset

For the purposes of this calculation and accuracy we have removed ‘low-cost home ownership’ from the total amount of social housing units which reduces the stock to 21,984 social rented housing properties in the Dorset local authority area. This data was compared to the 2021 Census which can be found in the Appendices.

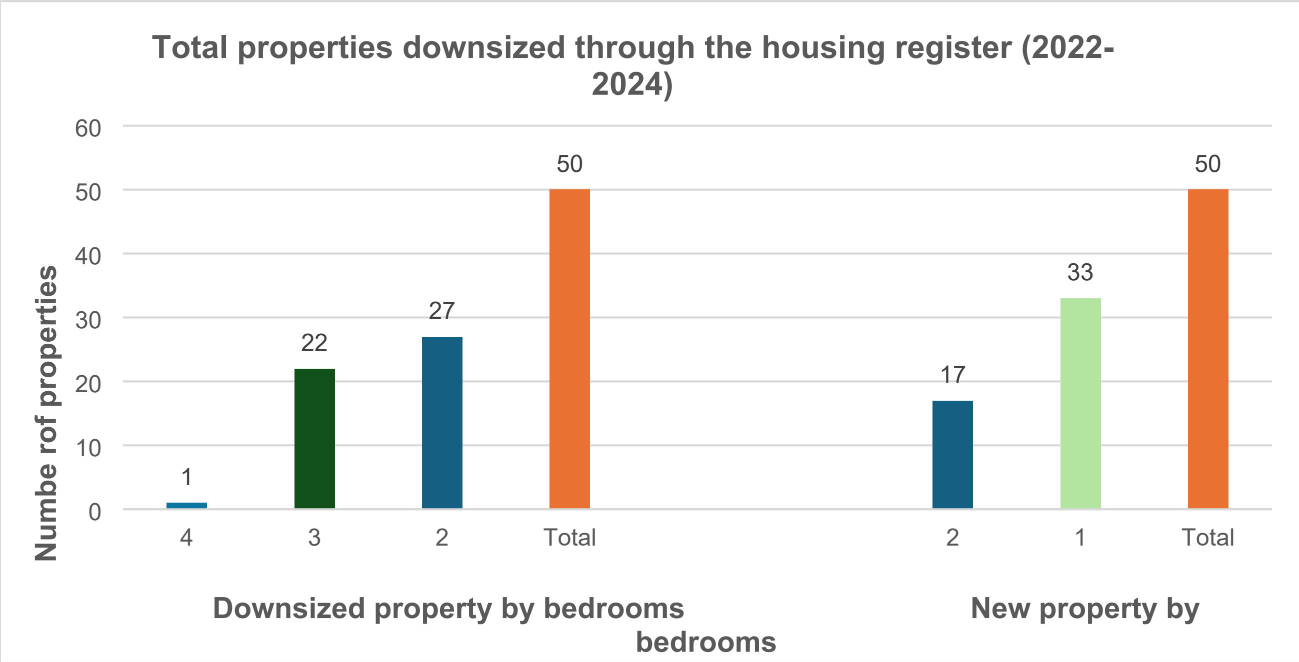
The English Housing Survey reports 2+ spare bedrooms as under-occupancy, which estimates the national average of under occupancy in social housing at 10%. Their data does not filter on those living with just 1 spare bedroom. The 2021 Census data for Dorset records under occupancy of 2 or more spare bedrooms in social housing at 9% and 1 spare bedroom at 27%. Based on the Census data the combined under occupancy rate across Dorset for any spare bedrooms in social housing is 36%.

Dorset Council Housing Allocation Policy

The Dorset Council Housing Allocation policy currently stipulates that people who are existing social housing tenants can apply to the housing register if under-occupying, attributing to a band B, high housing need to these applications. In Dorset Council, between 2022 and 2024 there were a total of 50 applicants who successfully downsized following their application to the housing register.

The graph below shows the breakdown of downsizers by property size and where they moved to. The majority downsized from a 2 bed, into a 1 bed property. Over the 2-year period 22 households downsized their 3-bed property and only 1 household downsized from a 4-bed property.

Graph A shows the total amount of downsizers by property size



Downsizing schemes and initiatives

During the development of this report, we researched national downsizing schemes and incentives that other local authorities or housing providers have. Several local authorities provided in-depth details of their schemes & incentives and provided information relating to how successful they have been. Further information can be found in Table 2 in the Appendix.

Islington City Council

Islington City Council are a local authority who have their own council housing stock, approximately 25,300 council owned properties, alongside local registered housing providers for social housing. They identified under-occupying as a problem and developed an initiative to tackle the issue. Islington told us that the average age range of under-occupiers in their area were thought to be a mixture of ages, including working-aged people. Their solution was to introduce a matching service called Smart Move whereby they match their own tenants (Council housing) who are under-occupying with tenants that are overcrowded, offering support and assistance to move. Matching was done through direct lets, outside of the normal nomination process. The scheme is for Islington Council tenants only and is funded through their Housing Revenue Account which means that the swaps must only be within their own council stock.

The scheme proved very successful in the beginning, especially when the spare room subsidy was introduced, they developed and sent out a 'Smart Move Catalogue' to residents, which advertised available properties. Over time the scheme slowed down, mainly due to entrenched under-occupiers. They identified the main reasons for tenants not downsizing is because residents want very specific properties in specific locations such as a bungalow; rental cost differences and some tenants expressing that they needed that extra bedroom for family members to stay. In addition to the Smart Move Catalogue, their scheme also pays tenants incentives of £700 per room plus up to £500 for removals. The scheme permits applicants with a 3 or 4 bed property wishing to downsize to bid on 2 bed properties.

For the Smart Move scheme Islington trialled a digital application called 'Swap Tracker' as a mutual exchange programme. They reported that this method did not work well, and reverted to using Home Swapper software, which can generate reports for them around over and under occupying and they reported finding this was simpler to use. Islington reported Swap Tracker was difficult to use, costly and not able to provide the level of reporting that Home Swapper already does.

Alongside the Smart Move scheme Islington offer general downsizing, where residents of Islington can join the housing register to downsize, and this can be between their own council stock and registered provider stock. This option allows only the *council tenant* the ability to claim the incentive though, which is £500 per room. Priority is given on the housing register for those downsizing. Islington hold active campaigns and events around downsizing, and these events prove successful and raise resident knowledge of the schemes available. They regularly send newsletters to all residents which have details of their schemes. With regards to staffing, Islington have 3 dedicated under occupying officers, 1 over occupying officer and 1 mutual exchange officer.

Hull City Council

Hull City Council are a stock-holding local authority and have created their own under occupation scheme. The scheme sits outside of their allocations policy, and this is because the council themselves approach the under-occupying households and encourage them to downsize, rather than it being in response to their requests to move due to a housing need. The scheme does not operate on a first come first served basis because the council's objective is not just to assist people but it's also to release a property that is in high demand. The scheme will support any households in a 4-, 5-, 6- or 7-bedroom property who wish to transfer to a smaller home. The scheme was developed because Hull Council recognised that there is a limited supply of large family accommodation in their area and that are many existing tenants living in properties with more bedrooms than they need. They also recognise that current options available, within their Allocations Policy for singles, couples and those with adult families is not sufficient to encourage people to move out of their large houses (because they would only be eligible for a one bed accommodation or a flat/maisonette). Properties released by this scheme are allocated to families who need them the most, e.g. people in temporary accommodation.

To be eligible tenants must be willing to give up a larger family home and downsize to a maximum of a 3-bedroom property, excluding 2-bedroom bungalows where a medical assessment is needed. The current home must be left in a good, clean state. The scheme will not accept applications that will cause a member of the existing household to become homeless. The amount given depends on any arrears owing and condition of property.

Table 1 shows the incentive amount offered by Hull City Council

Number of bedrooms in new home

		1	2	3	4
Current number of bedrooms	**Incentive amount**				
	4	£2,500	£2,000	N/A	N/A
	5	£3,000	£2,000	£2,000	N/A
	6	£3,000	£3,000	£3,000	£2,500
	7	£4,000	£3,500	£3,000	£2,500

In addition to the financial incentive Hull offer moving assistance on a case-by-case basis and this could include packing assistance, disconnection of gas, washing machine, dishwasher, telephone, cooker, broadband and reconnection of these services. Help organising removals and transporting property, setting up TV aerials, new carpets and blinds. The removal cost may be reimbursed. In 2024 Hull assisted 35 downsize moves, many residents moving from a 4-bed property. Incentives, totalled £36,278. Over half of the residents moving had arrears (totalling £6721) and this amount was deducted from the incentive amount. Three of the larger family homes went to families who were in emergency B&B, the cost of which was over £36,000 in B&B costs alone. The scheme has been very successful, and funding has been confirmed for a further year. Hull have a yearly budget of £100,000 which comes from the housing revenue. The scheme benefits both tenants and the council, especially from a financial point of view, as well as helping tenants who are in large houses who can no longer afford to live in their current properties due to mobility/financial issues. Some tenants in large properties are subject to the Social Sector Size Criteria (SSSC) or (bedroom tax) as well as having to pay large utility bills/council tax. Hull City Council say that when speaking to their tenants they have helped move, this scheme has been a huge practical help and to some, a lifeline especially from a financial point of view.

Some local authorities, such as Wiltshire, whilst they have no incentive scheme, actively encourage and campaign about downsizing to their residents. East Devon Council offer financial assistance with moving costs, prioritising those who are releasing a 3- or 4-bedroom property. Somerset Council offer a grant of up to £2,000 to households downsizing regardless of property size. Manchester City Council offer a specific age 50+ scheme.

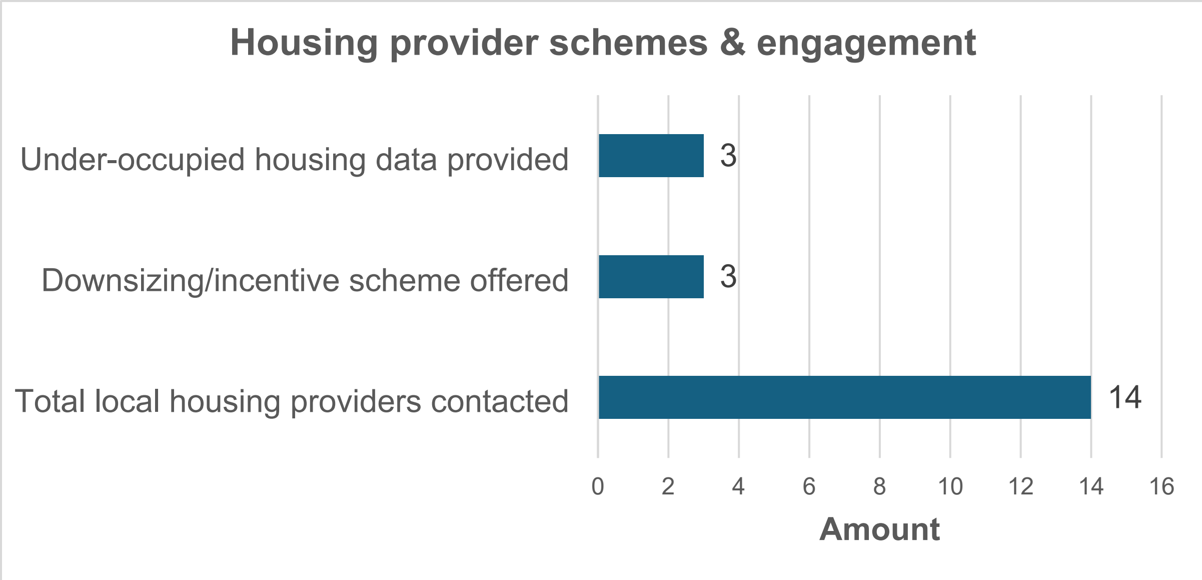
Summary

The common factor with other local authorities who are actively campaigning around downsizing, offering schemes and incentives is that they are mostly stock-holding local authorities. They have control over their stock and therefore have a good understanding about the scale of downsizing in their area. Dorset Council is a registered provider and a stock holding authority having received small numbers of property transfer from predecessor authorities. It does not, however, offer social housing and works with registered providers who supply social housing for allocation to households on the housing register. This means we rely on housing providers to provide us with insight into the scale of the under-occupying problem, and to maximise and make best use of their stock. With many schemes, and downsizing in general, there are often restrictions in place that apply to households who wish to downsize but have rent arrears. This may be a barrier for households who are in arrears because they are likely to be experiencing affordability issues or benefit reductions in their current home which can exacerbate their rent arrears. A few of the schemes we reviewed, Hull City Council for example, consider paying off arrears or using their financial incentive offer to do so to encourage tenants to move, but for the most part downsizing is not an option if there are arrears.

Registered providers have said they support and promote downsizing but have limited resources to financially incentivise this activity. We contacted some of the registered providers with stock in the Dorset Council area as part of our engagement work. We asked for details on their downsizing schemes, incentive packages offered and whether they record under-occupying and downsizing data that they would be able to share. We contacted 14 local registered providers, 3 were able to offer us under occupying data, 3 told us they have a downsizing scheme and 1 is currently developing a scheme.

The project was able to obtain detailed data from Magna and Sovereign Network Group (SNG) and partial information from Abri, which is examined below. The appendices show the full list of housing providers and their engagement.

Graph B shows housing provider engagement

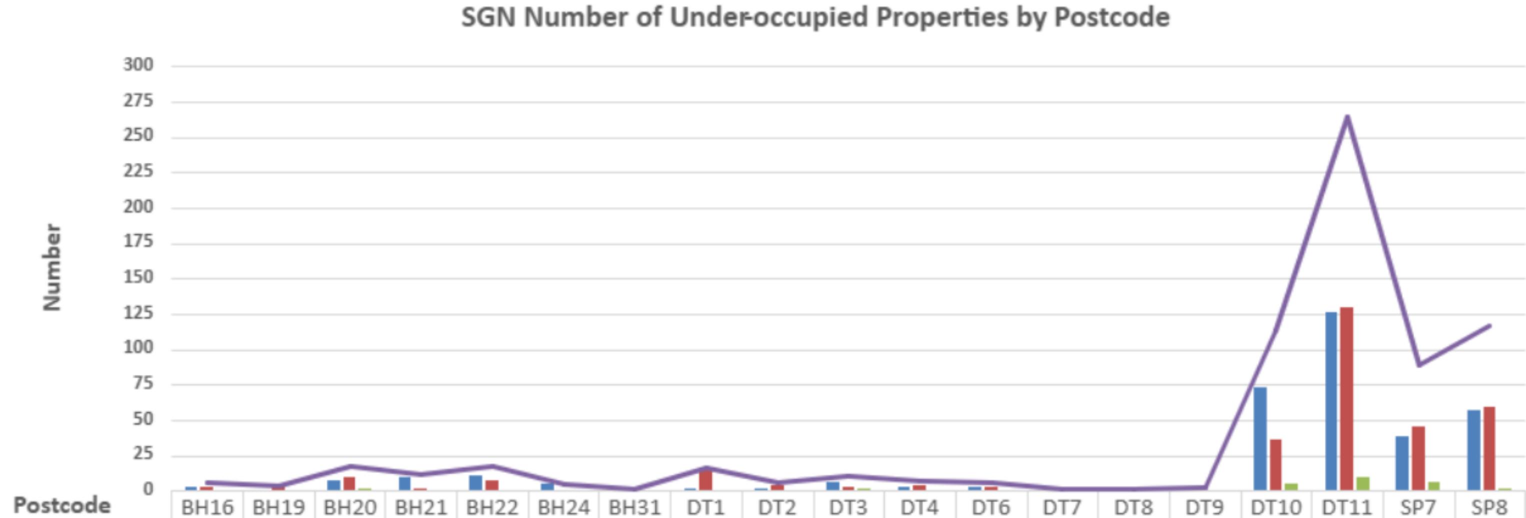


Housing Provider under-occupying schemes & data

Sovereign Network Group (SGN)

SNG's offer is called the 'Rightsizing Initiative', To be eligible tenants must be over housed, have no arrears and no savings to cover moving costs. The initiative is aimed at those who cannot afford to move and will be releasing at least a 2-bedroom property. There is no upper limit on the incentive amount that can be spent, and it is done on a case-by-case basis, but each claim has cost between £1,000-£2,000. No cash amount is paid direct to the claimant; it covers costs such as cleaning services or removal services and SNG pay the suppliers directly. The scheme allows for services to be paid for, such as removals, carpets and any other costs associated with moving. The whole organisation budget is £50,000 per annum and the aim is to assist as many tenants as possible, so awards are kept as low as possible. Although downsizing is mentioned on their website, information is minimal and there are no ongoing active campaigns around downsizing. Officers only speak to residents about downsizing when the issue is raised through associated rent arrears or resident engagement. Not everyone who applies for the downsizing incentive is successful, if the household has a good income and can afford the cost of moving, they are rejected or if they are not giving up 2 or more bedrooms. SNG do hold a list of residents who are currently under-occupying but state that the information is not always correct because they rely on residents telling them about changes in circumstances to households. Since February 2024 they have assisted 18 customers to downsize and spent £23,339 (from 175 residents who applied).

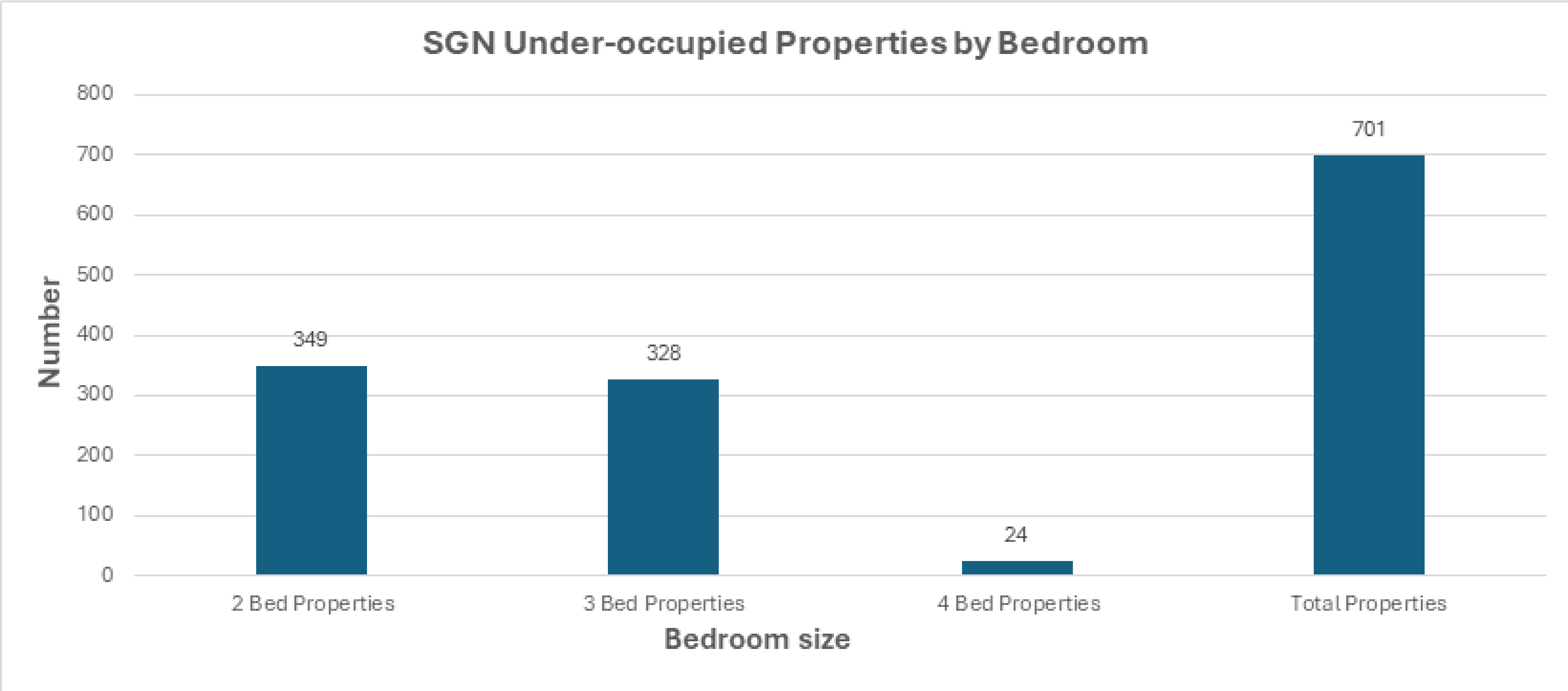
Graph C shows SNG's under-occupied properties by postcode & bedrooms in properties.



Postcode	BH16	BH19	BH20	BH21	BH22	BH24	BH31	DT1	DT2	DT3	DT4	DT6	DT7	DT8	DT9	DT10	DT11	SP7	SP8
Number of 2 Bed Properties	3		7	10	11	5		2	2	6	3	3			3	73	126	38	57
Number of 3 Bed Properties	3	4	10	2	7		2	14	4	3	4	3	1	1		36	130	45	59
Number of 4 Bed Properties	0		1							2						5	9	6	1
Total Properties	6	4	18	12	18	5	2	16	6	11	7	6	1	1	3	114	265	89	117

From the data there is a total of 701 under-occupied SNG properties within the Dorset local authority area. The data shows most of SNG's under-occupied properties fall into 4 principal areas: DT11, DT10, SP7 and SP8 postcodes. Chart D below showing the total number of under occupied properties by bedroom size.

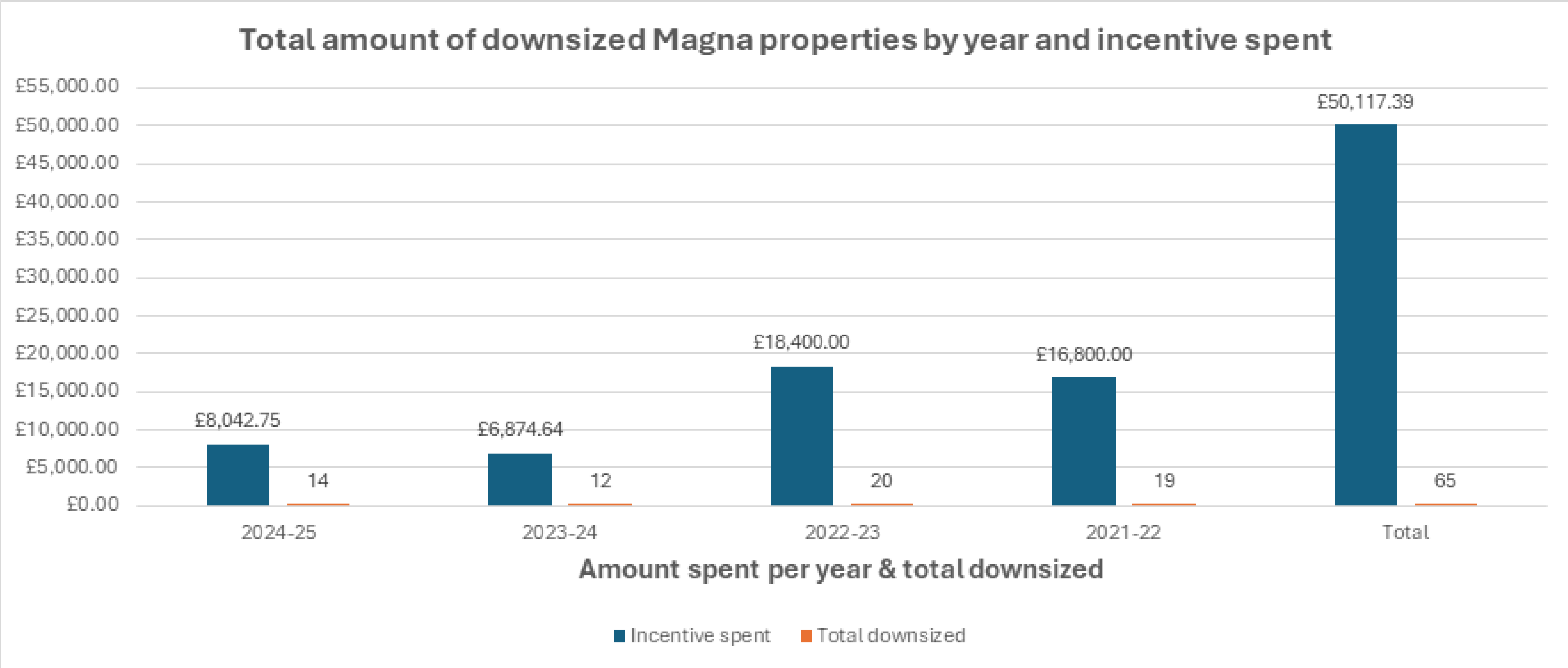
Graph D shows SGN's under occupied properties



Magna

Magna has a downsizing incentive scheme, offering rent in advance up to £600, for those downsizing into general needs stock. Magna confirmed there is no minimum bedroom criteria to access to their incentive. For complex cases that meet the criteria there is an 'additional costs' budget of up to £1,600 to cover deep cleaning, rubbish clearance, removals etc. but this is only in extreme cases where the tenant is deemed vulnerable. Magna formally employed a Home Move Officer, but this post ended in 2023 following budget cuts. This coincides with there being fewer downsizing moves and incentives spent from 2023 onwards, according to the data provided, shown in Chart E below.

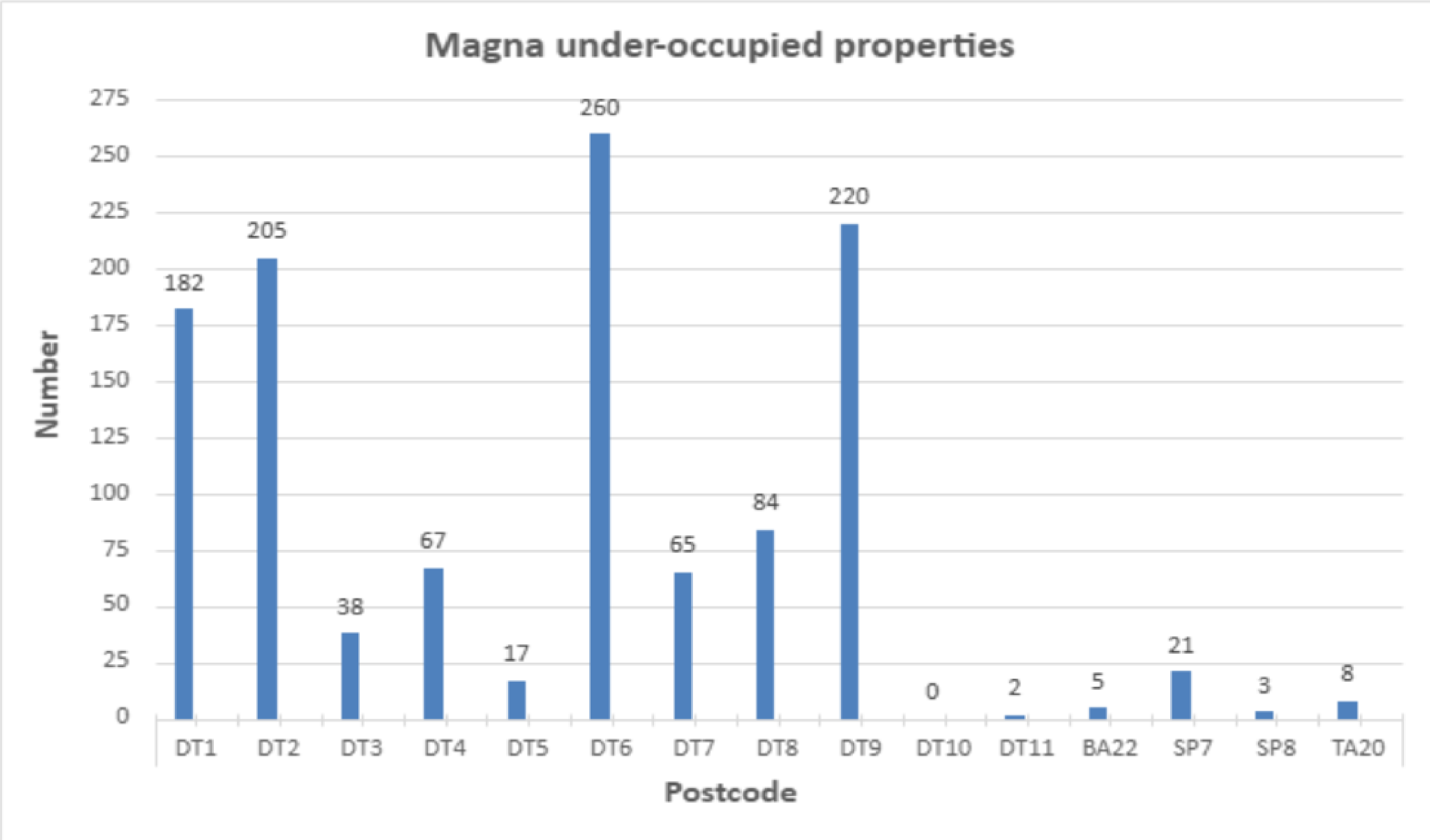
Chart E shows Magna's downsizing numbers and amount spent per year from 2021 – 2025



Magna residents can find about the downsizing scheme/incentive through their housing officer or from the website. Magna confirmed tenancy information is not currently reviewed regularly, and that they require residents to declare any changes in circumstances. This means the data provided, showing under-occupation, could be underrepresented. Also, for residents that self-fund (do not claim any housing-related benefits), may not declare such changes. This might not be isolated to only Magna but could represent a wider problem throughout other housing providers. Magna told us barriers to downsizing include residents viewing the property as their home and not wanting to move to other locations. Another barrier is the cost associated with moving, with little financial help available. Especially if the property they are moving to needs updating/modifying or adapting. Magna confirmed that all successful downsizes are met through the housing register or home swapper and not direct lets.

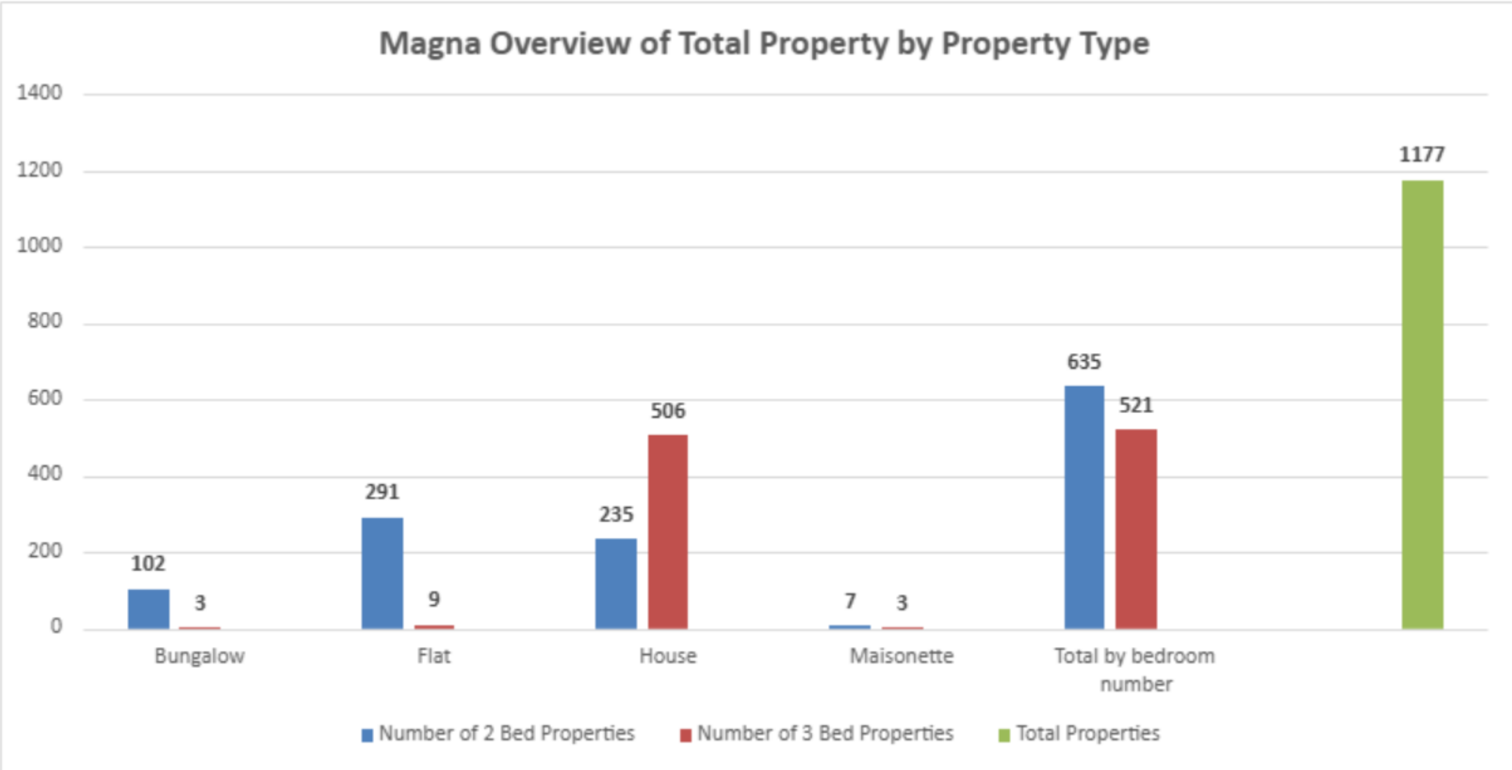
Magna provided information relating to their estimated under-occupying cohort shown below. Magna, estimate they have about 1,177 under-occupied properties. The most common areas are DT1, DT2, DT6 & DT9.

Chart F shows Magna under-occupied property by location



The data shows the breakdown of property type, with 46% of under-occupied properties being flats and 37% being houses. The majority of under-occupied two beds were flats and the majority of under-occupied 3 and 4 beds were houses.

Chart G shows total Magna under-occupied properties by property type.



Other local housing providers

Stonewater

Stonewater were not able to provide us with a full data set but were able to confirm 10 customers had been downsized via direct re-lets and 59 customers downsized through mutual exchanges during 2023/24. Over the next 12 months, Stonewater aims to directly approach customers wishing to downsize, to see whether mutual exchanges can be facilitated with customers needing bigger homes.

Abri

Abri responded with limited information. They have no specific reporting or reviewing of tenancies in place, therefore information provided is an estimate.

Abri estimates that within Dorset (local authority area) they have 114 under-occupying properties, approximately 18% of their stock. They could not provide a breakdown on specific areas within Dorset or by property type. According to the Regulator of Social Housing Report 2024, Abri owns 530 general needs properties in Dorset therefore 114 properties equate to 21.5% of their Dorset stock.

Their website encourages residents to get in touch so they can help people apply to the housing register or apply for DHP (Discretional Housing Payments).

Bournemouth Churches Housing Association (BCHA)

BCHA confirmed that they have no current downsizing scheme as they have very little general needs stock. They do not currently hold information on which of their tenants are under-occupying but advise that they are currently 'undertaking customer profiling' to obtain this information. They do not advertise or promote downsizing to their tenants currently. BCHA did state that a downsizing incentive scheme is something they would be interested in promoting, in future. They could not provide any statistics or further information.

Guinness Trust

Guinness stated that they do not currently operate any downsizing schemes, but they are in the process of designing one. The scheme will include a cash incentive per bedroom released plus help with carpets and removals. They do support downsizing and promote this on their website. They also give priority to internal transfers for under-occupying and overcrowded. They stated they have some reporting on under-occupying and were able to confirm that they have (recorded) 106 properties as under-occupying and 58 as overcrowded but did not provide any further details.

Legal and General Affordable Housing (Landgah)

Landgah state that as a new registered provider, much of their stock is newbuild (since 2019) and has been allocated based on housing need. Therefore, it is unlikely there is much under-occupying currently. Their Allocation Policy supports and includes an 'Under Occupation Incentive' although they state they have not had any cases for consideration yet. The incentives would be assessed on a case-by-case basis such as removal costs/decorating incentives and for people downsizing by at least 2 bedrooms. They have not run any specific campaigns promoting the incentive, the policy & information is available for customers on their website. Landgah state that under occupation will be an area that will be reviewed further in preparation for the Renters Rights legislation. Their original policy offered households a fixed term assured shorthold tenancy that was 6 years in length initially, and the process of renewal was further engagement and assessment of the household, making the best use of homes available and exploring potential downsizing.

Mutual Exchange – Home Swapper sites

Phase one research includes exploring mutual exchange websites and the information they hold. Home Swapper confirmed that *nationally* in 2024 there were 21,333 swaps recorded. Breaking these down into bedroom size:

Table 2 shows national swaps recorded

Bedsit/studio	0.7%
1	17.9%
2	43.8%
3	32.6%
4	4.7%
5	0.3%
6+	0.1%

When asked for a breakdown by local authority area and housing provider this information was not possible to obtain. It is recorded by ‘county’ only, which means ‘Dorset’ includes the BCP area for this data set. Below is the breakdown of swaps, by bedroom, in the *county* Dorset. There were 135 recorded swaps via HomeSwapper within Dorset in 2024.

Table 3 shows recorded swaps within the county, Dorset, in 2024

County	Bedroom	Swaps
Dorset	0	1
Dorset	1	20
Dorset	2	66
Dorset	3	38
Dorset	4	9
Dorset	5	1
Total		**135**

Other home-swap organisations were also contacted, including Brighter Places, UK Home Swap and Home Swaps.co.uk but none of these were able to offer any information or did not respond to our engagement.

Housing Register Priority

The project looked at Dorset Council's banding on the housing register for downsizing and compared this with other local authorities to benchmark.

Table 4 below shows that Dorset Council bands under-occupiers as a band B, high housing need. Any higher banding would be an emergency banding A. There is a new allocation's policy, just finishing consultation, and the under-occupying banding is proposed to stay the same but note that the banding will be band 2 instead of band B, this means the priority for under-occupying will stay the same. When we compare this banding to neighbouring local authorities some offer a higher banding. For example, North Somerset Council offer a band A if the applicant is offering an under-occupied property with at least 2 spare bedrooms, and band B if under-occupying by 1 spare bedroom. BCP and East Devon are like Dorset Council and offer under-occupying a band B – a band below emergency banding. Wilshire, like North Somerset offer under-occupiers the highest banding, band 1. Birmingham City Council have different bandings for the number of spare rooms an applicant has, for example, if someone has 3 bedrooms spare, they are eligible for the highest band, band A. If they have 1 spare bedroom, they are eligible for a band C. Some councils offer direct lets outside of the normal bidding site; this means the usual nominations or bidding process is bypassed.

Table 4 shows Dorset Council's housing register banding for under-occupying compared with other local authorities

Dorset Council	North Somerset	BCP	Wiltshire Council	East Devon	Somerset Council	Birmingham City Council	Manchester City Council	Hull Council	Nottingham City Council	Islington City Council
Band B	Band A if under occupying by 2+ rooms and band B under occupying by 1+ room	Gold band (1 below emergency)	Band 1	Band B - high housing need. Must have at least one extra bedroom	Gold band for those downsizing from a 4+ bedroom property (and 3 bed with a parlour)	Band A for those under-occupying 3 bedrooms or more Band B Under-occupying by 2 bedrooms Band C – under-occupying by 1 bedroom or more	Band 1 – strict criteria: must have at least a 3 bedroom and not move to another family sized home	Direct Lets are made outside of the normal bidding system. Band C but points increase with each spare bedroom	A13	Points based system with extra 100-150 points or direct lets with matching scheme

Housing Register Review

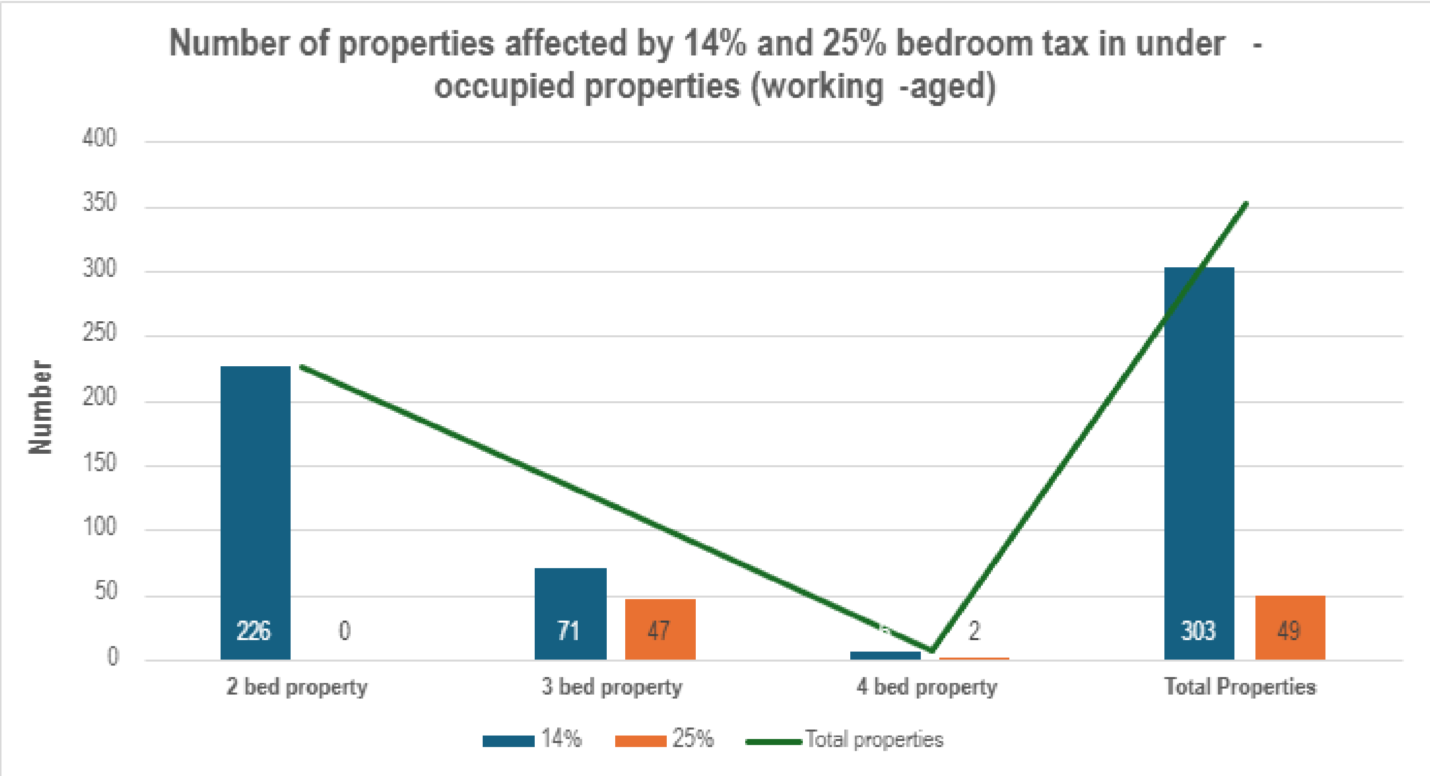
One of the objectives in the project brief was to review the current housing register data and identify how many people on the housing register are under-occupying, bidding and whether their details are still up to date. A hybrid review was conducted, and each under-occupying household was contacted and asked to update/review their application data. There are 185 live applications awarded banding for under-occupying. The review revealed 8 applicants, although registered, had not placed any bids on available properties. All the applications who are not bidding were contacted and offered to take part in our resident under-occupying survey, to understand the reasons why they were not placing any bids. Some of these form part of the resident engagement survey responses.

Data indicates that there are 7,949 under-occupied properties in the Dorset local authority area (1+ spare room) with 185 households on the housing register. This data suggests only 2.33% of under-occupiers are on the housing register to downsize.

Under Occupancy charge (bedroom tax) data

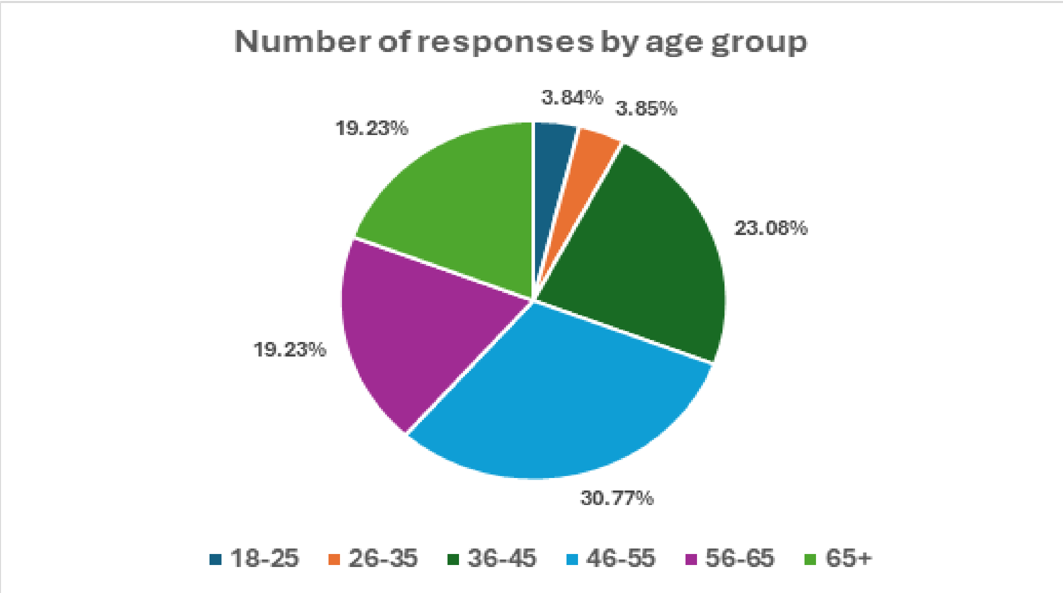
Information from the Revenue & Benefits team regarding under-occupancy and housing benefit have been provided to show a snippet of under-occupancy within Dorset. The information below relates to working-aged people who are in receipt of housing benefit and council tax benefit but subjected to '*under-occupancy charge*', which is also known as '*bedroom tax*'. The under-occupancy charge, or bedroom tax is where someone is of working-age and claiming housing benefit but has a reduction in benefits because their home has more bedrooms than needed. It applies to people who rent from the council, housing associations or other registered social landlords. If you have one spare bedroom the reduction of benefit is 14% and if you have two or more spare bedrooms the reduction is 25%. The data below shows residents in Dorset, who are of working age, and have not (yet) migrated over to Universal Credit or do not claim for other reasons. The data below rules out anyone in temporary accommodation as they would not be eligible or live in exempt rent properties. The Council does not hold information relating to Universal Credit claimants who are affected by the under-occupancy charge.

Chart H shows the number of 4,3 and 2 bed properties within Dorset affected by the under-occupancy charge/bedroom tax (HB only)



The data shows approximately 352 working-aged households under-occupying and affected by the under-occupancy charge. The breakdown below shows 303 properties affected by having one bedroom too many and a 14% reduction to benefits and 49 properties affected by 25% reduction to benefits, having two or more bedrooms too many. Whilst this data is useful in showing under-occupancy for those in receipt of housing benefit it only provides a small representation into the problem and does not provide a reflection of under-occupancy for those on Universal Credit. This data is accurate from the date received, March 2025.

A 2014 study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation investigated the effects of spare room subsidy in its first year of operation and found that it failed to deliver the savings expected. Councils made full use of DHP payments to help tenants adjust to the changes to benefits and in the first 6 months 6% of affected households moved to avoid the size criteria.



Resident survey & feedback

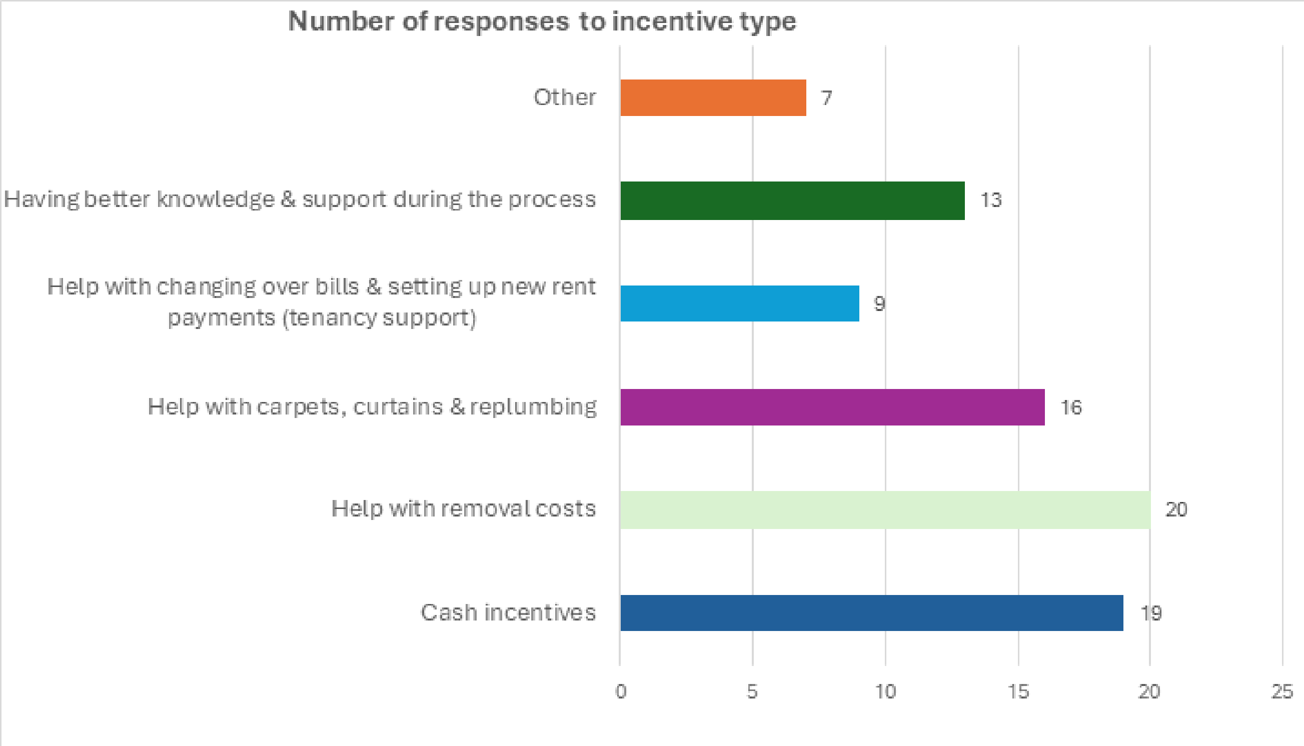
Resident engagement was one of the objectives of this project. A survey, specifically directed at those in social housing who are under-occupying, went live between 25th March 2025 and 30th June 2025. The survey was accessible through Dorset Council's social media

There were a variety of age ranges from respondents, with the most responses coming from 46–55-year-olds. The least responses came from the younger age brackets, as expected they are less likely to be under-occupying. It is thought that there are more older people under-occupying, and we would like to have seen a greater number of representations from the 65+ age group.

where it was posted on 3 separate occasions, a poster with the survey link was emailed to Parish Councils to display, CAB hubs and all Dorset Council libraries in poster form. Local housing providers agreed to put a copy of the poster in their newsletters. Despite this only 26 responses were collected.

The most common under-occupied property, according to the survey data is 3 bed properties, followed by 2 bed properties with 73% of respondents having 1 spare bedroom in their home. 19% had 2 spare bedrooms and 8% answered 'other' because they use their spare room for visiting family/children. Most participants had a current 3 bed property with 1 spare bedroom. Most participants with a 3-bed property were in the 46-55 age group. Further information can be found in the appendices.

When asked about whether they had thought about downsizing before, 85% said that they had and 15% said they had not. When asked why they had not thought about downsizing they responded to say that they keep a spare room in case their children return home, they need more space and have had a disabled partner who was no longer in the home. Out of the 85% of people who are interested in downsizing only 45% were on the housing register. The reasons listed for not joining the housing register include, there being nothing suitable in their location, not knowing they could join the housing register, not having the knowledge to do so, it being too long-winded and there not being any incentive to do so. 92% of residents said their housing provider had not approached them about downsizing. The 'other' included 'being able to have a choice of property to go to', 'new build property only', 'opportunity to move to a suitable property and not be constantly bumped for others, 'a change to move to a suitable property', 'a way to move my vulnerable daughter to a safe place', 'a bigger priority and moving in a realistic time frame', 'priority in a similar area',



When asked about whether any reward/inventive would support people in their downsizing journey the results show that help with removal costs was most important closely followed by a cash incentive and having help with carpets, curtains & replumbing. Having better knowledge & support during the moving downsizing process was also important.

The data shows that when it came to the frequency of bidding (for those on the housing register) 6 participants had never bid. The most common reason why is that they say there are no suitable properties to bid on, particularly bungalows in specific locations. Other reasons include affordability – moving from social rent to affordable rent being unaffordable to them. Not having enough priority on the housing register, being bumped down the list when a higher priority bid is placed. Out of the 6 participants who are not bidding 5 falls into the under 65 age group.

Participants were asked if they knew about home swapper websites and 85% said yes, 15% said no. Out of the 85% who have heard of home swap websites 71% had registered with one. There is no age correlation for those participants who are registered on a home swap website, with there being a variable age range registered. Out of the participants who do not know about home swap sites 50% are 65+ and 50% are 46-55 age bracket. The feedback from people who had used the home swap sites suggest that it can be a good alternative to bidding on the housing register, but it can take a long time for a suitable property to match to, some properties are not in decent condition and there can be timewasters, which is demoralising.

Reports & Research

A study by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) in collaboration with Hackney Council in May 2022 *'Rehousing Programmes for older social housing tenants in Hackney, London'* looked at how well rehousing (under-occupied) programmes work. The study included surveys to residents, photovoice for older residents, in-person interviews with older tenants who had decided against downsizing and interviews with professionals. The key findings of the study include a list of *disincentives* for moving, which includes:

- There not being enough suitable housing stock for their preference
- Being reluctant to give up a spare room
- Wanting to stay close to family, support networks and surroundings
- The prospect of a move daunting
- Attachment to their current home
- Concerns about switching to a new landlord and there being higher rent

Their research explored tenants' experiences of moving and found that there were mixed views about how well they were supported during the downsizing or moving process. One of the schemes is called 'Seaside and Country Homes' whereby residents aged 55+ who live in London are offered a bungalow or flat on the South Coast or East of England, in return for freeing up their London property. The feedback from this scheme was positive. The key messages from this study highlighted the biggest obstacles to rehousing/downsizing as not having enough personalised support. The report also states the need for better communication with tenants around rehousing options and implications of a move.

Another pilot study through Reigate & Barnsley Borough Council in March 2025 describes how they ringfenced £68,000 from the Homeless Prevention Grant to host a 12-month pilot social housing downsizing scheme. The scheme allowed the council to assist under occupying social tenants into smaller homes. This came about because of the shortage of family-sized social housing, and it is causing a costly backlog in emergency and temporary accommodation, with longer waiting times on the housing register. The pilot employed a part-time member of staff, and the aim was to downsize 10 households. During the 12-month period 14 households were successfully downsized, freeing up 14 family homes – six 3-bedroom houses (4 had dining rooms), three 2 bed houses and five 2 bed flats. They amassed 83 households registered to the scheme and ready to downsize in future when appropriate smaller properties become available. The offer they gave to tenants included a packing and removal service, furniture disassembly and reassembly and disposal of unwanted item. The offer included access to a handy person service for small household tasks, limited to 5 hours per household. A one-off payment of £1,000 was offered per bedroom released and there was support by the dedicated Under Occupancy Transfer Officer. The officer helps with ensuring the move goes smoothly, liaises with removers, helps with clearance, benefits and utilities. All these things were highlighted as barriers in their previous research. The study says that the pilot was so successful that they extended it for another 6 months. A March 2025 update states they have over 100 households on their downsizers list and have moved a further 15 households within a 4-month period.

Barriers

Resident engagement told us that 85% had thought about downsizing. Our research, data & resident engagement shows the main barriers to downsizing in the local area are:

1. **Social rent to affordable rent – the rent cost difference:**

   Our research and engagement with residents tell us that for some households they are resistant to downsizing if their current property is a social rent and the properties available are affordable rents. The weekly average social rent for general needs (2024) is £113.56 compared with the average weekly affordable housing rent of £158.44, with a difference of £44.88 per week. See Appendices for further information.

2. **Priority on the Housing Register:**

Despite households being in a band B, high housing need, our research suggests that people feel they are being ‘out-bid’ or ‘trumped’ by emergency housing band A and feel disenfranchised. Some other local authorities, as shown earlier, offer the highest banding (gold/A/1) for households wishing to downsize and in some cases the criteria varies but the reason for this banding would be to allow more successful bids for those releasing properties desperately needed.

3. **Location/property type**

   Our research shows that location and property type is a huge reason why some households choose not to downsize. Some residents wish to stay in the same town/village but find there are no suitable properties to bid on. Another common factor is people wishing to downsize, but only to a 2-bed bungalow in the same village, and in some locations these properties simply do not exist or do not become available to bid on. This means there is little to no chance they will downsize their property. Some residents, according to feedback, say that they have thought about downsizing but want to keep their spare bedroom in case a family member wants to move back home – such as an adult child.

4. **Lack of knowledge, awareness & housing provider communications:**

   Our research shows that many residents who are eligible to downsize are not being targeted for discussions about options & opportunities. Less than half the residents we engaged with are on the housing register and 92% of residents we engaged with said their housing provider had not approached or discussed downsizing with them. Our research tells us that with the ‘estimated under-occupancy cohort in Dorset’ that less than 3% are on the housing register. This shows there is a huge gap in communications and engagement (about downsizing) with our residents in social housing.

5. **Incentives & support services:**

   Some of our local housing providers offer downsizing schemes and incentives. These schemes often come with a strict criterion, and little is done to communicate to residents about these schemes. There is very little active campaigning into downsizing amongst residents from our local housing providers and no joint working with Dorset Council to promote downsizing. National research suggests these schemes can be very successful in encouraging people to downsize. Other local authorities who offer schemes and incentives, combined with dedicated officers and housing provider engagement, show that partnership working is a successful approach. When it comes to support services for tenants wishing to downsize the practical support, such as financial assistance and having a case-by-case approach to each situation, could be very beneficial.

6. **Lack of reporting**

   One of the biggest concerns is the lack of reporting by housing providers about their own under-occupied stock and the lack of accountability about the scale of the problem. Only Magna and Sovereign provided in-depth data about their under-occupying stock with the disclaimer that the data is only as accurate as what residents report to them about change in circumstances and household make-up. There is no mandatory obligation to report on under-occupying or to tackle this problem. Our research has shown that the scale of the problem is much larger than thought.

Conclusion

This project has told us that the scale of under-occupying in social housing in the Dorset Council area is much larger than previously thought. Our research has shown that housing providers have no legal obligation to tackle the under-occupancy issue as it does not affect them unless there are arrears. Through resident engagement, reports and research the barriers to downsizing became clear and suggest multi-faceted reasons why households choose not to downsize. The reasons include the lack of support and incentive, there not being available, suitable properties for them to move to, lack of awareness about their options, rent differences and not being successful on the housing register due to higher bandings. It is concerning that there are no legal duties that require accurate reporting by our local housing providers, nor the obligation to tackle the problem. National research has told us that downsizing schemes and dedicated officers can have a huge impact on creating movement and freeing up family-sized homes and having this resource would be very beneficial to

Dorset residents. It is clear from our data and research that there is a need for campaigning alongside such a dedicated officer. Further work with our older residents who, as our research says, might occupy many of the under-occupied properties would be beneficial, too.

Recommendations

1. **Reporting on under-occupying**:
   Encourage housing providers to conduct resident/household reviews and provide reports on under-occupying to understand the scale of under-occupying within their own stock

2. **Campaigns & partnership working:**
   Have a dedicated Dorset Council Downsizing Officer/s who engages with local housing providers and works in partnership to promote downsizing. Actively campaign about downsizing to residents. Therefore, increasing the number of households joining the housing register and home swapper sites to increase the number of eligible households wishing to downsize. The funding and budgets for such posts are out of scope for this project and would require further discussions or further phases of the project.

3. **Incentives & support:**
   Offer an incentive, support & guidance package for those who wish to downsize and have no means to pay for removals, house redecoration, carpets etc. This could be in partnership with local housing providers. The housing providers could contribute to a central pot of money to fund this. The finer details are not in scope of this project and further work is needed to explore funding avenues

4. **Housing register:**
   Larger households (5, 4, 3 bedrooms) to be considered for band A (1) to prioritise family homes being released to those most in need. These could be offered to those in temporary accommodation.

5. **Lobbying:**

   Lobby to central government about housing providers taking more accountability with reporting on under-occupation and actively tackling the problem or there being a legal obligation to do so.

Appendices

List of local housing providers, their engagement with us and any downsizing schemes or incentives offered.

Housing Provider	Incentive/initiative	Details
Abri	No specific schemes or incentives.	Offer tenancy support & support under-occupiers to apply to HR & Mutual Exchange sites Tenancy support
Aster	No specific schemes or incentives	Offer support to those who reach out. Website & Mutual Exchange Handbook Aster-MutualExchange1016.pdf
SNG	Yes – Downsizing/Rightsizing scheme & initiatives. Specific criteria apply.	SNG – Have a Right Sizing Project for those with 2 or more spare rooms are offered help with moving such as removals, carpets, arrears, white goods. Will not clear arrears or provide monetary support. Applicants must have completed an eligibility assessment and have scored highly in our 3 priority areas - Financial, Health and Maintenance of the Home. There is a budget of £50k to support this work. Our RightSizing offer includes: Advice on best housing options Register for an internal move through Sovereign Home Transfer (where we have nomination rights). Provide customer focussed support to help be move ready Financial support up to £4,000: 3 bedroom - £2,500 4 bedroom - £3,000 5 bedroom - £3,500 6 bedroom - £4,000. Our RightSizing offer | SNG
BCHA	No specific schemes or incentives	BCHA-GNCH-v1.5.1 (1).pdf
Betterment	No specific schemes or incentives	
EBHT	No response	
Guinness	No specific scheme in place but they are working on one currently (waiting for approval)	This will be advertised on their website and priority given for over/under occupiers (transfer applications). The proposed scheme will include a cash incentive per bedroom released plus removal costs, carpets and redecoration.

		Moving out - The Guinness Partnership
Hastoe	No response	
Landgah	No specific schemes or incentives	LGAH-Allocation-Policy.pdf
Places for People	No specific schemes or incentives	Places for People Exchange your Rented Home - Places for People
Sage Homes	No specific scheme in place	Mutual_Exchange_Policy_2-0_fqv1mx.pdf
Sanctuary	No specific scheme in place	
Magna	Yes, downsizing scheme in place.	Downsizing incentive scheme but only for rent in advance up to £600 (downsizing general needs only) No bedroom criteria. For complex cases that meet the criteria there is an 'additional costs budget' of up to £1600 to cover deep cleaning, removals etc. This is not paid to applicant, paid to trades person or service. There used to be a FT Home Move Officer post but that ended 2023 with budget cuts. It was successful role. There is no active advertising or promotion of downsizing to residents, they would rely on getting knowledge through website or local housing officers. Tenancy information isn't regularly reviewed, so the numbers of under-occupied is thought to be under-reported. Successful downsizes are met through the housing register or Homeswapper. Home Moves Incentive Scheme | Magna
Stonewater	No direct response from Stonewater but they do have a downsizing scheme	Help to move project whereby there is incentives of up to £500 per household if one is downsizing and another is overcrowded. Your home - Here to help | Spring newsletter 2025 | Stonewater

National downsizing schemes & initiatives

Housing Provider/Local Authority	Incentive/initiative details
Thrive	Downsizing scheme: • Cash incentive Mutual exchange - Thrive Homes
Birmingham City Council, Wise Move Team	Downsizing scheme: • Organising & paying for removals • Decorating new property • Curtains • Disconnecting & reconnecting cooker and washing machine • Rent help whilst improvements are made • Carpets, white goods & furniture • Join Housing Register and bid on properties. How we can help | Move to a smaller council home | Birmingham City Council
Manchester City Council, Manchester	Move rightsizing service: • 50+ and live alone or with a partner • Tenant of a 'Manchester Move' landlord • Cash incentive up to £2500 • Dedicated Rightsizing Officer homes.manchestermove.co.uk/choice/content.aspx?pageid=12
Hull City Council	Under occupation scheme: • enhanced scheme for those with 4+bedroom house looking to downsize • Cash incentive dependant on size of property being released • Actively campaigning – tenant newsletter • People signposted to houseexchange.org.uk • Practical help package: paid removals, disconnection/reconnection of white goods, boxes and

	packing help, reconnecting broadband, carpets, TV aerial, re-fitting blinds, 2-week rent-free period Housing News Summer - 2023
Nottingham City Council	Downsizing scheme: • Grants up to £2500 • Under occupying on register gets band A (releasing a high demand property) housing-allocations-policy.pdf
Islington City Council	This LA have two downsizing schemes: • Smart Move is a downsizing scheme that is only for their own stock and is a matching service. (Islington Council stock only). • Under-occupying tenants are matched with over-crowded. Scheme was more successful in the beginning, when bedroom tax was introduced. Still being used but has slowed down. Incentive is paid - £700 per room plus up to £500 for removals. • Preference on properties is given to those wishing to downsize and is in the allocations policy. Applicants with a 3 or 4 bed property to downsize can also bid on 2 beds. • Islington's second downsizing scheme only allows council tenants to claim £500 per room & with priority on the housing register. • Islington hold active campaigns and events. They send newsletters to all residents. • They have tried a chain-letting scheme – but that didn't work well. They also tried their own in-house 'Swap Tracker' but found it didn't work well. • Work closely with HomeSwapper, which can generate reports on over-occupying - under occupying. • They have specific HRA funding for the Smart Move project and this is for Islington council stock/residents only. • They have 3 dedicated under occupying officers, 1 over occupying officer and 1 mutual exchange officer. Swapping homes | Islington Council

Regulator of Social Housing SDR data 2024: Breakdown of social housing provision.

Regulator of Social Housing

Select Local Authority area: Dorset

Region South West

Click for help on the search function

Provision Type (including Affordable Rent units in GN, SH and HOP)

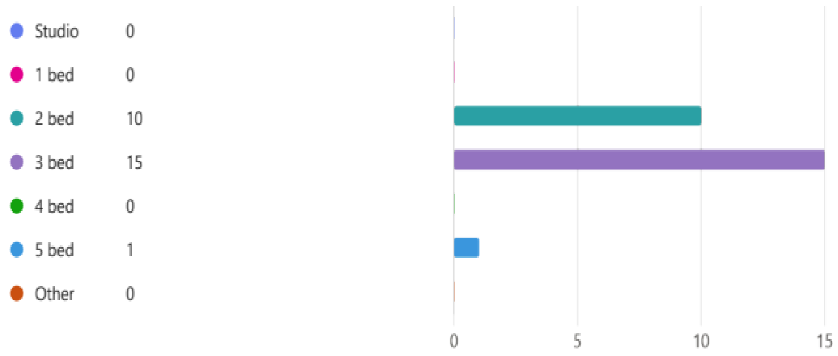
highlighted figures are included in the chart		2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Low cost rental	General needs	15,426	15,710	15,907	15,954	16,276	16,344	16,477	16,679	16,886	17,221
	General needs self-contained	15,364	15,659	15,868	15,915	16,237	16,328	16,451	16,663	16,870	17,221
	General needs non-self-contained	62	51	39	39	39	16	26	16	16	-
	Supported housing	559	563	697	758	759	582	757	780	804	789
	Housing for older people	4,399	4,374	4,130	4,215	3,935	4,177	3,985	3,986	3,982	3,884
Low cost home ownership (LCHO)		831	921	970	1,010	1,124	1,211	1,310	1,467	1,681	1,793
Total		**21,215**	**21,568**	**21,704**	**21,937**	**22,094**	**22,314**	**22,529**	**22,912**	**23,353**	**23,687**

Rent differences between social & affordable housing

Provision	Average weekly rent in Dorset 2024	The difference
General needs	113.56	
Supported/older people	105.01	
Affordable rent - general needs	158.44	£44.88 per week
Affordable rent - supported/older persons	185.72	£80.71 per week

Resident survey information on current property size and spare bedroom

5. What size property do you currently live in?



6. How many spare bedrooms do you have? (Bedrooms not being used)

2021 Census social housing under-occupying information

Tenure of household	Total	Occupancy rating of bedrooms: +2 or more	Occupancy rating of bedrooms: +1	Occupancy rating of bedrooms: 0	Occupancy rating of bedrooms: -1 or less
Total	169,262	74,824	56,974	34,653	2,811
Owned	120,775	67,349	40,050	12,559	817
Owned: Owns outright	77,561	48,295	23,308	5,635	323
Owned: Owns with a mortgage or loan or shared ownership	43,214	19,054	16,742	6,924	494
Rented	48,487	7,475	16,924	22,094	1,994
Rented: Social rented	20,836	2,011	5,938	11,675	1,212
Rented: Private rented or lives rent free	27,651	5,464	10,986	10,419	782

List of tables

List of graphs

References

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- Older tenants in social housing make up 40% of under-occupied homes - Blogs - Housing LIN
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- English Housing Survey 2021 to 2022: social rented sector - GOV.UK
- Housing benefit size criteria: impacts for social sector tenants and options for reform | Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Assisting tenants to downsize their home: Reigate and Banstead Borough Council | Local Government Association