



Department for
Communities and
Local Government

Provision of Social Lettings Data

Advice to Local Authorities

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If you have any enquiries regarding this document/publication, email contactus@communities.gov.uk or write to us at:

Department for Communities and Local Government
Eland House
Bressenden Place
London
SW1E 5DU
Telephone: 030 3444 0000

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Introduction

1. This advice is issued by the Minister for Housing of the Department for Communities and Local Government to assist local authorities in meeting their requirements under the single data list¹.
2. The single data list is a list of all the datasets that local government must submit to central government. If a data requirement is not on the list, councils do not have to collect and provide it without receiving extra funding. If a dataset is on the single data list it is a requirement that local authorities will fulfill their obligations to provide this information.
3. One of the required datasets on the single data list is the Continuous Recording of Lettings (CORE). This return captures information on the characteristics of the household and property each time a social or affordable property is let. This advice sets out the importance of this data and offers some guidance to local authorities to assist them in obtaining key parts of this dataset on the characteristics of tenants.
4. Further information on CORE, including the questionnaire and guidance manual is available on the CORE website at <https://core.communities.gov.uk/>

Importance of social lettings data

5. Information on social lettings² is vital to enable government and the public to understand who is accessing social housing. These data, collected through CORE, are used extensively in the Department's monitoring and formulation of social housing policy, and to provide Official Statistics which are published by the Department and used in parliamentary business.
6. There is also a wide range of other users of this data including the Homes and Communities Agency, bodies representing registered social landlords, research organisations, academic institutions and lobby groups for whom CORE data is essential in their research and analysis of social housing issues.
7. The Prime Minister has made clear the Government's determination to tackle the widespread perception that the way social housing is allocated is unfair, and to address concerns that the system favours households who have little connection to the local area over local people and the Armed Forces.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/making-local-councils-more-transparent-and-accountable-to-local-people/supporting-pages/single-data-list>

² The term social letting is used in a broad sense here to encompass lettings of properties owned or managed by social landlords and let at social or affordable rent levels for general needs or supported housing. The scope of lettings to be submitted to CORE is defined in detail in the CORE manual.

8. To support this, and enable the public debate that we need to have, it is imperative that good quality, complete and timely data on social lettings is collected and provided by local authorities to CORE.
9. Good quality data on social lettings is critical to enabling local authorities to effectively discharge their functions and understand how their assets are used and allocated. Local authorities should have up-to-date information about prospective tenants' characteristics, including nationality and immigration status, in order to ascertain their priority and eligibility for social housing. In the spirit of transparency and public accountability, this information should be readily available.

Collecting household characteristics

10. CORE is the government's preferred route for local authorities to centrally report data on their allocation of social housing. This guidance is primarily concerned with household characteristics as there should be full transparency on who is receiving social housing. This is also an area where data returns are less complete and yet this information is critical to enabling an informed public debate.
11. Local authorities should be collecting and reporting data on the age, gender, economic status, ethnicity and nationality of the lead tenant and their household members. CORE also captures information on Reasonable Preference and whether anyone in the household has served in the regular Armed Forces. Full details of the information required by CORE is available at <https://core.communities.gov.uk/>.
12. Local authorities will have their own allocation policies and internal business processes for recording and managing information about those applying for and being allocated social housing. However, there are broadly two main routes that are used for capturing tenant characteristics: through direct interview with tenants and / or the housing registration application process.
13. Information can be obtained for CORE through a planned interview with the tenant as part of the tenancy sign-up process. This may be a busy and pressured time for both the housing officer and the new tenant when large volumes of paperwork are being completed. It is important that the information required is given due regard and that there is opportunity for the housing officer to request this and for the tenant to provide it.
14. Alternatively, it may be more practical to request this information during the verification process for housing applications, prior to letting, when a full investigatory interview is often routinely conducted. This means that when a recently verified applicant becomes a tenant, accurate data will be readily available both for the local authority needs and for CORE. This approach would require some re-wording of questions to use appropriate tense.
15. Prior to interview, it would be useful to advise tenants that information on income and benefits will be requested, for example, to ensure that they have this information to

hand. Requesting personal data should also be carried out in a suitable environment in which the interviewee would feel comfortable with providing such information.

16. It should be possible to incorporate the CORE questions seamlessly into the tenant verification or sign-up process. Housing officers should make every effort to obtain the information required on household characteristics. To facilitate this, it may be helpful to make clear that this information:
 - a. is an important part of the national monitoring requirements for allocation of social housing;
 - b. will only be provided to central government in an anonymised form for statistical purposes;
17. Only if the tenant then refuses to provide information should the 'refused' option be used.
18. Local authorities should be able to use data already collected and held in internal systems for populating parts of their CORE returns (for example, collected on the housing registration application). To facilitate this, they should ensure that:
 - a. The information requested is consistent with data required for CORE;
 - b. Where relevant³, information is up to date, i.e. it is not more than 3 months old. This means having in place a mechanism by which applicants can provide updated information – this should be in place anyway as authorities should ensure at the point of allocation that tenants are eligible, qualify and have priority for letting;
 - c. Confidentiality commitments given when information is obtained from prospective tenants should allow for sharing of anonymised data with central government for statistical purposes (see section on Data Protection Act considerations below).

Data Protection Act considerations

19. The Data Protection Act 1998 (the Act) does not prevent local authorities from collecting information on those applying for and receiving social housing provided this is done for a specific and legitimate purpose, e.g. in order to ensure they can ascertain their priority and eligibility for social housing. They should have due regard to the Act in their management and sharing of information⁴.
20. Local authorities have implicit legal powers to share data⁵. Furthermore, Section 33(2) of the Act effectively allows local authorities to share personal data for research purposes (which includes statistical or historical purposes).

³ Some tenant demographics are less likely to change, such as sex, and others such as age may be updated by calculation based on the date of form completion and the date of the letting.

⁴ <http://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/information-access-rights/data-sharing/annex-h-data-sharing.pdf>

⁵ Section 111(1) of the Local Government Act 1972 and Section 2(1) of the Local Government Act 2000

21. Anonymised personal data provided to the Department or its contractors for statistical purposes are kept confidential and subject to the Data Protection Act. Aggregate statistical data are made available through the CORE analysis system and the Department's published official statistics. Access to micro-data containing personal information is carefully governed by restricted access under licence for research purposes. This micro-data is redacted to prevent the identification of individuals and the licence conditions govern the processing and use of this data by the Data Receiver.

Annual review of CORE questions

22. Each year there is an annual review of the CORE questions in liaison with data providers and users. This is also governed by the single data list Gateway process. As part of the review of data collection requirements for 2014/15 (scheduled for autumn 2013) it is being proposed that household characteristics, in particular nationality, will be made compulsory questions on CORE. Alongside this we will be considering the question formats to see if they can be better aligned with information held by social landlords. We encourage local authorities to be involved in this process, announced through the CORE website.

General advice on providing CORE data

23. We recognise that collecting and collating the data required by CORE can be a complex undertaking for local authorities, particularly where the required data is spread across different teams within the authority or is managed by third party organisations. The following suggestions may be helpful to local authorities in considering ways in which they can facilitate and improve their approach:

- Ensure a close working relationship with your housing management software supplier to optimise the data extracted from existing systems and reflect changes in data requirements early in the financial year.
- Provide data on a regular basis throughout the year. Monthly or quarterly data returns can spread the work across the year and avoid pressure at a busy year end.
- Review responses for all questions on CORE in your Annual Data Submission reports which are available on the CORE website (Analyse CORE Data page at <https://core.communities.gov.uk>). Interim reports are published six weeks before data reporting deadlines and all the final reports published to date are available.
- Respond promptly to data validation queries from the CORE contractor. Queries can be easier to resolve the closer to the letting period and prevent errors being carried through to other returns. Authorities could look to designate a quality champion for CORE and encourage periodic assessments, using data downloads and interim and annual reports, in order to identify and address any data gaps.

- To consider whether manual entry or the automatic upload functionality (eCORE) offers the more appropriate data submission route for your authority. If your authority has larger numbers of lettings, establishing a good quality automatic upload is likely to be a more efficient approach.
- Ensure there are clear business processes within your organisation for collating and providing CORE data. This may include establishing a multi-disciplinary team across the authority with clear responsibility for each part of the questionnaire.
- Reconcile with other housing data returns: the number of lettings returned to CORE should be in line with the number of lettings reported in Section D of the annual Local Authority Housing Statistics return made to the Department.