



Gateway to Homechoice Annual Report 2020 – 21

This report is intended to summarise the main outcomes for the last year of the Gateway to Homechoice system of choice-based lettings.

Gateway to Homechoice Project Board Chair Summary

Welcome to the Annual Report for 2020/21 for the Gateway to Homechoice. It has been an extraordinary year for everyone and the Coronavirus pandemic has highlighted how important, safe and suitable housing is. This year has been unprecedented, we never expected we might need to suspend the Choice Based Lettings Scheme, but unfortunately to comply with Government Guidelines, we had no choice but to do so.

I took over the role of Chair of the Project Board in December 2020, which I do alongside my 'day job' of Housing Solutions Corporate Manager for Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Tim Lucas from Braintree District Council who Chaired the Gateway to Homechoice Project Board for many years, providing great leadership and working diligently to ensure the partnership worked well.

I am really looking forward to the year ahead and the work we have planned for the Gateway to Homechoice. To ensure we comply with all the legal changes, we will be making some changes to the Allocations Policy in the summer and we are currently carrying out a review of the IT systems we use, to determine whether we continue with the current provider or move to a new one in 2022.

I hope you find this Annual Report helpful and informative. If you have any suggestions of how we can improve this report in future years, please do not hesitate to contact us at gateway.coordinators@cbhomes.org.uk

How the Scheme Operates

There are currently 7 Local Authorities (LA) in the Gateway to Homechoice scheme: Babergh, Braintree, Colchester, East Suffolk, Ipswich, Maldon and Mid Suffolk. The scheme allows one point of access for customers to apply to a Local Authority housing register and be considered for available properties in any of the areas.

The 7 Local Authorities in the Gateway to Homechoice scheme advertise vacancies in rented social housing using the same system that operates as follows:

- The Local Authorities (LAs) use a single IT system and website for registering applicants and advertising and allocating properties.
- Each week the vacant social housing in the area of operation of the 7 LAs is advertised on the Gateway to Homechoice website.
- Applicants who are registered can indicate up to 2 properties they are interested in either online or by phone.
- All the vacancies advertised through the scheme are owned by councils or housing associations.
- All the LAs operate the same Allocation Policy.
- The Allocations Policy sets out:
 - how to register;
 - how registered applicants can choose where they live; *and*
 - how the property is allocated to a specific household.

Qualification and Local Connection

People register with the LA where they live (or would like to live if they come from outside the sub-region of the scheme). Applicants with no local connection to any of the LAs are 'demoted' by one Band compared to someone with the same housing issue from within the area. An applicant will be considered to have a local connection to the sub-region if:

- their only or principle home is in one of the participating districts; *or*
- they were placed in specialised housing outside the sub-region, but previously lived here; *or*
- they are in permanent paid work in the sub-region; *or*
- they have an adult son, daughter, brother, sister, mother or father who lives here and has done so for at least 5 years.

Shortlisting

The principle of the system is that properties are normally let to the household that wants the property and has been waiting the longest in the highest Band.

Available properties are advertised on the Gateway to Homechoice website for a week, starting on Thursday morning and closing on the following Wednesday at midnight. As people place their bids for housing, the system automatically compiles a shortlist of applicants. The order of the applicants is from Band A down to Band E. If 2 or more applicants have the same band, then the system will normally place the applicant with the longest date first.

The Gateway to Homechoice website address is www.gatewaytohomechoice.org

The Gateway to Homechoice Project Board

The Gateway to Homechoice Project Board meets remotely every month to work collaboratively on the monitoring and development of the Gateway to Homechoice scheme. It is a senior officer group of 14 representatives from the Gateway local authorities. Its objectives are to:

- Determine the strategic direction of scheme
- Make key strategic decisions about the structure and operation of the scheme;
- Confirm the appointment of any external partners or sub-contractors deemed appropriate to facilitate the operation of the scheme;
- Monitor the financial aspects of the CBL Scheme ensuring that there are sufficient resources to operate the scheme;
- Appoint the lead authority; and
- Establish sub-groups, their membership and terms of reference.

The Gateway to Homechoice Operations Group

The Gateway to Homechoice Operations Group consists of 27 members from local authorities and Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT) representatives who meet remotely every 8 weeks.

The Operations Group are responsible for identifying issues and solutions to day-to-day operations, in addition to regularly reviewing and developing the Gateway to Homechoice scheme procedures and other projects, as identified by the Project Board.

The Gateway to Homechoice RP Group

The Gateway to Homechoice RP (Registered Providers) Group consist of 26 representatives which are part of the Gateway to Homechoice Choice-based lettings scheme who meet remotely every 12 weeks for information exchange, updates, identifying issues and solutions and are involved with the development of the scheme's policies and procedures.

Response to the COVID-19 global pandemic

The Gateway to Homechoice choice-based lettings allocations were suspended on 27 March 2020, in response to the first national lockdown which commenced on 23 March. Lettings were suspended as many landlords stopped the process of works to properties that were vacant as they could not be carried out safely.

On 27 April 2020, the Government issued guidance for social landlords to enable essential moves to re-start. In response to this, the Gateway partnership implemented a local lettings plan to allocate the few properties that were then becoming available. The plan prioritised applicants in the following categories:

- Accepted (main duty) homeless applicants;
- Applicants for whom there wasn't suitable temporary accommodation available, and the PO would be breaching its duty under homelessness legislation if no accommodation is provided;

- Applicants who were assessed by the PO as meeting the criteria for Band B Options Advice, including applicants who were owed the relief duty and who were residing in temporary accommodation;
- Applicants who are fleeing violence or harassment (and who are in Band A);
- Those with a critical health need to move; *or*
- Others who the partner organisations assessed as having have an urgent need to move.

On 4 June 2020, some choice-based lettings resumed. To ensure that the Gateway local authorities could meet the need of the most urgent households in their areas, some properties were still let directly while others were advertised as normal.

By 1 August 2020 the local lettings plan was revoked, and normal choice-based lettings were fully reinstated and continued throughout the rest of the year.

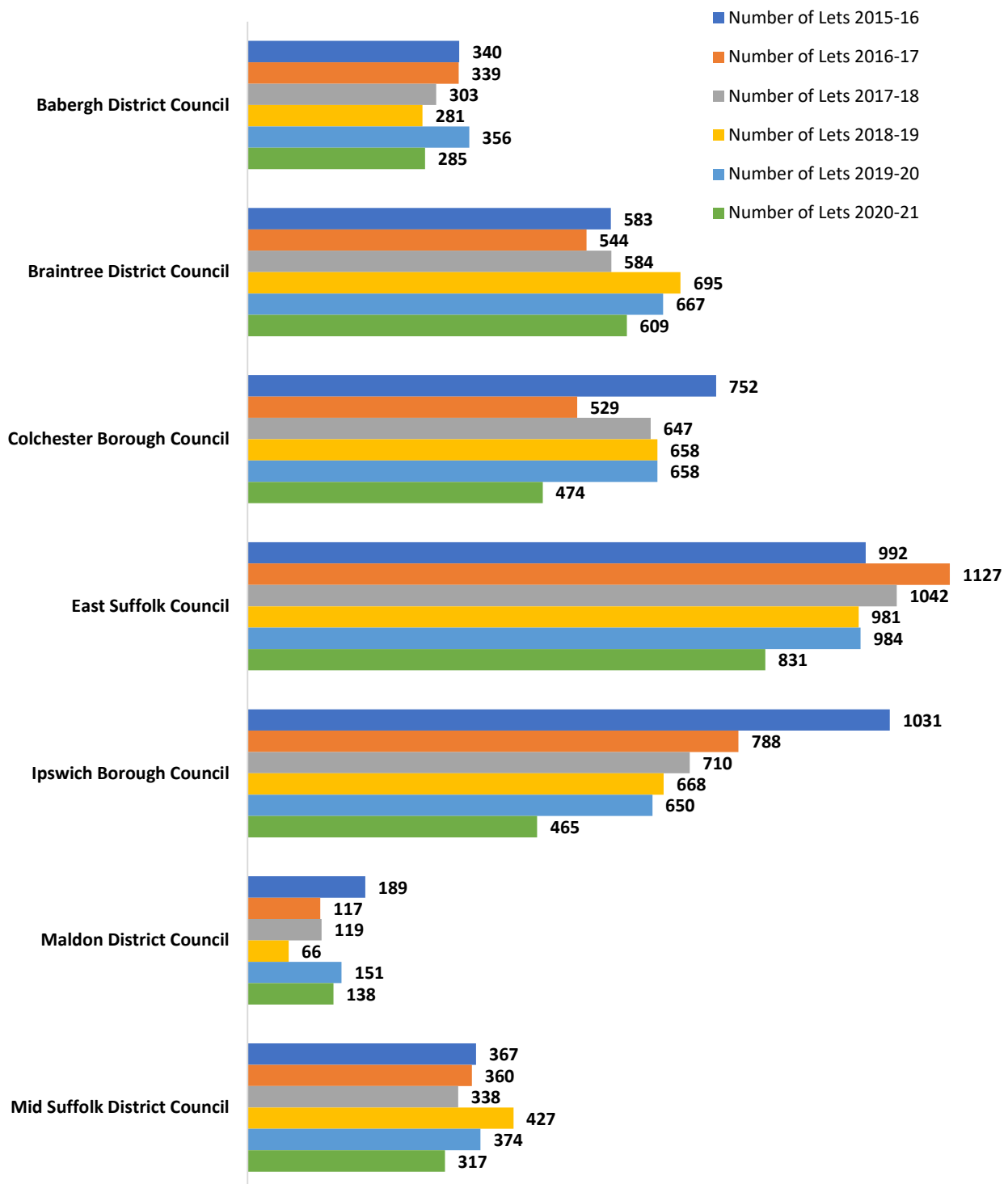
The Government Guidance that only essential moves should take place, which included the suspension of choice-based lettings meant that fewer properties were let across the Gateway during the 2020 – 21 period.

1. Number of properties let in each Local Authority through Gateway to Homechoice between 2015 – 21

The number of properties that become available to let each year is affected by a number of factors but the main ones are:

- the number of rented social homes in the area *and*
- the number of new affordable homes let in that year.

The variations between the LAs reflects mainly the size of their social rented sector. For example, Ipswich have the largest number of social homes, while Maldon has the smallest number. The changes from one year to the next within a Local Authority area usually reflect the variation in the number of new homes provided.

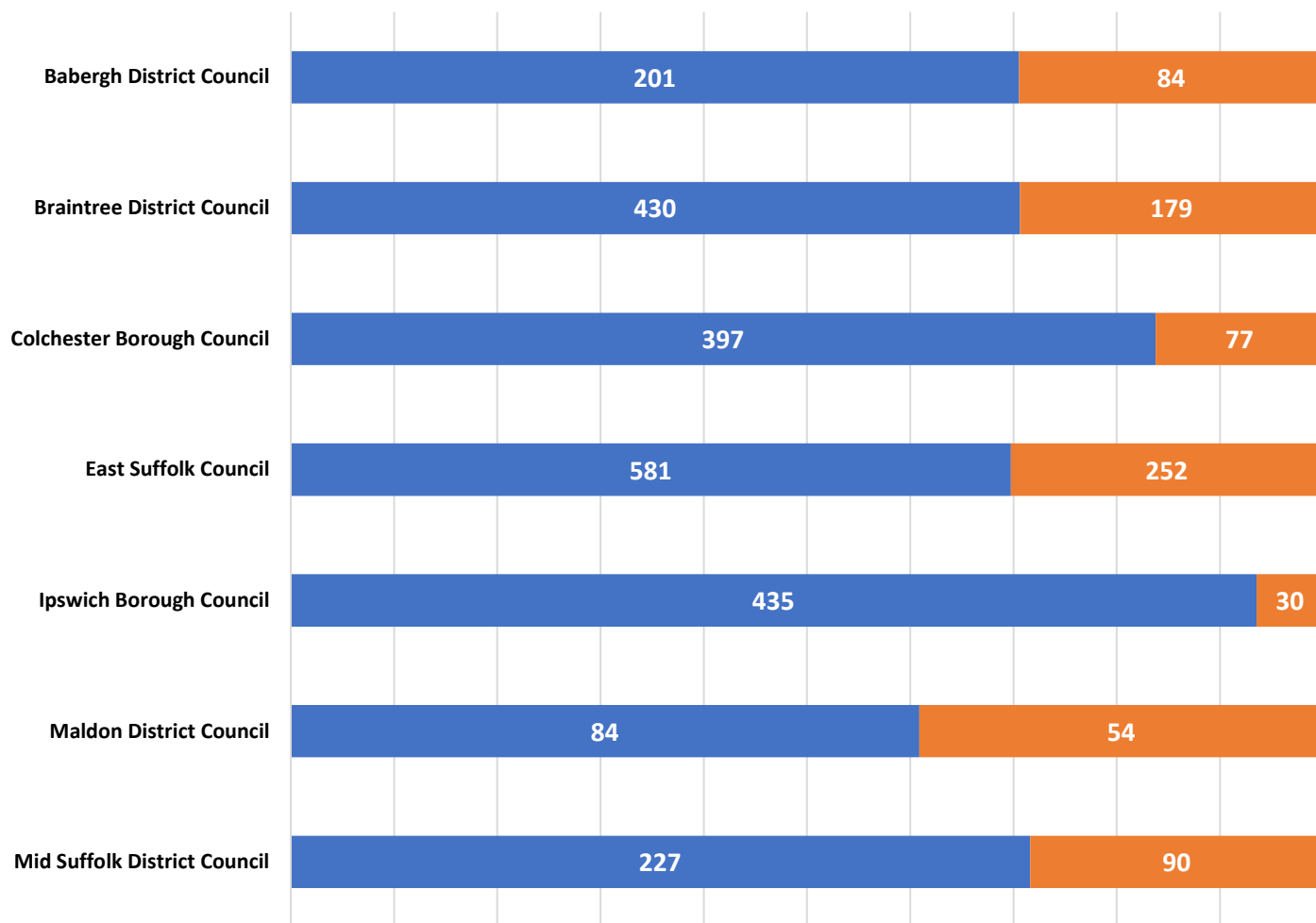


2. Total number of properties let in each Local Authority in 2020/21 split by type of rent

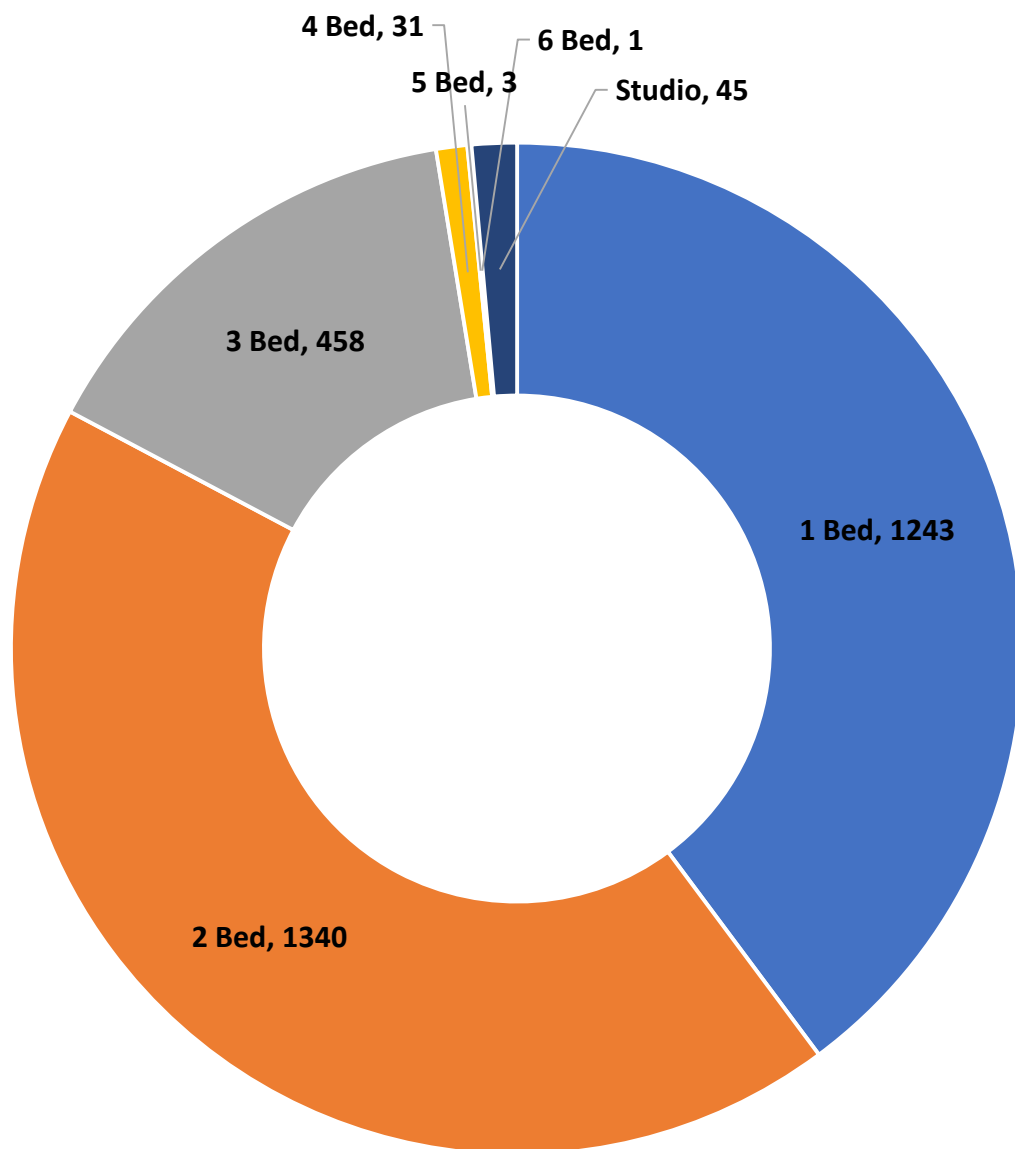
Social housing for rent can be let at social or affordable rent levels. Social rent is set using a formula that considers local earnings and house prices, while affordable rent is set at 80% of market rent. In general, affordable rents are higher than social rents and the gap between them is bigger for bigger properties.

Affordable rents are usually charged for all **new** social housing. Some housing providers also 'convert' properties from social rent to affordable rent when they become vacant. This raises money to invest in new affordable housing.

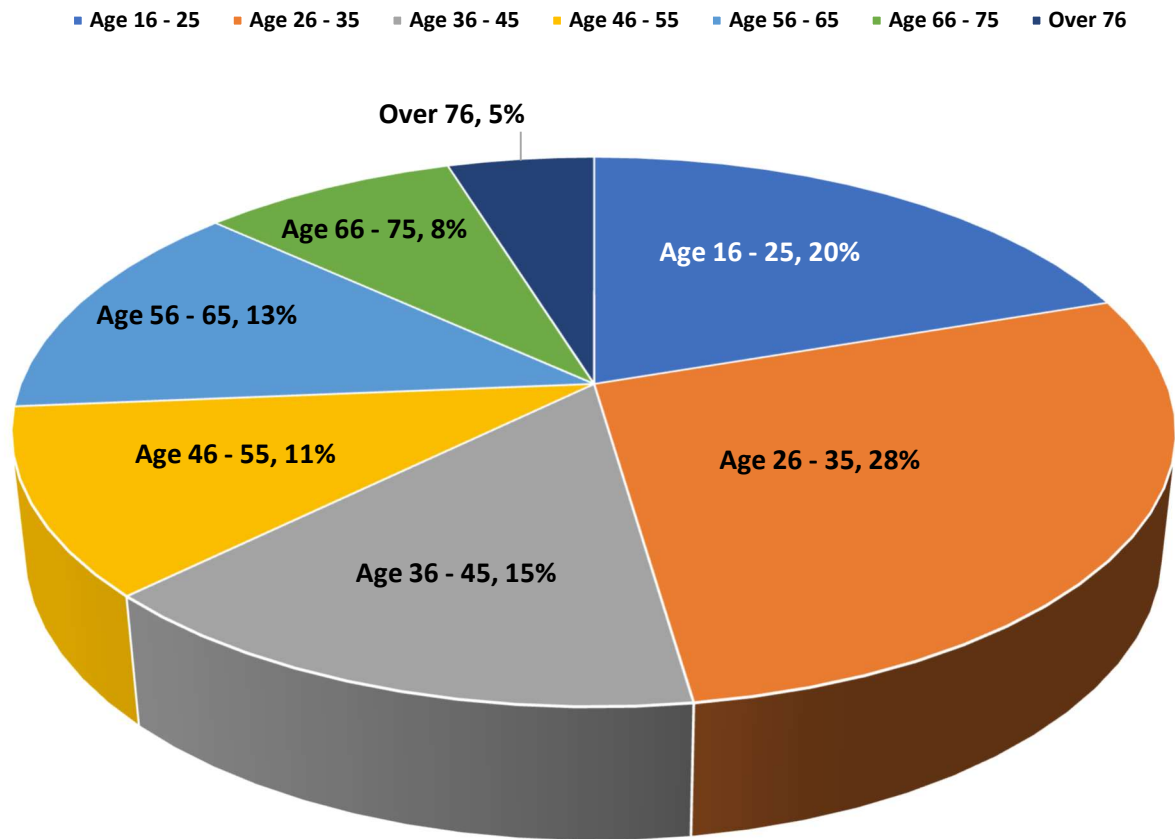
■ Social Rent ■ Affordable Rent



3. Total number of properties let in 2020/21 split by the number of bedrooms in the property



4. Proportion of property lettings in 2020/21 made through Gateway to Homechoice split by age of main applicant

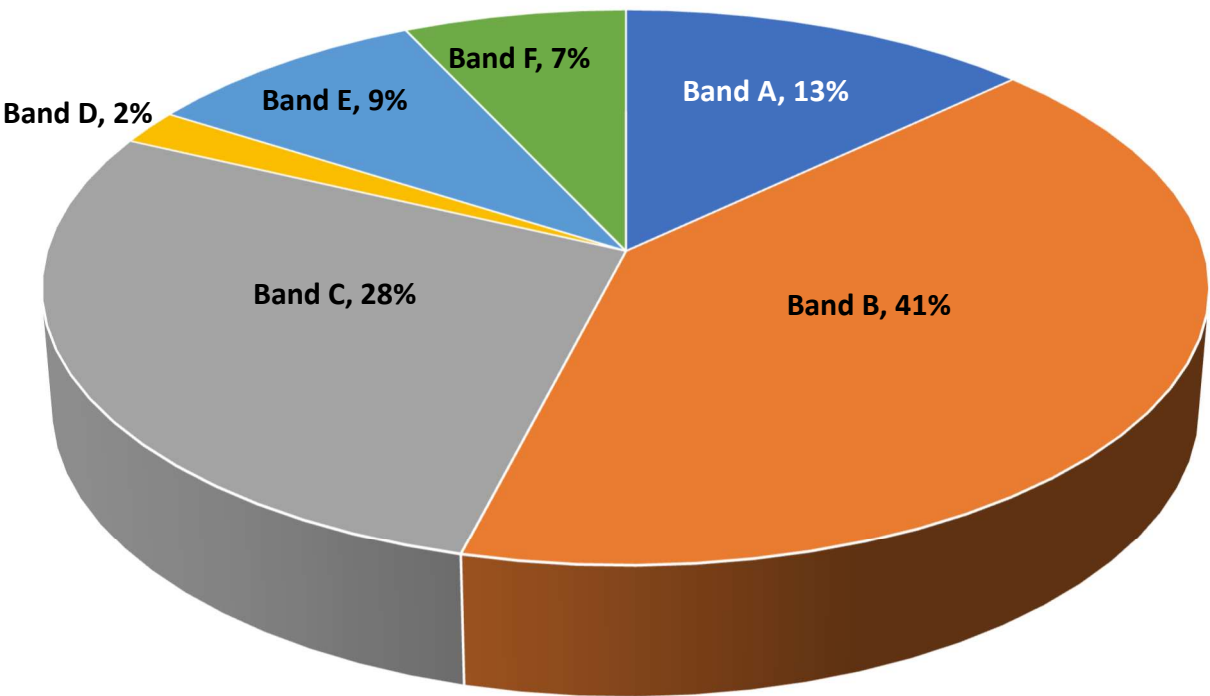


About 'Bands'

When someone applies for housing, the urgency of their application is assessed in line with the Allocations Policy, which can be viewed and downloaded from the scheme's website. Applications are placed in 'Bands' from A to F, depending on the level of need. The **main** categories of need for each band are summarised below. (Please look at the [website](#) if you want a complete guide to the banding scheme).

Band	Main categories of need
A	Critical medical/welfare award Downsizing from 3 bedroom or larger social housing property Nominations from supported housing providers with agreed move-on arrangements
B	Serious medical/welfare award Downsizing from 2 bed social housing property Accepted homeless cases and some cases where homelessness can be prevented Overcrowding in social or private rented housing
C	Moderate medical/welfare award 'Prevention' or 'Relief' homeless applicants Homeless households not in 'priority need' People sharing facilities with other households or lacking facilities
D	Applicants whose needs have been assessed as having a higher need but whose application has been given reduced preference. Examples include people with no local connection and households with a poor tenancy history (e.g. arrears, current or previous eviction action)
E	People with no immediate need to move
F	Applicants registering for schemes where qualification is based on an assessment of care needs (such as 'Extra Care' or 'Very sheltered' housing schemes).

5. Total number of properties let in 2020/21 made through Gateway to Homechoice split by the band awarded to the applicant



6. Types of applicant

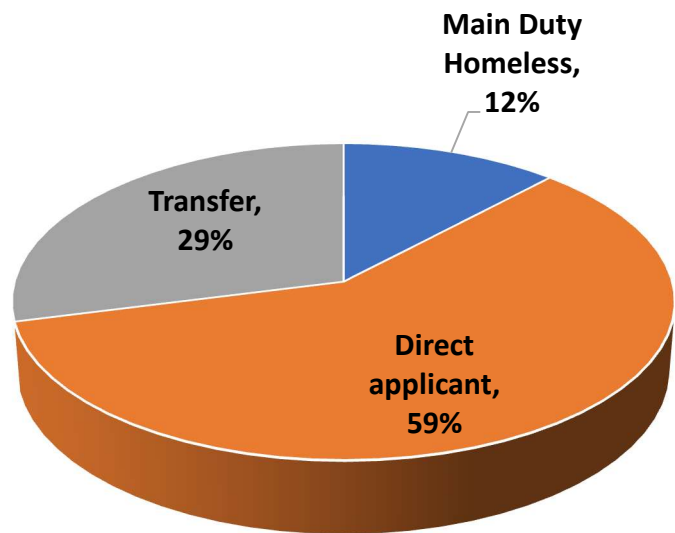
Applicants are split into three categories:

Homeless applicants – these are households that a local authority has accepted a legal duty to house

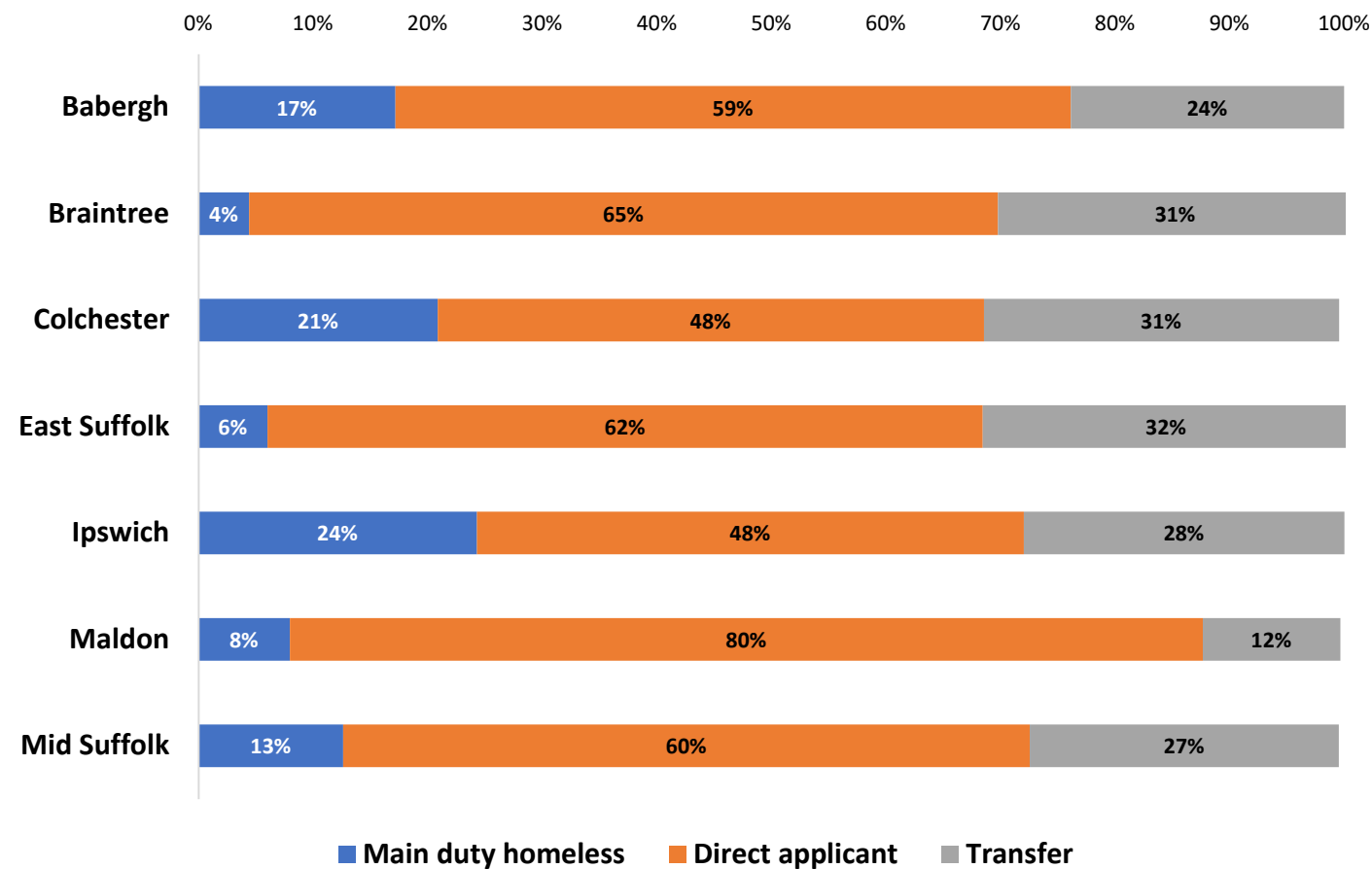
Transfer applicants – Council or housing association tenants seeking a move to another property

Direct applicants – all other applicants. The largest groups are people renting privately and people living with their family

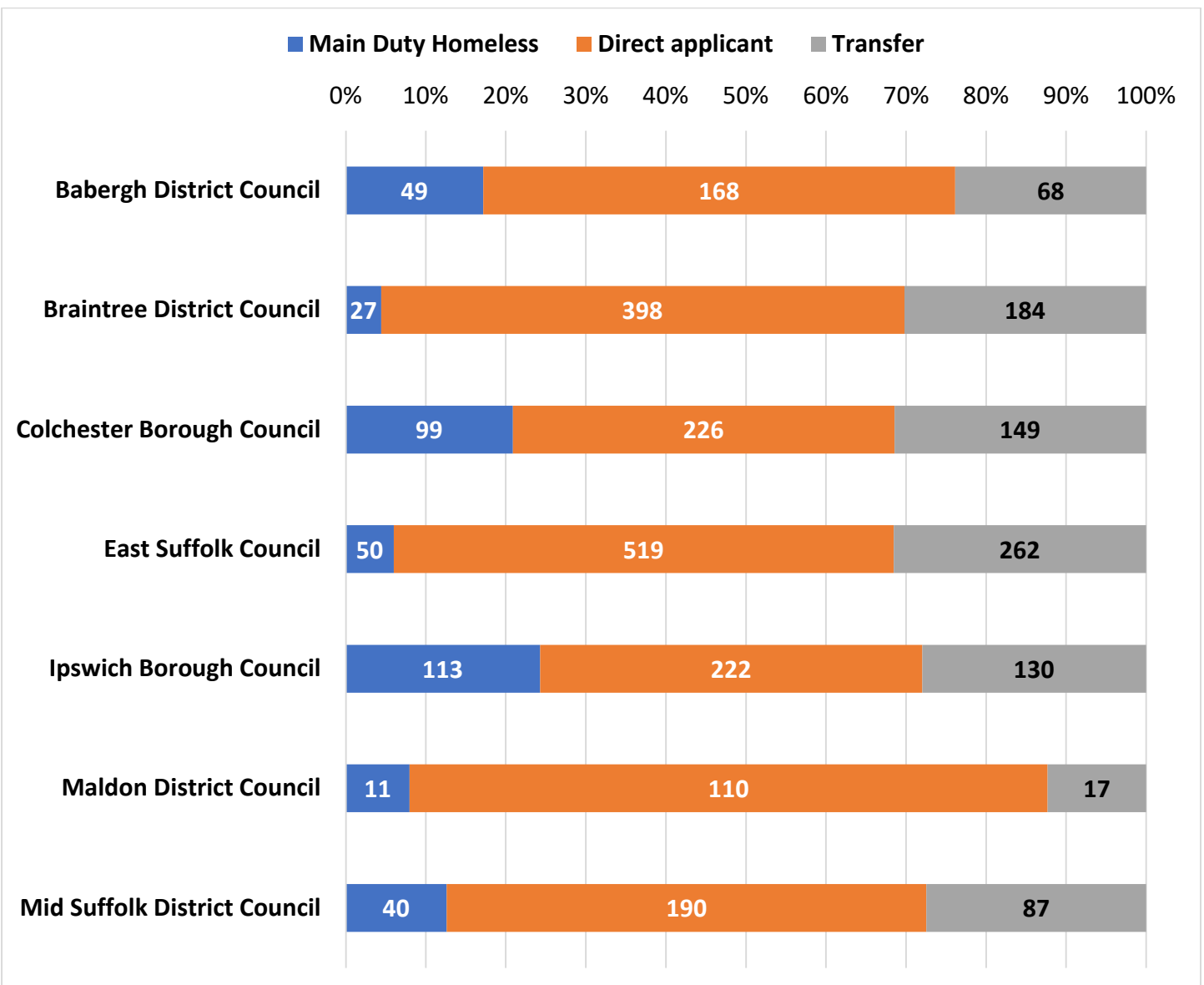
We want to house a reasonable balance between these groups. The scheme is designed to recognise how urgently people need to move while meeting our legal duties and promoting a reasonable flow of properties.



Applicant type



7. Applicants housed in 2020/21 through Gateway to Homechoice split by applicant type

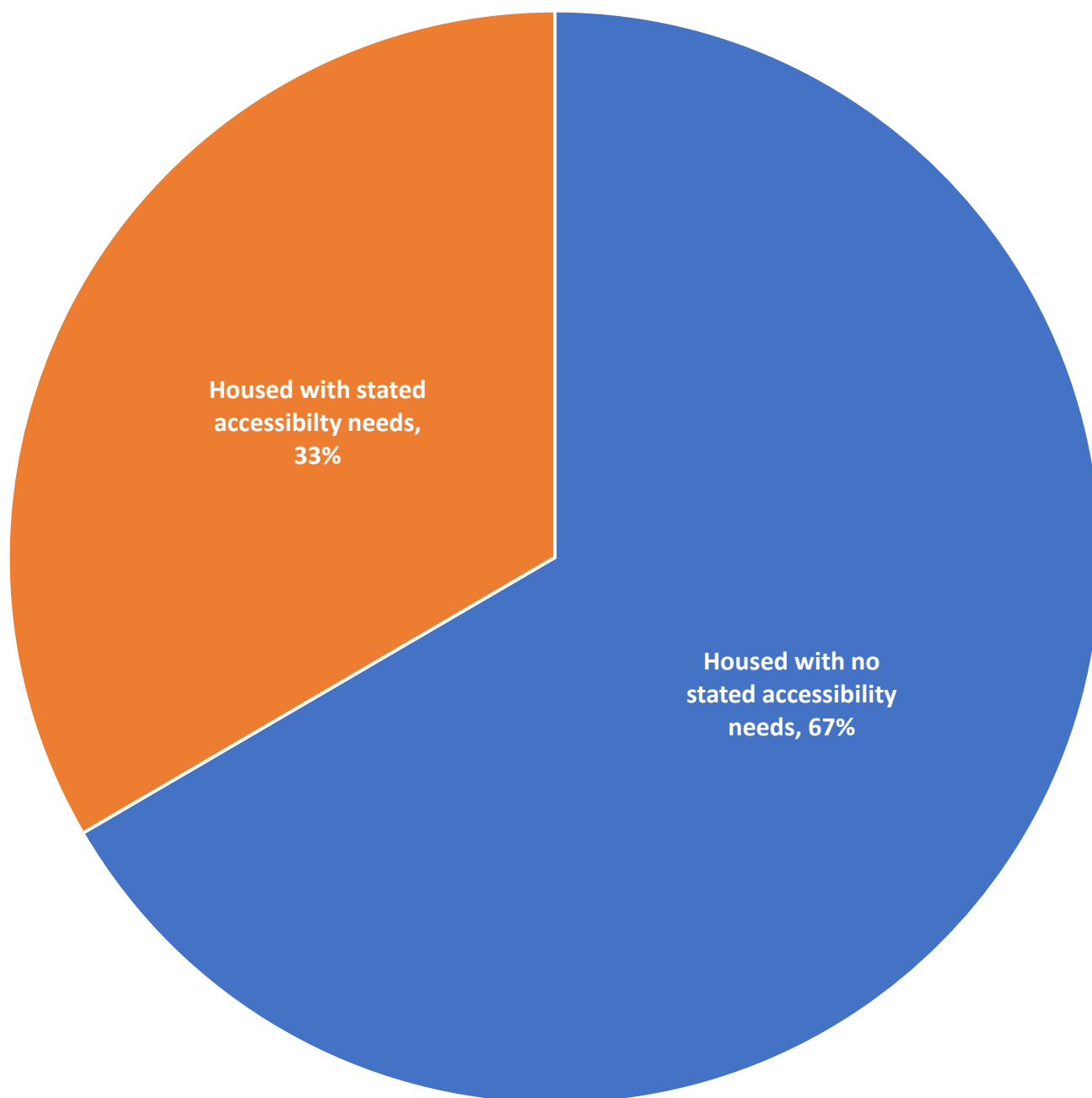


Accessibility and Adaptations

Some disabled people need a home to have certain features for it to be suitable for them. Most commonly, people have limited mobility and need a property with level access (such as a bungalow or ground floor flat). It is also relatively common for people to need a level-access shower. A few people need a property adapted specifically for a wheelchair user.

We are committed to making sure that adapted homes are offered to people who need the adaptations in the property. We therefore operate a system where people identify their accessibility needs to us and if a suitable property becomes vacant, people needing the adaptations are given priority first.

8. Properties let through Gateway to Homechoice in 2020/21 to people with a stated accessibility need



Waiting Times

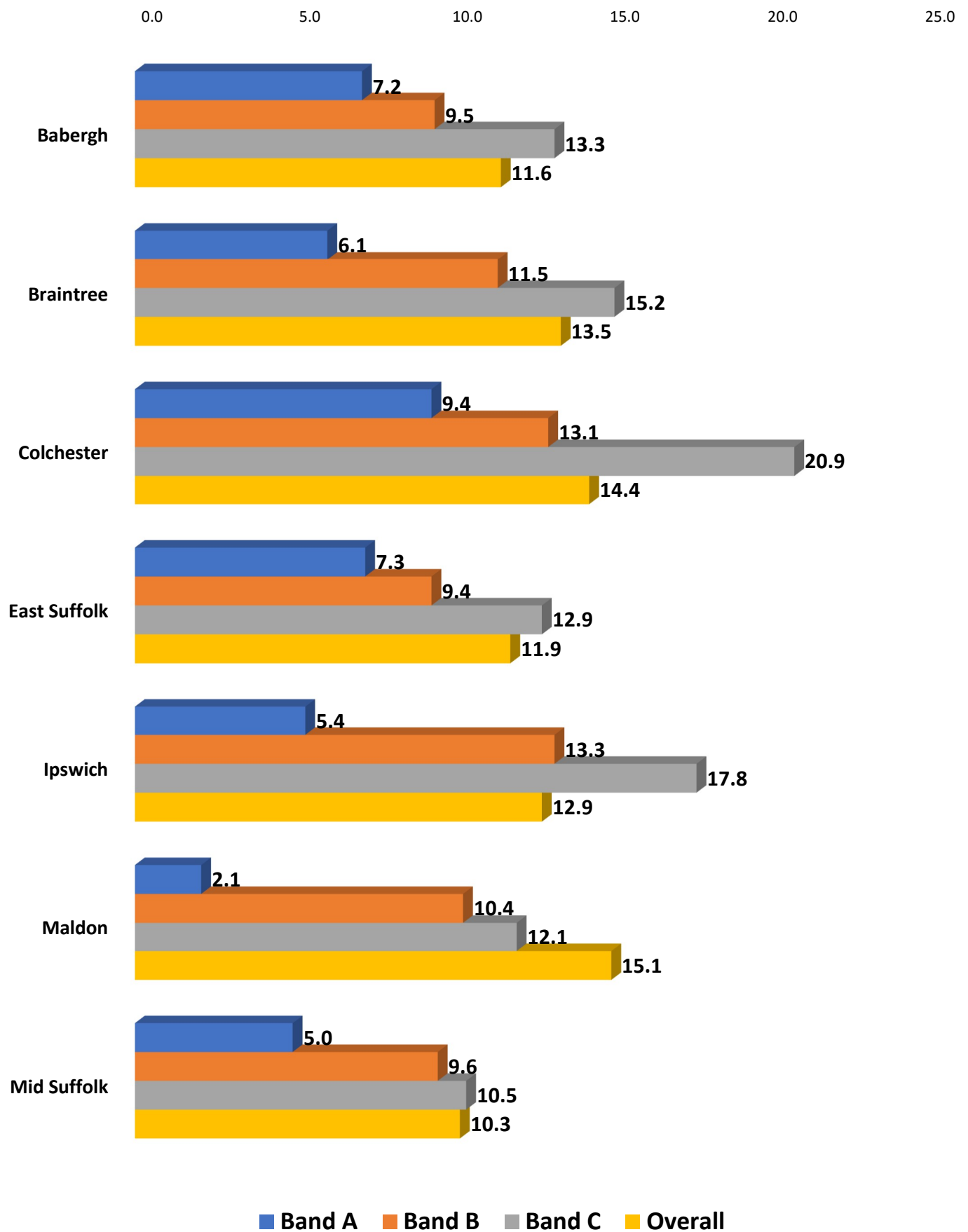
The table below shows the typical waiting time (in months) for housing, broken down by the band of the applicant. It is measured by recording how long people have waited when they are housed.

We have excluded those housed applicants who were awarded a downsizing or Armed Forces priority as well as those who were housed in a property requiring a local connection. This is because in all three examples, the waiting times give a false impression to people using the waiting times as a guide to how quickly they could be housed. The reasons for this are as follows:

- Many people who are downsizing wait for a suitable property to become available in the area of their choice. Their waiting times are therefore longer than average.
- The higher priority for people who have served in the Armed Forces is given to reduce their waiting time. The scheme therefore distorts the data for people who have no such priority.
- Housing schemes (mainly in villages) requiring a local connection are often let to people in lower bands and with short waiting times.

By excluding these types of lettings before taking the average waiting times, we think the results are much more representative of people's experience of waiting times. The following data shows the typical waiting times for people by Local Authority and by Band.

9. Waiting times in months



Household Movement

Households register with the District where they live (or where they want to live if they are from outside the area of the scheme). Once registered, they can 'bid' for housing in any of the 7 Local Authority areas.

There are some exceptions to this policy. In particular:

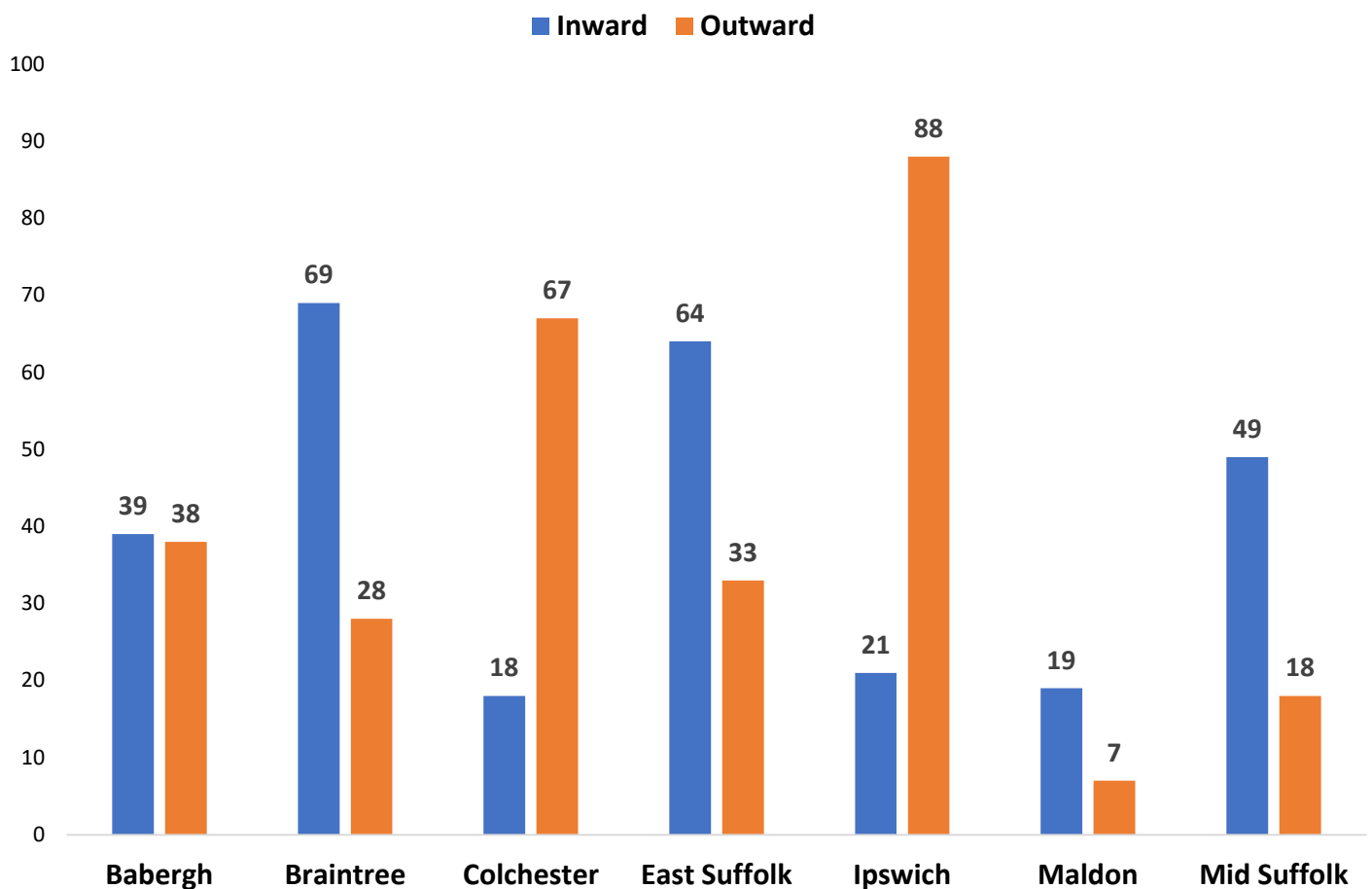
- If a Council accepts a homeless duty to an applicant, the applicant will normally be restricted to bidding for housing in the area of that Council.
- New affordable housing is normally offered on first let to people with a connection to the Local Authority where it is built. On some rural sites, where there are s106 agreements, the local connection also applies each time they are re-let.

Imbalances between inward and outward movement can be controlled by advertising properties as available only for local residents for a period of time. This can be applied to specific property types, for example to 2 bed houses, so that a Council can restrict bidding until a better balance is reached.

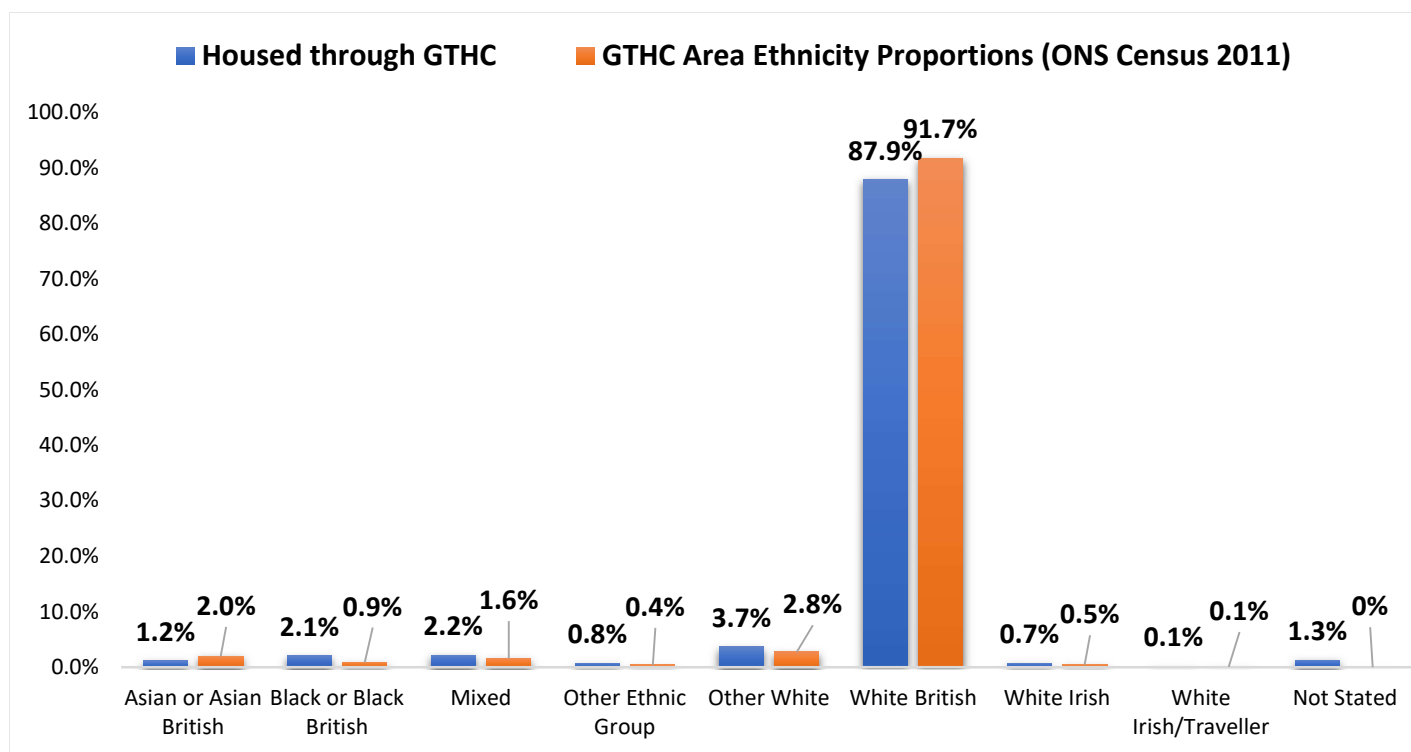
The following tables show the extent of cross-boundary movement between the Local Authorities. Some of the people who move between districts may have a connection (for example through work or family) to the area they move to.

The method of calculating inward/outward migration changed at the end of December 2019 and so we expect reduced cross boundary movement during 2020/21.

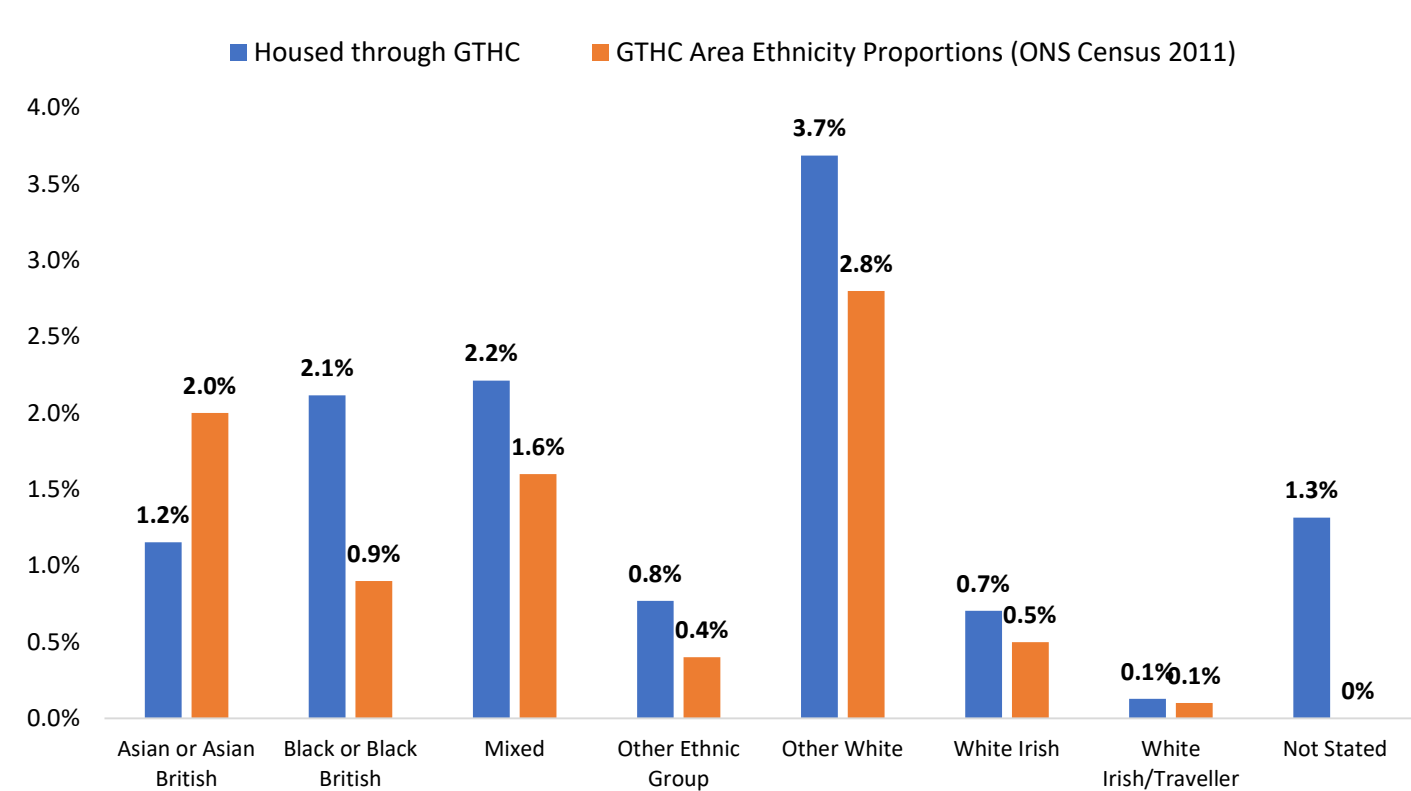
10. The movement of households housed through Gateway to Homechoice in 2020/21



11. Ethnic groups housed through Gateway to Homechoice in 2020/21 compared with overall ethnicity in the Gateway to Homechoice area.



As above, but with the 'White British' ethnic group excluded:



12. Gateway to Homechoice Armed Forces data

We give additional priority to people who have served in the Armed Forces.

When we consider an application from someone who has a history of service, we use the same criteria as when we band all other applicants. When households bid for a property, the household with a service history automatically comes above all the people in the same Band. This means they are more likely to be housed than someone who has the same circumstances but has no history of service.

Note: Data in this section refers to the Local Authority (LA) where the applicant registered. Because applicants can move between LAs, totals here are likely to differ slightly from the number of property lettings in each LA in the tables at the beginning of this report.

Local Authority where applicant was registered	Households housed with Armed Forces priority in 2020/21	Total households housed through GTHC in 2020/21
Babergh District Council	7	285
Braintree District Council	16	609
Colchester Borough Council	14	474
East Suffolk Council	17	831
Ipswich Borough Council	9	465
Maldon District Council	4	138
Mid Suffolk District Council	4	317
Total	71	3119
Overall % Housed	2.27%	100%

Local Authority where Applicant was registered	Active Applicants with Armed Forces Priority as at 01.04.21	Total Active Applicants as at 01.04.21
Babergh District Council	17	760
Braintree District Council	41	2133
Colchester Borough Council	68	3014
East Suffolk Council	77	3789
Ipswich Borough Council	35	2906
Maldon District Council	14	1112
Mid Suffolk District Council	17	597
Total	269	14311
Overall % of Active Applicants	1.87%	100%

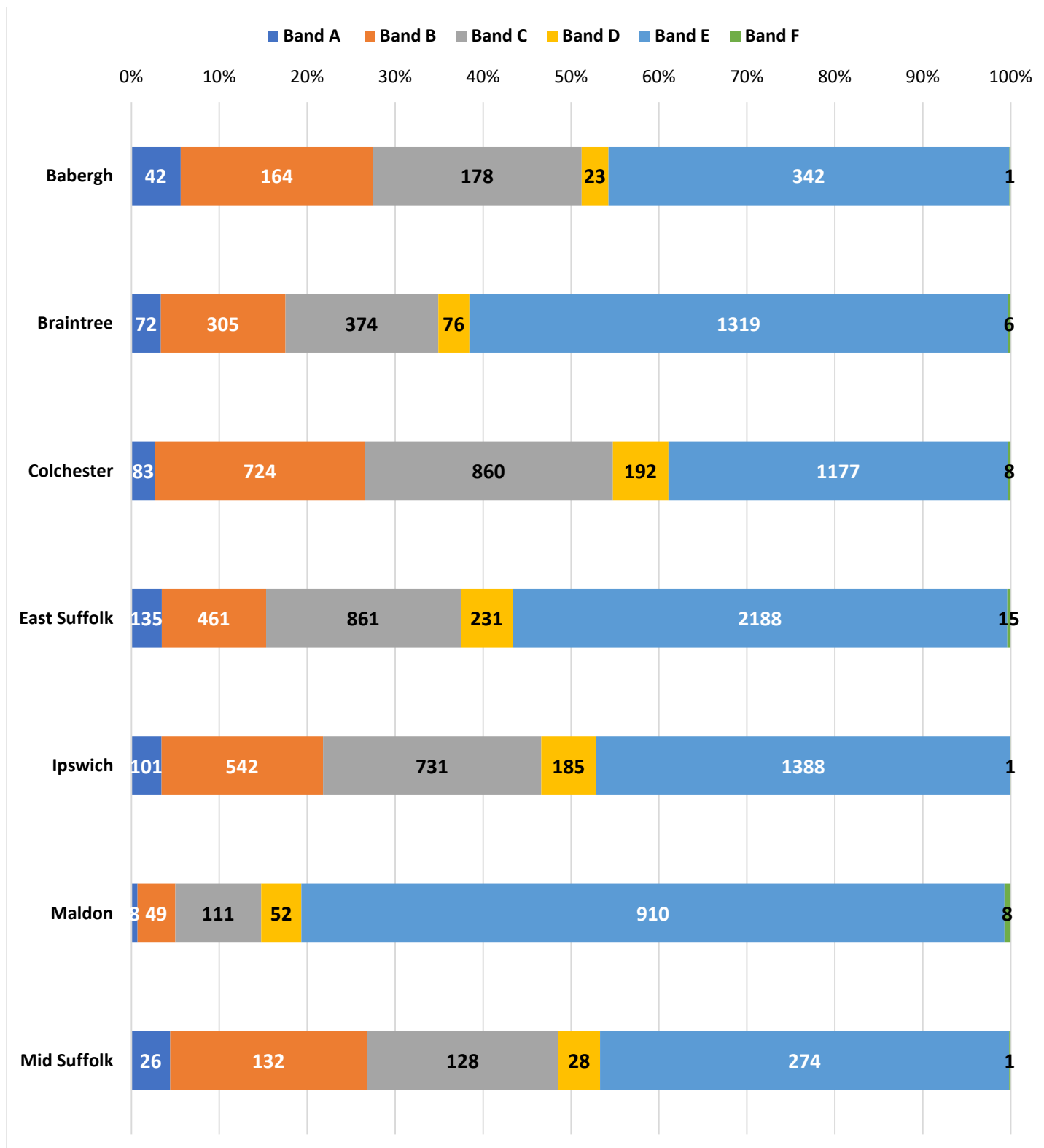
Priority Type	Overall Average Waiting Time in Months to be housed through GTHC in 2020/21 (exclusions apply – see waiting times chart above)
Households housed <u>with</u> Armed Forces Priority	9.9
Households housed with <u>no</u> Armed Forces Priority	13.0

13. Gateway to Homechoice 'Active Applicants' data by band as of 1st April 2021

The number of applicants changes all the time as new people register and households move into accommodation or do not renew their application. Applicant numbers are therefore a 'snapshot' at a particular point in time.

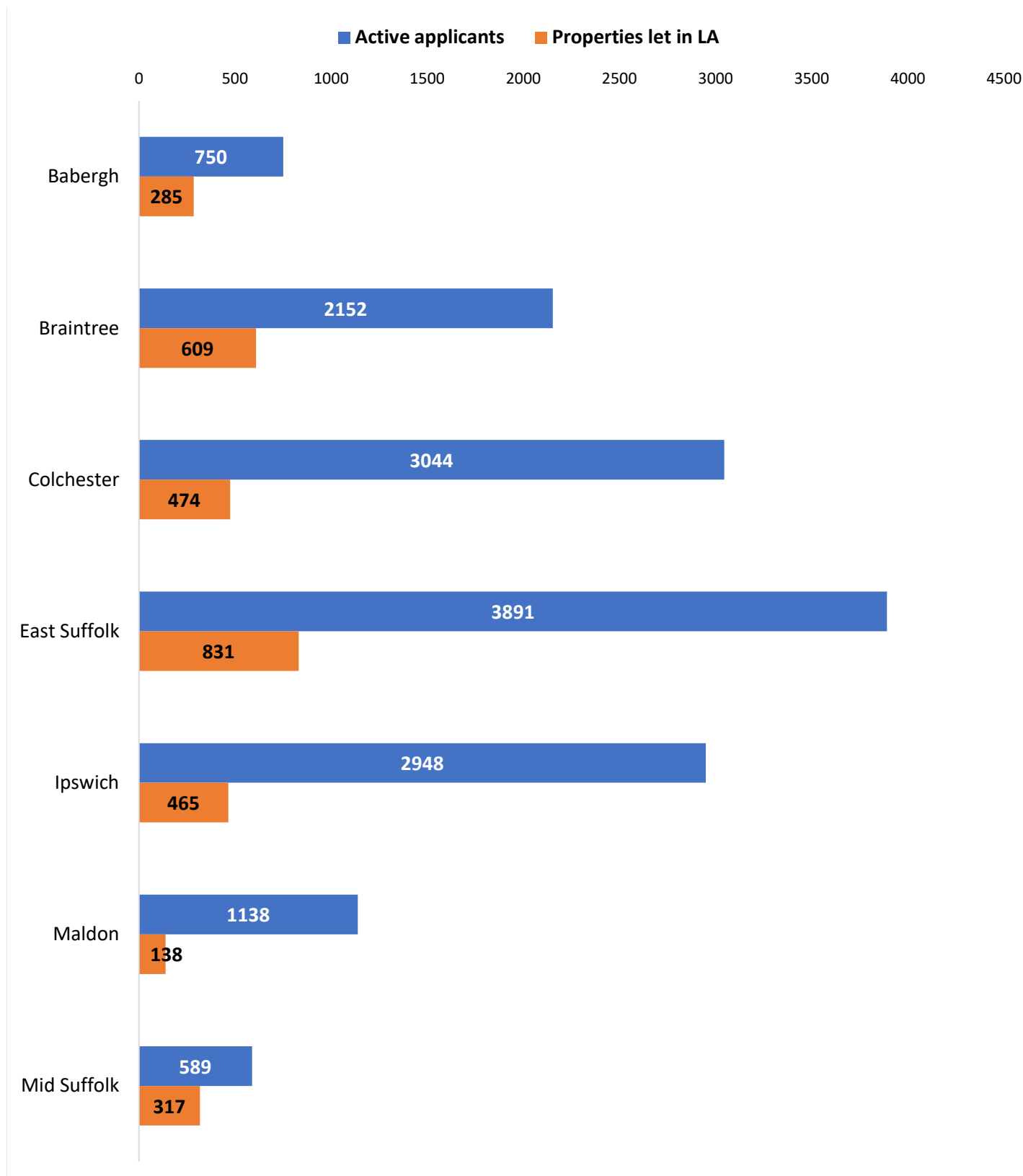
All of the data for the report so far has related to the households that have been housed through the scheme and mainly looks back at the year from 01 April 2020 to 31 March 2021. The data below relates to people waiting to be housed. The report from which this was generated was taken on 1st April 2021.

The chart shows the number in each Band, in each Local Authority.



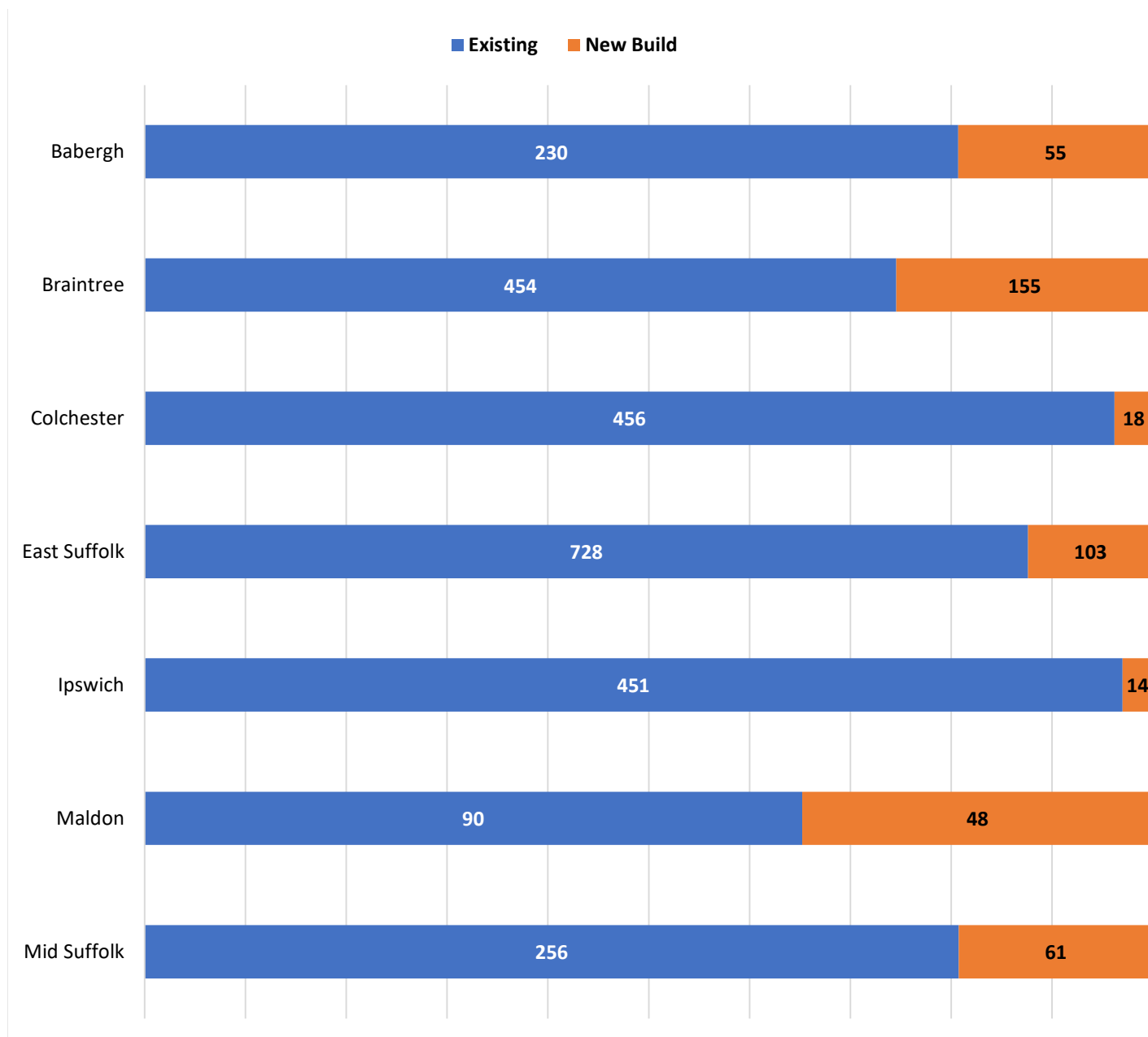
14. Gateway to Homechoice Active Applicants Data as of 1st April 2021 compared to the total number of properties let in each Local Authority area in 2020/21.

The data below compares the number of registered applicants on 1st April 2021 with the number of lettings made during the previous financial year 2020/21. The data shows the balance between the number of households waiting for social housing and the number being housed.



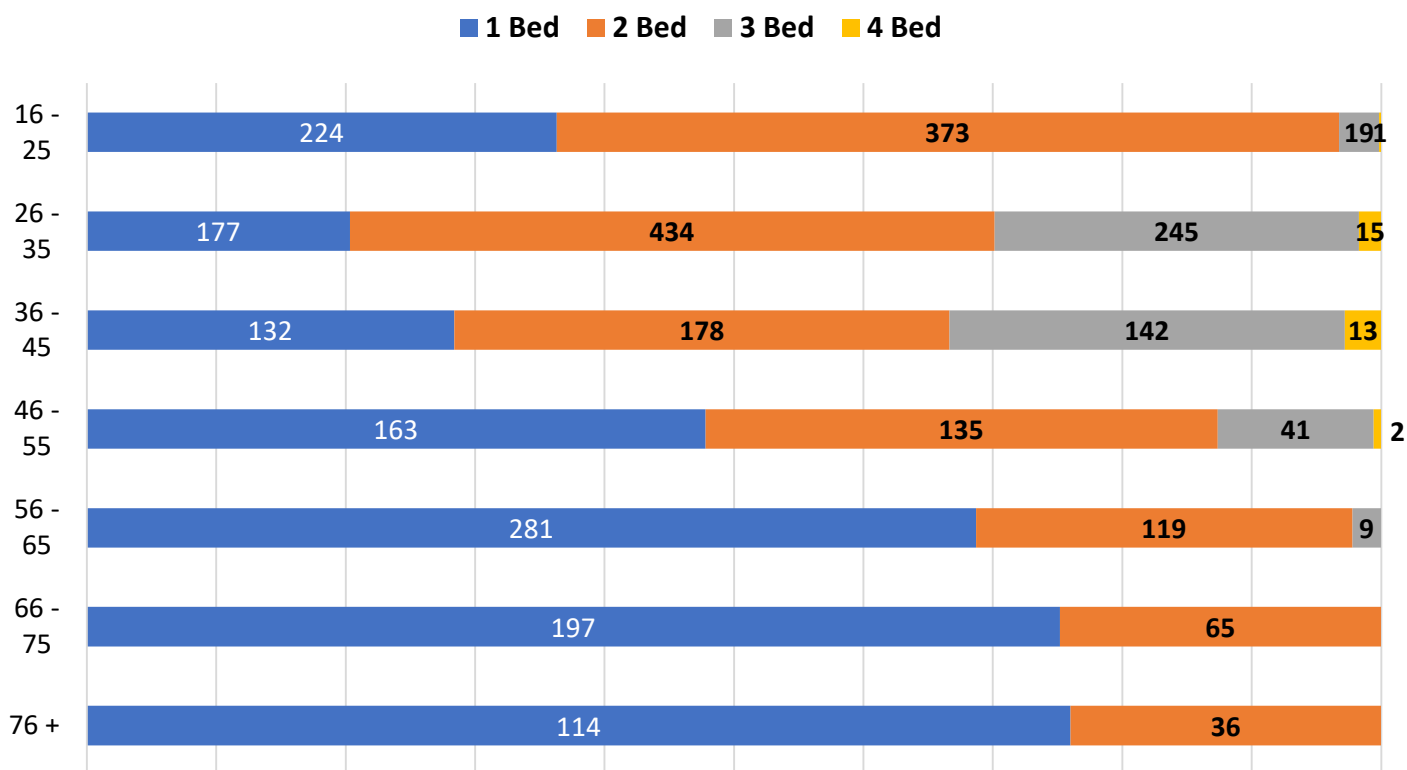
15. Comparison of the proportion of new and existing properties let in each Local Authority in 2020/21

The next chart compares lets of new housing with lets of existing properties.

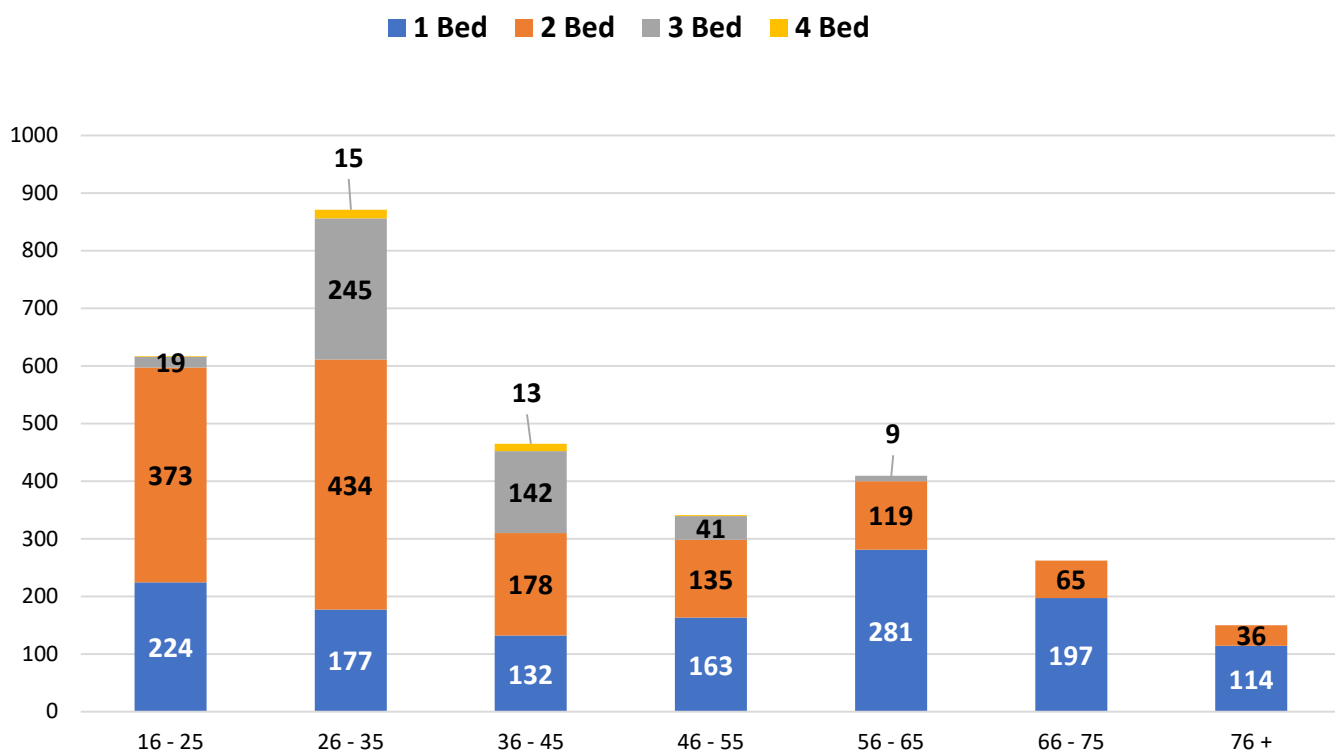


16. The proportion of lets made in the Gateway to Homechoice area in 2020/21 split by the number of bedrooms in the property and the primary applicant's age group

The data shows the correlation between the age of the main applicant and the size of property let to them. This information can be helpful when planning what sizes of properties to build to meet future demand.



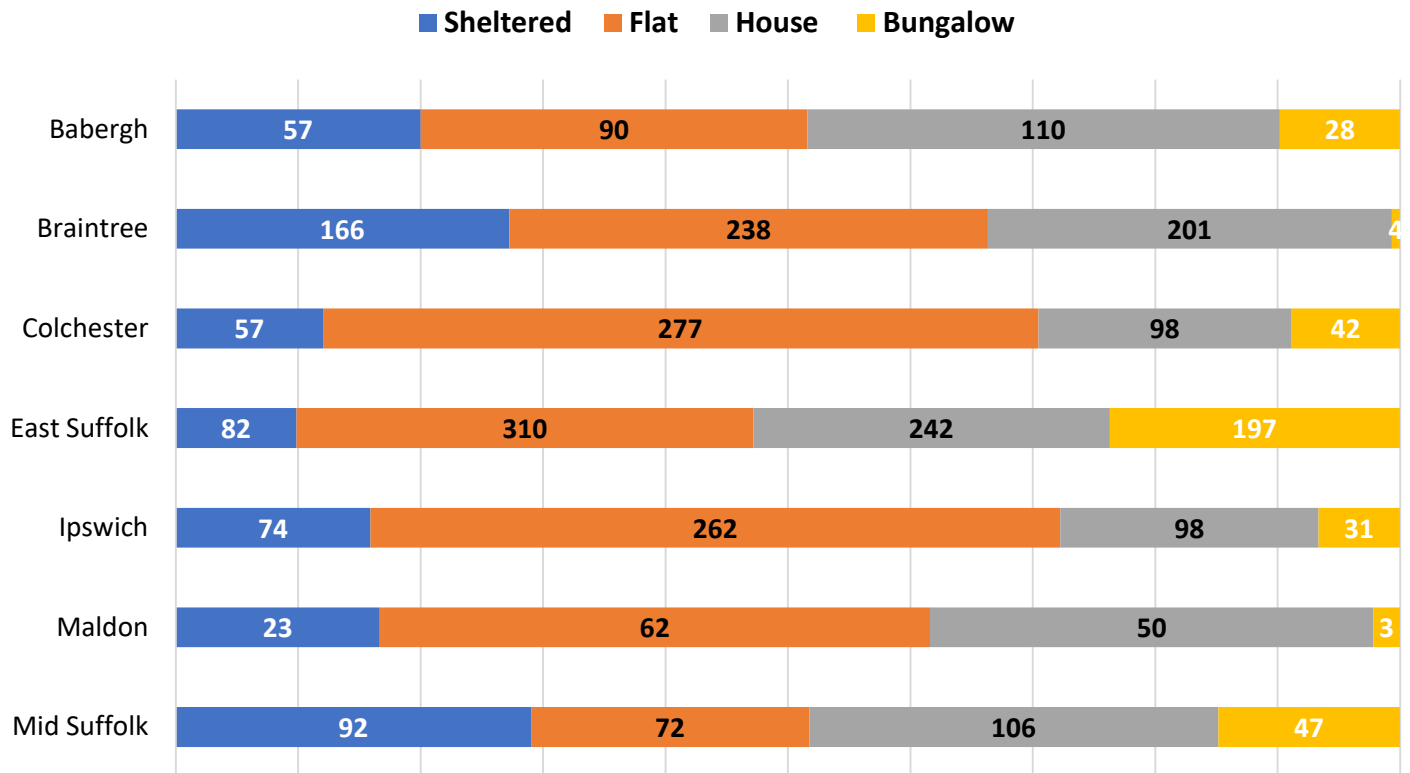
The proportion of lets made in the Gateway to Homechoice area in 2020/21 split by the number of bedrooms in the property and the primary applicant's age group:



There were also 4 x 5 bedroomed properties let; two to applicants in the 36 – 45 age group and two to the 46 – 55 group.

17. The proportion of lets made in the Gateway to Homechoice area in 2020/21 split by the type of property let

The “Specialist Older Person” category mainly comprises flats in sheltered housing schemes but also includes those properties let that are part of or are linked to sheltered schemes. It is quite common for a few bungalows to be linked to a neighbouring sheltered housing scheme and for the purposes of the graph below, they are included in the ‘specialist older person’ category. The “Bungalow” category in the chart therefore only includes those bungalows let that are **not** linked to a sheltered scheme.



Future Data Requests

If there is something you would like to see reported on now or in the future, please contact the Gateway to Homechoice team: gateway.coordinators@cbhomes.org.uk

List of Registered Providers using the Gateway to Homechoice Scheme 2020 – 21

Anchor Hanover
Broadland Housing
CDS Co-operatives Housing
CHP Housing
Clarion Housing
Cotman Housing
Eastlight Community Housing
English Rural Housing
Estuary Housing
Flagship Homes
Guinness Homes
Habinteg Housing Association
Haig Housing
Hastoe Housing Association
Havebury Housing
Home Group
Housing 21
L & Q Housing
Moat Housing
Notting Hill Genesis
Orbit Housing
Orwell Housing
Papworth Trust
Peabody Housing Association
Riverside Housing Association
Saffron Housing
Sage Housing
Salvation Army Housing Association
Swan Housing
Sanctuary Housing
Suffolk Housing
Winnocks & Kendall Almshouse
Winsleys Charity