

## **Summary of the Communications Plan for the New Allocations Scheme for the Housing Panel December 2013**

### **Introduction**

The Allocations Scheme is the policy the Council uses to allocate social housing in Oxford and to prioritise those in housing need on the Oxford Register for Affordable Housing for offers of housing.

A new Allocations Scheme was approved by the Council in September 2013, following changes in legislation, guidance and best practice. The new Allocations Scheme will be introduced on 12<sup>th</sup> December 2013. The Allocations Scheme seeks to make the best use of the very limited social housing available, balanced with local needs and aspirations. A public consultation took place as part of this process. The policy seeks to ensure there is a consistent approach to the allocation of housing across the City.

The new scheme has introduced a number of changes, in particular, a new local connection eligibility requirement. Applicants will usually now be expected to have a local connection to Oxford through residence, work, or family connections. The Council has also adopted increased powers in relation to excluding applicants from the housing register for anti-social behaviour, by themselves or household members, or for significant rent arrears.

Property size eligibility rules have also been amended to bring the bedroom sharing rules for children into line with the new housing benefit rules introduced under welfare reform. This ensures that the full rent of the property allocated, is eligible for housing benefit, should the household require this financial support to sustain the tenancy.

The Housing Panel have requested to see a summary of the Communications Plan for the new Allocations Scheme.

### **The Communications Plan**

Customers, both internal and external, and other stakeholders will be informed of the changes to the Allocations Scheme.

A range of communication methods will be used seeking to ensure:

- Customers and stakeholders are aware of the changes to the Allocations Scheme in Oxford
- Customers are aware of how the changes affect them
- Customers are realistic about their chances of receiving an offer of housing and information is available to help manage their expectations

### **The Website**

Information will be available on the Council website for customers and stakeholders about the Allocations Scheme and the other housing options.

The new Allocations Scheme and a summary of the Allocations Scheme will be available on the Council website. The summary of the Allocations Scheme will include a breakdown of letting statistics for the last 3 years by property size and type to help manage customer expectations. Customers without a PC will continue to be able to use the self-service PCs in Council offices or the Library. Customer Service Officers will be available to assist if required. Alternatively, customers will be able to request a copy of the summary of the Allocations Scheme to be sent to them.

The new Choice-Based Lettings (CBL) website will have a downloadable CBL guide for customers to use. Customers will be able to view previous lettings outcomes to check the band of the person who finished first for properties advertised via CBL. This will enable housing applicants to make an informed decision on whether to continue to bid for properties becoming available or to consider other housing options instead to resolve their housing situation – such as securing their own accommodation in the private rented sector.

### **Letter**

Every housing applicant on the Housing Register was written earlier this year as part of the consultation on the proposed changes to the Allocations Scheme. The letter advised customers the Allocations Scheme would be changing and gave them the opportunity to respond to the consultation. The responses were taken into account in the drafting of the final version of the Allocations Scheme. There are currently over 4000 households on the Housing Register. A letter will be sent to each to notify them that the Allocations Scheme has changed and advising them to contact the Housing Needs Team or to check the website if they have any queries.

### **Housing Applicants on the General Register without a Local Connection**

Households on the General Register List without a local connection (around 350) will be sent a letter to notify them that they no longer qualify for inclusion on the Housing Register and their application has been cancelled. If a housing applicant considers they do have a local connection through residence, family or work (or if they consider they have exceptional circumstances for seeking to move to Oxford) they will be able to appeal against this decision.

### **Housing Applicants on the Homeless List**

Households on the Homeless List to whom the Council has accepted a statutory homeless duty (around 70) and placed in temporary accommodation will be sent a letter advising them of the changes and how they will be affected.

### **Housing Applicants on the General Register & Transfer Lists**

Households on the General Register and Transfer Lists (around 3600) will be sent a letter advising them of their Housing Need Priority Band and the size of property they are now eligible to apply for. Households will be notified that many are unlikely to receive an offer of housing and they should consider other housing options to resolve their housing situation to help manage their expectations. There will be around 400 households where their band has changed (most will have gone down to a lower priority band).

Individual households with serious rent arrears and/or anti-social behaviour will also be notified they no longer qualify for inclusion on the Housing Register. These will be done on an on-going and case by case basis and will be a low number.

### **Press**

A press release will be done to notify the general public the Council has introduced a new Allocations Scheme and to also highlight the numbers on the housing register currently compared to the low number of properties becoming available to let each year to help manage expectations.

### **Training**

Staff training will be completed to ensure staff are aware of the changes and able to assist customers with any queries.

The training will include:

- Staff training for the Housing & Property Team
- Team briefings for the Customer Services Team and other departments
- Briefings for staff working for Oxford Register for Affordable Housing partners in Oxford, Shelter and other key stakeholders including floating support staff and voluntary agencies
- A Members briefing schedule to take place on 18/12/13

### **The Future**

Following the introduction of the Allocations Scheme, feedback from customers and stakeholders will be monitored on an on-going basis to ensure we are providing the information and service our customers expect. Further planned changes such as the introduction of an on-line application form will help manage customer expectations by providing instant feedback on an applicant's chances of being made an offer of housing.

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