

Report to: Executive Board - Friday 27<sup>th</sup> Sep 02**HOUSING ALLOCATIONS POLICY REVIEW**

<b>Report of:</b>	<i>Business Manager, Housing Management Business Unit</i>	<b>WARDS AFFECTED</b>
		<b>ALL</b>
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<b>Lead Member Responsible:</b>	<i>Val Smith, Housing Portfolio Holder</i>	
<b>Overview and Scrutiny Committee Responsibility:</b>	<i>Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee</i>	
<b>Key Decision:</b>	<i>Yes</i>	

**SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This report aims to set out the scope of the Allocations Policy Review. It is proposed that this review includes full consultation with stakeholders, and that it follows, as far as practicable, the Corporate model for Best Value Reviews.

It is envisaged that a final report setting out timescales and resource implications of proposed policy changes will be submitted to the Executive Board in April 2003 following completion of the review. The Business Manager will build a contingency into the budget setting process for 2003/04, to cover implementation of any changes necessary in that financial year. Any other staff or financial implications will be reported to Executive Board in April 2003, for implementation in 2004/5.

The final report will make full recommendations regarding the Allocations policy for the City, but a number of changes are required prior to that date to comply with new legislation.

**The Homelessness Act 2002 places a duty on the Council to decide which, if any, applicants should be excluded from the General Housing Register as a result of behaviour which makes them unsuitable to be tenants. Work on formulating recommendations on this question will be urgently undertaken as part of the review, and presented to the Board in a further report before presentation to full Council in December.**

**The Review will also consider the operation of the Furnished Tenancy Scheme operated by Housing Management. This scheme has run as a pilot since 1998.**

**The report has staffing and financial implications in respect of the Furnished Tenancy Scheme, but these have already been budgeted for in this financial year.**

**The report supports the Council's strategic aims of sound management, strengthening local communities, and reducing poverty and inequality, by ensuring that our allocations policies are lawful, effective, and targeted towards those citizens in greatest housing need.**

**The Executive Board is ASKED to agree the broad approach, scope and aims of the review as set out in the report. The Board is also asked to approve the specific recommendations listed below.**

**Recommendations:**

**Policy changes and decisions required by the Homelessness Act 2002.**

**The Board is asked to recommend to full Council that:**

- a) Oxford City Council continue to maintain a General Housing Register and Transfer Register to identify persons requiring to be housed, and to prioritise those persons by housing need (as opposed to the introduction of a Choice Based Lettings Scheme).**
- b) the current restriction limiting registration on the General Housing Register to persons living or working in the City be removed, in line with the Homelessness Act 2002, and that the points scheme be amended to give additional points to applicants demonstrating a current local connection.**
- c) Oxford City Council does not exercise its newly available discretion to provide accommodation for those persons presenting as homeless who are not intentionally homeless, but are not in priority need, as allowed for in the Homelessness Act 2002.**

**Background:**

1. The Council's present Allocations Policy was largely introduced in 1997 following the introduction of the 1996 Housing Act. Although some relatively minor changes have been introduced since that time, a substantive review has not taken place.
2. The shortage of affordable housing in Oxford is severe. Demand for property far outstrips supply and the private sector is unaffordable for many people. Applications to be housed by this authority far exceed the property becoming available. The Council's own stock is reducing through the Right to Buy, and new developments by Registered Social Landlords make little impression on the overall availability of social housing. Oxford has a chronic homelessness problem with approximately 1000 households currently accepted by OCC as statutorily homeless and housed in temporary accommodation. The cost to the City of providing temporary accommodation needs to be reduced to meet Corporate business plan objectives.
3. The Homelessness Act 2002 (and subsequent statutory instrument) has imposed further duties on local authorities. The Act came into force on 26 February 2002, with the main provisions concerning homelessness effective from 31 July 2002. Some of the main changes brought about by the act in relation to homelessness are:
  - The groups deemed in priority need, which the authority has a statutory duty to permanently house, have been extended.
  - There is a greater emphasis on the prevention of homelessness and a stronger duty to provide effective advice and assistance.
  - Authorities are granted a new power to house unintentionally homeless applicants who are not in priority need, should they elect to do so.
  - The duty to house those accepted as being in priority need is made permanent, rather than expiring after two years.
4. The Act also makes changes to legislation concerning maintaining a housing register and lettings. These provisions become effective from 1 January 2003.
  - The Authority must make a decision as to whether it wishes to continue to hold a Housing Register, as opposed to adopting a Choice Based Lettings Scheme, and include a statement on choice in its published allocations policy. It is widely recognised that Choice Based Schemes are not practicable in areas of high demand/low availability of social housing, hence this report's recommendation to maintain the status quo in this respect. The review will, however, consider opportunities for introducing some measure of choice, for example in relation to difficult to let properties.
  - A general right to apply for social housing in any location is established, which prevents Oxford restricting access to its General Register to persons 'living or working in Oxford' as at present. A decision therefore needs to be made regarding the relative priorities which will be given to housing applicants from inside and outside the city

- Authorities must decide which, if any, applicants they wish to exclude from their Housing Register, as a result of behaviour which makes them unsuitable as tenants.
  - Authorities are also encouraged to ensure accessible information on housing options, with clear procedures and customer focused service standards in place. Authorities must also have processes in place to address individuals support needs and to deal with appeals effectively.
5. The current housing situation, together with the advent of this new legislation, necessitates a review of current policy and procedures to ensure that we deliver the best use of scarce resources, and the correct prioritisation of applicants within the local context.

### **Aims of the Review:**

1. This review will aim to ensure the following:
  - That Allocations fully comply with current legislation
  - That nationally recognised best practice is adopted in the allocations processes
  - That best use is made of the stock available to the Council
  - That applicants are fully advised as to their re-housing options and that better information is provided to all stakeholders
  - That appropriate priority is given to those deemed most in need and that allocations of properties best match that need
  - That the Furnished Tenancy Scheme is further developed and used

### **Approach of the Review:**

1. It is proposed that the Best Value Review model is adopted for undertaking the review as far as practicable. This model is being developed and used Corporately. The model suggests that a Steering Group oversees and directs the review process and that a core Review Group undertakes the actual investigations, enlisting representatives of interested parties to join it at meetings to assist in consideration of specific issues. The Review Group will draw on expertise from relevant officers and members, and will arrange consultation with a wide range of stakeholders including tenants' representatives.
2. The model outlines keys stages for the review which can be summarised as:
  - Scoping the Review – establishing a Steering Group; agreeing the scope and aims of the review; and agreeing a project plan
  - Investigation – establishing a baseline statement on the current service and then identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Challenge the service; Compare with other providers; Consult stakeholders.
  - Develop Options – evaluate options and integrate these with the budget and service planning processes
  - Recommendations – Develop an action plan; implement changes; establish targets to monitor performance
  - Monitoring - To monitor progress against action plans

This report is intended to allow the board to agree the scope and aims of the review.

### **Scope of Review – Broad Themes:**

#### **• Housing Advice and Housing Options**

- Consider ways of improving housing advice provided to customers through personal contact, literature, and the Council's website.
- To investigate ways of increasing provision and uptake of shared ownership options and to better identify suitable persons for such schemes.
- To improve liaison with other agencies that deal with housing, or assist vulnerable client groups (such as The Lord Mayor's Deposit Guarantee Scheme), and to promote use of their services where appropriate.
- To review the marketing of properties in less demand, such as Sheltered Accommodation.

#### **• Increasing Mobility**

- Investigate better use of schemes to move persons under-occupying large properties into smaller ones, including a full review of the Removals Expenses Scheme.
- Further promotion of mutual exchange schemes and better matching of persons that may be able to exchange.
- Development of transfer options for persons to other Local Authority areas.
- Investigate development/adoption of IT resources for increasing mobility nation-wide.

#### **• Relationships with Registered Social Landlords**

- Thorough review of procedures to ensure more effective use of nomination rights
- Consideration of issues such as local lettings plans, ensuring balanced communities, and giving greater choice to applicants.
- Review the current Nominations Agreement in use between the Council and its partner RSLs.
- Improved liaison with RSLs and better monitoring of performance, with particular respect to lettings.

- Investigation and development of a common approach to allocations and a common register.

- **Homelessness**

- Better development of support packages for vulnerable groups at an early stage in the allocation process.
- Further joint working with Hostels regarding move-on cases to ease backlogs in emergency accommodation.
- A more straightforward appeal process for homeless applicants.
- Review the percentage of accommodation given to homeless households to whom the Council has accepted a duty to house.

- **Best Use of Registers**

- To implement open waiting lists as required by law.
- To review and amend where necessary the points system used to prioritise applicants.
- To review the use of Home Visits and anti-Fraud checks on applications.
- To improve information held regarding properties and ensure these are effectively allocated to, particularly those adapted for disabled persons and other vulnerable groups, including better liaison with other agencies, and the development of care packages prior to lettings. The Review will also consider the impact of the new Supporting People framework in this area.
- To investigate freezing positions on the list or deferring applicants that are unlikely to be housed onto a inactive list.
- To consider redesignating some of the stock for different types of applicant, particularly with respect to age.
- To consider the use of schemes to extend and convert property to provide more larger sized accommodation.
- To review the role of the Exceptional Circumstances Panel and the current range of over-riding allocations categories, including ORLIT, DECANT and URGENT.
- To review the procedure for awarding Health and Housing points, and the level of points thereby awarded.

- **Improved Service Delivery**

- To review all information to customers including letters and forms.
- To review access to the lists from Black and Minority Ethnic communities and other under represented groups.
- To improve consistency and adopt best practice in allocations and lettings
- To consider the development of local lettings plans for some categories of stock (e.g. tower blocks, sheltered accommodation).

- **Furnished Tenancy Scheme**

- To review the costs and income generated by the Furnished Tenancy process.
- To develop a range of proposals for the future development of the scheme.

THIS REPORT HAS BEEN SEEN AND APPROVED BY: The Strategic Director for Housing, Health & Community, The Portfolio Holder for Housing & Business Manager's for Legal Services & Financial Management

Background papers :

- Rooms with a view? – report on OCCs tower blocks by the Sustainable Tower Blocks Initiative – April 2002
- Preparing to implement the Homelessness Act 2002 – Housing Quality Network
- Shelter – Homelessness Act 2002
- Housing Strategy 2001-2004
- Single Homeless Strategy 2002
- Housing Register Scheme Booklet
- HRA Business Plan
- Quality and Choice: A Decent Home for All - The Housing Green Paper 2000
- Member Involvement in Best Value – Exec Board Report 23/04/02