

To: The Housing Scrutiny Panel

Date: 12/09/16

Report of: Allocations Manager

Title of the Report: Choice-Based Lettings Refusals

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To provide a briefing on how a refusal of an offer of housing is dealt with in the Allocations Scheme and a summary of offers refused from 1/4/15 to 31/3/16

Policy Framework: Meeting Housing Needs

Recommendation(s): None – for information only

Appendices

Appendix 1: Refusals of 55+ and Sheltered Properties from 1/4/15 to 31/3/16

Appendix 2: Refusals of Family and General Needs Properties from 1/4/15 to 31/3/16

Appendix 3: A summary of unreasonable refusal reasons from 1/4/15 to 31/3/16

1. The Council's Allocations Scheme is the policy used to prioritise those in housing need on the Oxford Register for Affordable Housing (ORAH) for offers of housing. The Allocations Scheme seeks to balance local needs and aspirations with current legislation, guidance and best practice as well as local housing conditions. The current scheme was approved by the Council and came into effect on 12/12/13 and is available on the Council website.
2. Choice-Based Lettings is the process used to advertise new build or existing properties owned by the Council and our Registered Provider partners within Oxford that have become available to re-let. The properties are advertised in weekly lettings cycles. The ORAH consists of three separate housing lists:
 - The Homeless List for applicants to whom Oxford City Council has accepted a statutory homeless duty and placed in temporary accommodation who are awaiting an offer of permanent accommodation
 - The Transfer List for Council and eligible Housing Association Tenants living in Oxford applying for a move to alternative accommodation
 - The General Register List for all other households applying for social housing in Oxford
3. Housing applicants from each list can apply for properties advertised through Choice-Based Lettings and if they are successful they are made an offer. Before proceeding with an offer checks are made as to whether the housing applicant is considered suitable for an offer and whether the property is suitable for their housing requirement. If they are not considered suitable or the property is not considered suitable for their housing requirements they will not be made an offer and the property will be offered to the next suitable housing applicant.
4. Before a housing applicant is made an offer an Allocations Officer will check the shortlist after the lettings cycle has ended and contact the successful housing applicant and send them a written offer of housing. The successful housing applicant is then given an opportunity to view the property before making a final decision about whether to accept the offer of the accommodation they have bid for.
5. The person who finishes first on the shortlist will normally be offered the property although this is not always the case. The Council and other ORAH partners reserve the right not to offer the property to the person highest on the shortlist if the property offers a better match with the needs of another high priority applicant, the person is not considered suitable for an offer of housing or the property is not considered suitable for their housing requirements. If a housing applicant's circumstances have not been fully verified they may also be overlooked.

6. If a housing applicant is offered a property and refuses without good reason a penalty may be applied. Unreasonable refusals delay other applicants in housing need moving into a property, cost the Council and other landlords in lost staff time and can result in the landlord losing rental income from having longer void periods. If a housing applicant's reason for refusing is considered reasonable by the Allocations Team they will be able to continue to bid as normal.
7. Applicants on the Homeless List will normally be made one suitable offer of accommodation; this could be an allocation of social housing through the Allocations Scheme or an offer of suitable accommodation within the private rented sector made outside of the Allocations Scheme by the Housing Options Team or Private Sector Team to discharge the Council's homeless duty. This is subject to the right of review.
8. If a homeless applicant refuses a suitable offer without good reason the Council will no longer have a duty to accommodate them and ask them to leave their temporary accommodation and to resolve their housing situation themselves. If the applicant does not move out the Council will take action to take possession of the property.
9. Housing applicants on the General Register or Transfer Lists who are considered to have unreasonably refused two suitable offers of accommodation within the last 12 months will be suspended from bidding for 12 months. With the exception of tenants on the Transfer List occupying a property suitable for a family and seeking to downsize to a smaller property. Other exceptions may also be made on a case by case basis by the Allocations Manager.
10. The Council makes an exception for tenants seeking to downsize to encourage tenants wanting to downsize to bid for all potentially suitable properties so that they can move to a new home they are happy in and more family properties become available to re-let. During 2015/16 there were 42 family properties made available because existing Council tenants were re-housed to smaller more suitable properties.
11. From 1/4/15 to 31/3/16 the Allocations Team made 766 offers of housing. The table below shows whether offers were accepted or refused and for refusals shows if they were considered reasonable or unreasonable.

Offers of Social Housing made from 1/4/15 to 31/3/16

Offers Accepted	629
Unreasonable Refusals	83
Reasonable Refusals	54
Total Offers	766

12. A housing applicant may have various reasons for turning down an offer of housing. Personal reasons for refusing are hard to categorise because they can vary so much. Other reasons for refusing can be broadly categorised to include the following; the location of the property, health reasons, the property type, size or layout and sometimes the condition of the property. Refusal reasons are monitored and if for example an offer is refused due to the condition of the property the landlord will be contacted to see if the property is considered ready to let or if further work is required. A surveyor may be asked to look at the property to ensure it is up to the void standard of the landlord and to check if any further work needs to be arranged before or after the tenant moves in.
13. When a property is advertised through Choice-Based Lettings the property location, size, type, rent and other details such as whether it is adapted or has a bath or shower are all included in the advert. Furthermore, before proceeding with an offer of housing an Allocations Officer will where possible contact the housing applicant to discuss the property details before proceeding with an offer of housing. So if a housing applicant refuses a property for example because they don't want to move to a particular area after applying for the property this will normally be considered an unreasonable refusal unless they can provide evidence about why the area is unsuitable.
14. Appendices 1 and 2 show a more detailed breakdown of the properties refused during 2015/16 by property type and size and whether the refusals were considered reasonable or not. Appendix 1 shows refusals of properties only suitable for housing applicants aged 55 years or older or 60 years or older and suitable for sheltered accommodation. Appendix 2 shows refusals of family properties and 1 bedroom properties with no age restriction. Appendix 3 shows a summary of the number of offers refused without good reason during 2015/16 by reason.
15. In summary during 2015/16, around 1 in 6 of all offers were refused. Based on previous years this is an improvement – during 2014/15, 1 in 5 offers were refused. Only 2 housing applicants were suspended from bidding for 12 months and both were tenants on the Transfer List who refused two properties without good reason within a 12 month period. There were 18 offers refused by under-occupying tenants (these were treated as reasonable refusals and included in 54 reasonable refusals listed) but of those 6 later went onto accept another offer and were re-housed and their former homes were re-let to 6 families in housing need on the ORAH.
16. The Allocations Team continues to seek to balance minimising the number of avoidable refusals against allocating properties within agreed ORAH targets so that properties are offered and re-let to suitable tenants in housing need as

quickly possible. By monitoring refusal reasons and working closely with the ORAH landlords in the City to identify if any improvements in working practices can be made and whether current penalties for refusals are appropriate or need to be changed in the future.

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