

AGENDA ITEM

FALKIRK COUNCIL

SUBJECT: HOUSING ALLOCATIONS REVIEW UPDATE

MEETING: HOUSING AND SOCIAL SERVICES COMMITTEE

DATE: 24 JUNE 2008

AUTHOR: DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE & COMMERCIAL SERVICES

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is for Members to consider a draft housing allocations policy which subject to the approval of Council would be the basis of stakeholder consultation over the summer months.
- 1.2 Following feedback from the consultation process a final Housing Allocations Policy would be presented to Members for consideration and approval.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 In September 2007, Members recognised that the existing housing allocations policy was no longer effective in meeting local housing needs. In addition, it was no longer compliant with on-going changes in legislation or efficient in maximising the use of the Council housing stock. Members agreed that a fundamental review of the policy was required to develop a modern, efficient, effective and person-focused allocations mechanism which takes account of local housing needs, current legislation and accepted best practice.

3. THE REVIEW PROCESS

- 3.1 In order to review comprehensively the housing allocations policy, work has been carried out in a number of areas:
 - the existing policy was examined in detail
 - examples of best practice were gathered from relevant guidance, research findings and other social landlord allocation policies, and
 - extensive consultation with service users and other stakeholders was carried out.
- 3.2 The detailed examination of the current allocations policy highlighted a number of issues; in particular, that the policy did not ensure that allocations were made to applicants within the main need based categories. To address these issues, Members approved a number of interim changes with effect from 1 January 2008:
- 3.3 An analysis of allocations activity during January and February was provided to Members. This highlighted that the changes have been effective in ensuring that allocations are made to those in greatest housing need. Between January and the middle of June, a total of 450 properties have been allocated with 284 properties allocated to applicants who were homeless and in priority need (63% of properties), 21 to applicants who have a high medical priority (5% of properties) and 88 to those in overcrowded conditions (20% of properties). The remainder were allocated to other waiting list applicants e.g. applicants for Housing with Care.

In addition, 71% of all properties accepted the first or second time they were offered for let.

- 3.4 When contacting all applicants on the waiting list to advise them of the interim changes made to the allocations policy, the opportunity was taken to undertake a re-registration exercise.

The purpose of this exercise was to:

- bring the housing list up to date
- gather general views on broad allocations priorities and process options, and
- invite applicants to indicate if and how they preferred to take part further in the allocations policy review.

4. RE-REGISTRATION OF HOUSING LIST APPLICANTS

- 4.1 The re-registration exercise has now been concluded and the waiting list has reduced from 12,605 as at 9 January 2008 to 8066 applicants as at 16 June 2008. This includes over 500 applicants who have been assessed as homeless and in priority need, and who have a statutory right to permanent accommodation.

5. CONSULTATION WITH SERVICE USERS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

- 5.1 To date, considerable consultation has been carried out to gather views on allocations in order to inform development of a revised policy. This consultation has included a short questionnaire to all stakeholders, staff workshops, a workshop for local Members.
- 5.2 The feedback on the outcome of these consultation exercises has been provided to Members.
- 5.3 Since then, a series of cross-stakeholder workshops has take place. Each workshop focused on different aspects of allocations:
- homelessness
 - determining priorities,
 - allocations processes
 - management of the housing list and allocations
 - information for stakeholders, and
 - moving to a revised policy

The main points emerging from the feedback from participants at these sessions is summarised at Appendix 1 and is consistent with earlier feedback.

- 5.4 All the contributions and comments received as a result of the different consultation exercises carried out have proved very useful. This feedback, together with the review of guidance and best practice, has been used to draft the revised policy which is now presented to Members.

6. PROPOSED HOUSING ALLOCATIONS POLICY

- 6.1 A proposed Housing Allocations Policy document for consultation is set out for Members consideration at Appendix 2.

This proposed policy aims to ensure that allocations are routinely made to applicants in the greatest housing need, the use of the Council's housing stock is maximised and applicants are able to choose which houses they wish to be considered for.

The main features of the proposed policy are:

- It is a priority based system (not points)
- It is a "group" system rather than one list
- Applicants choose the properties they wish to be offered (not matched)
- There are targets for outcomes (i.e. a quota system)
- Registration will be simplified
- Applicants are pro-active.

6.2 Applicant Groups

Applicants are separated into Groups rather than being on a single list. These groups are:

- Home Seekers - applicants who are assessed as homeless in accordance with Part II of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 as amended by the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and the Homelessness, etc (Scotland) Act 2003:
- Home Movers - Falkirk Council tenants and the tenants of RSLs living in the Falkirk Council area, and
- Home Starters - all other applicants

6.3 Target Outcomes

Quotas are set for allocations to each applicant group rather than allocations being untargated. These quotas will be reviewed annually to ensure that allocations are being made in a way which reflects waiting list demand. The proposal is that initially allocations should be made in the following proportions:

- Home Seekers – 50%:
- Home Movers – 25%: and
- Home Starters – 25%.

6.4 Priority Categories

Applicants are awarded priority for their most significant housing need rather than points. It is proposed that 4 levels of priority are available, from Category 1 which will include applicants to whom the Council must give "reasonable preference", to Categories 2 and 3 for applicants with less pressing housing needs, and lastly Category 4 for applicants who have no recognised housing need but who wish to move within or into Council housing

Detail on priority awards are outlined in Section 4.3 of Appendix 2 and these are summarised below:

Category 1

- Homeless in Priority Need
- Significant medical needs and bed blocking
- Serious overcrowding – min 2 bedrooms short
- Poor housing condition
- Under-occupying social rented housing

- Redevelopment/regeneration
- Two-for-One

Category 2

- Homeless – Non priority (2012 Target) & Insecure tenure
- Sharing and “Care of”
- Overcrowding – 1 bedroom needed (including bedsit)
- Exceptional housing needs – social reasons

Category 3

- Continuing parental responsibilities
- Children in Flats
- Under-occupation (non tenants)
- Medical condition
- Local connection

Category 4

- All other applicants

6.5 **Allocations Process**

Applicant registration is simplified without the need to hold detailed information regarding applicant choices as at present. Applicants are asked to indicate in which part of the Council area they wish to live. The number of allocations areas is reduced from 102 to 7 and these are based on High School cluster areas. Applicants can indicate as few or as many of these areas as they wish.

Properties are automatically sequenced in accordance with the quotas set and individual adverts will indicate which applicant groups are to be given preference when bids are received.

Allocations are made using a choice-based approach rather than a matching process. Available properties will be advertised fortnightly with a closing date before which interested applicants should indicate a note of interest. There is no limit on the number of bids that applicants can make at any one time or how often they bid.

A short-list of suitable applicants is prepared. In general, suitable applicants are those who meet the criteria in the advert and whose household size best meets the size criteria for the house.

Bids are then ranked according to the Category of priority of the suitable applicants. Suitable applicants with the same level of priority are further ranked according to the date of award of priority or by date of application for applicants with Category 4 priority. No priority is awarded for the length of time spent on the housing list.

6.6 **Refusals**

Applicants are active in the allocations process and have more control over when they wish to be considered for housing and which houses they wish to be considered for.

Given that applicants will have the opportunity to choose the properties they bid for, there is an expectation that successful applicants will accept the property they are offered. However, if an applicant with Category 1, 2 or 3 priority is successful in their bid and subsequently refuses the property, they will lose their priority and revert to Category 4 priority.

Applicants have a right to appeal this decisions as outlined in Section 7.1 of Appendix 2.

6.7 Exceptions to Advertising

To ensure that the Council makes best use of its specialist housing stock, allocations to Housing with Care and properties adapted for those with a medical condition or disability will continue to be matched to applicants who have been assessed as requiring these types of specialist accommodation.

In addition, properties which are required for emergency accommodation, or to discharge our statutory duty in accordance with Homeless legislation will not be advertised.

7. FURTHER CONSULTATION

7.1 It is proposed that further consultation be carried out over the summer recess to gather feedback from stakeholders on the proposed policy. This consultation will include:

- placing a copy of the proposed policy on the Council's Website for comment from any member of the public
- making copies of the proposed policy available in Neighbourhood Offices/One Stop Shops, ARC, supported accommodation projects, libraries and the offices of RSL partners for service users to comment
- providing RTOs and other agency stakeholders with a copy of the proposed policy for comment
- holding local awareness raising events across the Council's area where service users and stakeholders can provide comments on the proposed policy
- holding focus groups for staff to comment on the proposed policy
- providing stakeholders who attended the series of cross-stakeholder workshops with a copy of the proposed policy for comment

7.2 It is proposed to report back to Members on the outcome of this further consultation at a future meeting of this Committee. Thereafter a detailed implementation action plan and timetable, including transition arrangements for existing applicants, can be drawn up for Members' approval. At this stage, it is anticipated that implementation of a revised policy will take place from 1 April 2009.

8. CONTINUING DEVELOPMENT WORK

8.1 In addition to the further consultation which will be carried out during the summer recess, further development work related to implementing a revised policy will also be carried out. This will include:

- undertaking further modelling on the impact of the revised policy for applicants currently on the Council's waiting list
- considering options for incentive schemes to encourage applicants who are currently under-occupying properties to apply for re-housing to smaller properties
- researching in greater depth, best practice with regard to the provision of a choice based lettings scheme
- options for advertising and publicising vacant properties
- options for registering bids

9. CONTINUING INTERIM ARRANGEMENTS FOR ALLOCATIONS

- 9.1 In accordance with the decision taken at Falkirk Council in December 2007, the interim arrangements will continue until the revised allocations framework is implemented. Therefore, we will continue the arrangement for two out of three properties to be offered to homeless applicants in priority need and the third property to “Other Needs” applicants.

However in order to further improve the effectiveness of allocations in meeting the needs of housing applicants and reducing further the time taken to house homeless applicants in this interim period, additional interim arrangements are proposed as set out below.

9.2 Under-occupation

It is recommended that applicants who are Falkirk Council tenants who have been awarded under-occupation points should be included for consideration for allocations made to the “Other Needs” group. As with other applicants considered for allocations to this group, applicants will be prioritised on the basis of their current points total. It is anticipated that this arrangement will not only assist these applicants move into more suitable accommodation, but will also free-up larger houses for allocation to other applicants in housing need. It is proposed that this arrangement be implemented with effect from 1 August 2008.

9.3 Offers to Homeless Applicants

Although homeless applicants have to select 20 allocation areas, many of the current allocation areas have few properties and very low levels of turnover and therefore do not represent a realistic option for re-housing.

To improve the prospects of homeless applicants receiving an offer of housing, staff at the Accommodation Resource Centre (ARC) have been carrying out Housing Options interviews. These interviews have been used to review the applicant’s housing circumstances and reconsider the allocation areas they have selected. Unfortunately, not all applicants have engaged in this process. Some have attended for interview but refused to alter any of their allocation areas while others have simply not attended for interview. Those applicants who have reviewed their choices have been successful in receiving offers.

In order to provide these applicants (c500) with an offer of permanent accommodation, many of whom are living in temporary accommodation provided by the Council, it is intended to carry out Housing Options Interviews with all applicants who have had homeless priority for 12 months or more.

It is proposed that the applicant be advised that if they do not voluntarily include more realistic allocation areas on their application, then an offer of housing will be made as soon as possible. Where possible, this offer will be within the High School cluster area of the school attended by any children within household, however this will depend on the availability of suitable properties.

This will discharge the Council’s statutory obligation under the terms of the homelessness legislation.

If the applicant refuses the offer, they will lose their homeless priority points, and if they are living in temporary accommodation provided by the Council, they will be given 28 days notice to vacate the property.

It is proposed that this arrangement be implemented with effect from 1 August 2008.

10.1 Members are asked to:

- Shal Ritchie

Date 14 June 2008

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