

Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee

10.00am, Thursday, 3 June 2021

Allocation Policy for Council Homes - Update

Executive/Routine Wards Council Commitments	Executive All
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1. Recommendations

- 1.1 Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee is asked to:
 - 1.1.1 Note the update on the proposed approach to assist with the management of exceptional housing need following engagement with key stakeholders and ongoing actions to improve advice and information on access to housing;
 - 1.1.2 Agree that an additional level of 'waiting time' can be added to the current silver exceptional need priority where an 'officer panel' decision is taken that a case is urgent and cannot be resolved within the allocation policy framework or existing processes/multi-agency pathways; and
 - 1.1.3 Agree to discharge the motion by Councillor Kate Campbell on Allocations Policy as approved at the City of Edinburgh Council of [4 February 2021](#).

Paul Lawrence

Executive Director of Place

Contact: Elaine Scott, Housing Services Manager

E-mail: elaine.scott@edinburgh.gov.uk | Tel: 0131 529 2277



Report

Allocation Policy for Council Homes – Update

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 This report provides an update on the actions agreed following the Allocation Policy for Council Homes report provided to the Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee on [18 March 2021 and requests agreement to discharge the motion by Councillor Kate Campbell from 4 February 2021](#).
- 2.2 Committee is asked to note the ongoing actions to improve advice and information on access to housing and to agree an additional approach to assist with managing exceptional housing need cases that cannot be resolved within the allocation policy framework or existing processes/multi-agency pathways to ensure good outcomes for households.

3. Background

- 3.1 On 18 March 2021, the Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee considered a report on the operation of the 'Allocation Policy for Council Homes'. This report was provided in response to a motion by Councillor Kate Campbell that was approved by City of Edinburgh Council on 4 February 2021.
- 3.2 The report provided information on the policy framework for letting Council homes and how this aligns with the regulatory and statutory requirements for social housing allocations. The report also set out the approach and challenges in managing access to housing for households with specific needs such as mobility issues, or other urgent and/or complex needs, within a context of very high demand for social housing.
- 3.3 Interim actions to manage exceptional need cases were agreed by Committee to maintain transparency, try to manage demand fairly where households have similar needs for homes and ensure effective support and communications with households and/or their representatives. It was also agreed that an update would be provided to this Committee following further engagement with key stakeholders on a revised process for the escalation of exceptional need cases not resolved within the allocation policy framework or existing processes/multi-agency approach.

4. Main report

Managing Exceptional Housing Need

- 4.1 Edinburgh has one of the lowest proportions of social housing in Scotland and the demand for housing is very high with an average of around 200 households bidding for each available home advertised on the Choice system. Recognising the local context for managing the supply and demand for social housing is essential in ensuring an effective planned approach to service improvements and in delivering positive outcomes for households.
- 4.2 Managing access to housing where households have urgent and/or complex needs, needs to remain fair and transparent but also support the overall aims to identify solutions and achieve positive outcomes for households. This is challenging where demand is high and there are a significant number of households with an urgent need for a home or a move to more suitable accommodation. Any changes in approach need to balance local responsiveness to individual cases and more defined processes and multi-agency approaches. It also needs to be managed carefully to maintain compliance with the statutory reasonable preference requirements and to ensure continued high levels of lets to other priority groups including gold and silver priority homeless categories.
- 4.3 The March report to Committee set out in detail how exceptional housing need is managed within the allocation policy framework and through operational practices within the Council and working with EdIndex partner landlord and other agencies where required. In summary these are:
- 4.3.1 **Silver priority** for exceptional need can be awarded to allow a household to bid for suitable homes through the Choice system where there is an identified need for the household to move that is not covered by the other priority categories but there is not an urgent need for a move or an immediate risk to the household;
- 4.3.2 **'Management transfers'** can be used by the locality teams and partner landlords to identify homes at short notice for either permanent or temporary moves where tenants or a member of their household is at known or potential risk of harm or they need to be moved for a temporary period, for example, to enable repairs to be completed. It is important to note that any alternative accommodation provided where there is an immediate risk of harm would be dependent on what would be available at the time; and
- 4.3.3 **Housing pathways** supported by a case management approach for households with exceptional housing needs and/or complex circumstances, many of whom will be potentially vulnerable, covering areas such as Offender Management and Adult Support and Protection.
- 4.4 Engagement with key stakeholders was carried out on the existing approaches for managing exceptional housing need and to consider whether the priority/waiting time could be revised where the complexity or specific circumstances require a household to secure a suitable move as soon as possible but there is no immediate

risk of harm (where alternative permanent or temporary housing would be provided).

- 4.5 Following this engagement, it is proposed that the existing approaches are retained but the management of the current silver priority award for exceptional housing need is revised to provide an option to escalate cases to an urgent exceptional need category, where the need for this has been identified. In these cases, an additional level of 'waiting time' would be added to the current exceptional housing need priority for a small number of urgent/complex cases. This would be managed through changes to the IT system whereby eligible bids made by applicants with the urgent exceptional priority categorisation would be ranked above any other silver priority applicants but below any gold priority applicants on shortlists for available homes. Ranking this urgent/complex category below gold priority will ensure the current approaches that support households with mobility needs continue and to make best use of accessible and potentially adaptable housing. If more than one applicant with an urgent exceptional need award were to bid for the same home, the system would further rank applicants on the shortlist by date of the priority being added, with the applicant who has held the priority for the longer time being ranked higher.
- 4.6 As with the existing exceptional housing need priority, the urgent category will not be defined in the allocation policy as it needs to remain flexible and responsive to any circumstances that arise. This will also help manage expectations as this urgent priority category is not in any way intended to be an alternative route for households to seek priority but will be an additional measure that can be utilised by landlords and other Council services (such as Homelessness and the Home Accessibility Referral Team) to escalate exceptional cases where the other priority categories, pathways and processes have not resolved the urgent/complex household needs. The award of priority is also expected to help staff manage demand more fairly and effectively where households have similar needs for size, type and location of homes. This could include cases where locality staff have been seeking to assist households through management transfers, but reasonable moves have been refused by the household.
- 4.7 It is important to note that the allocation framework and the pre-existing processes/pathways for specific housing needs will continue to be utilised as the main processes to manage cases dependent on the individual circumstances. Where cases involve an existing tenant the Council, or the Housing Associations, as landlords will remain responsible for trying to resolve the tenants housing situation where it is practicable to do so. While the engagement with key stakeholders identified that this proposal would provide a useful route to manage the escalation of urgent and complex cases it was noted that this would need to be supported by a robust process to minimise the risk set out at 4.6 and any negative impact on lets to other silver priority groups.
- 4.8 The process to potentially award urgent exceptional housing need priority would therefore be managed through a case management/officer panel approach involving Senior Council and Housing Association representatives who have the expertise to

identify potential solutions and authority to make decisions. It would also provide an independent route for escalation for landlords where this is necessary and will ensure consistency and clear accountability for the decisions taken. Decisions on whether individuals/households would be awarded urgent exceptional housing will, as operates for the existing exceptional housing need award, consider whether other measures within the allocation framework should be applied, take full account the household circumstances and any specific needs, the areas and types of properties that would be required and the likelihood of a positive outcome being achieved for the household through the award of the extra priority.

- 4.9 A key factor in the proposed urgent exceptional need priority being a suitable option will be the need for the household, or the appropriate family/friend or agency acting on their behalf, to be proactive in bidding regularly for homes that would meet their needs. As with any other applicant who cannot bid for themselves and have no alternative support, staff can record bids for them where necessary. This urgent priority award will not be time limited, but these cases would be monitored closely, and the additional urgent priority may be removed if this was not being used reasonably or where an offer of a home that is reasonable and meets the household needs had been refused.
- 4.10 Close monitoring of the use and outcomes of the award will be essential to ensure there is not an unreasonable unintended impact on letting outcomes across the other priority need groups. If the process for the escalation of case is tightly controlled and the existing routes continue to be utilised, it is expected that risk of a reduction in the proportion of lets to other silver priority groups can be reduced.
- 4.11 The process to escalate cases for potential exceptional/urgent exceptional need priority would be managed by a panel request being made from the Localities, other Council services, such as Homelessness, and partner landlords into Tenant and Resident services within the Council's housing service. Clear guidance and procedures will be set for staff to ensure they are supported to assist with these potentially challenging cases and only potentially complex/urgent cases are escalated through this route. All requests received will be reviewed to initially determine if the household circumstances are already being dealt with or if it would be more appropriate for these to be considered through one of the other existing processes/pathways. This escalated route may also useful as an alternative for cases where management transfers may otherwise have been the measure used.
- 4.12 Where a case panel is required this will be convened as soon as practicable and will normally be managed via a video call. The panel will consider the full circumstances of cases, take decisions on potential solutions and identify any additional support and assistance that may be offered to households. As agreed by Committee in March 2021 as an improvement action, a lead officer will continue to be assigned to each exceptional need case to ensure effective communication with the household and to coordinate actions with all parties involved within and out with the Council such as partner landlords.

Other Improvements

- 4.13 Work has been ongoing to take forward upgrades to the IT systems and digital services available for customers looking to access housing in Edinburgh. A new housing online system for Choice based lettings was implemented in April 2021 and the next phase of the upgrades scheduled to be completed by the autumn will be to implement an on-line EdIndex housing application. This will provide applicants with access to information on their application such as their bidding history and enable them to update their application with any changes in their household circumstances. Following on from this will be the development and implementation of an on-line housing options checker that will provide applicants with information on potential housing options based on their individual household circumstances.
- 4.14 More information on improvements underway on finding and letting a home and the scheduled timescales for implementation are detailed in a separate report to this Committee on the 'Housing Service Improvement Plan- Update'.

5. Next Steps

- 5.1 If agreed by Committee, the proposals for an urgent exceptional housing need priority and the operational processes outlined to manage this will be implemented.
- 5.2 Work will continue to be taken forward to upgrade the advice and information on social and other affordable housing and digital services for customers. Information on improvements and IT developments in finding and letting a home will be provided to Committee through the six-monthly update reports on the Housing Service Improvement Programme.

6. Financial impact

- 6.1 If the proposed changes to the management of exceptional housing need priority are approved by Committee there will be costs associated with implementing the required changes to the IT system. These costs are expected to be minimal and will be covered within the funding for investment in improvement to the IT systems and digital services factored into the HRA business plan.
- 6.2 Funding for the ongoing operation and improvements to the common housing register and choice based letting includes an annual contribution from the partner landlords of around £0.26m. The individual landlord contribution is based on a unit cost agreed annually by the Edindex Management Board and the social rented stock the landlord operates within Edinburgh.

7. Stakeholder/Community Impact

- 7.1 There are no adverse stakeholder/community impact implications arising from this report. It is however essential to ensure that the additional route to escalate

urgent/complex exceptional cases is robustly managed to reduce the risk of any negative impact on the statutory reasonable preference groups and other choice silver priority categories.

- 7.2 The strong partnership through EdIndex continues to be successful in assisting households looking to access social housing in the city. This is demonstrated in the commitments to continue to assist with the challenge of homelessness in the city and to work together to support households with complex and urgent housing need. The EdIndex Business Plan for 2021-2024 will also focus on ongoing improvements in advice and information on affordable housing options, opportunities of digital services, ensuring continued statutory and regulatory compliance and workstreams around customer communications and engagement.

8. Background reading/external references

- 8.1 [None.](#)

9. Appendices

- 9.1 None.