

Management Committee: 25.07.18

Agenda Item: 3.7

Paper No: MC/18/33

Attachment: 1

Residents Panel Scutiny Report on Allocations

It doesn't seem like two years since we (the residents' panel) scrutinised Orkney Housing Association Ltd's (OHAL)' s repair service. The residents' panel have been busy in these two years., meeting regularly, either in OHAL's office or at The Warehouse Buildings in Stromness.

We've celebrated OHAL's 1000th house, a trip to visit our Wick counterparts, tenants' day at Kirkwall Town Hall, with our counterparts visiting us and a panel member building up her confidence to do a talk about the foodbank and how its helped people here. Sadly some members left us due to personal circumstances, but we welcomed new member which has kept the panel fresh with new ideas and energy.

There's more work on the agenda for the panel, including TPAS training and another scrutiny exercise. This year, we've opted to scrutinise both OHAL and Orkney Island Council's (OIC)'s Allocations Policy for social rented housing.

Starting with OIC's policy, once the applicants' choices and circumstances are considered, whether their current housing is of a tolerable standard – overcrowded, under occupied, condition of current property, personal circumstances – marriage breakdown, medical conditions, homelessness or threat of homelessness, the OIC then award Priority passes, Platinum being for emergency priority in exceptional circumstances, to Bronze, the lower priority cases.

OHAL, in comparison, have a Choice Based Lettings Policy. This is where tenants or potential tenants can apply for vacant properties suitable for the applicant's requirements when advertised on OHAL's webpage, facebook page and in the Orcadian. Application forms can be got from OHAL's office and OIC's one stop shop in Kirkwall, or Stromness one stop shop, either by phone, email or in person.

The applicant will be assessed on their need and priority points. The clarity of reasons why OIC's applicants' refusal of offers of property not being 'of good enough reason for refusal' for an applicant being removed from the waiting list was queried. The response appeared to be applicants' reasons can vary, and each is considered carefully before taking an applicant off the waiting list or relegated down the list. We found that OIC were now considering Choice Based Letting, after seeing how successful it was for OHAL. At the point of writing, OIC are putting choice based lettings for consultation with their tenants.

The residents' panel did an exercise, where we completed a fictitious application form, (in pairs), once completed, the forms were swapped about and we then assessed the forms as a Housing Officer would. It was a very constructive exercise, as it highlighted some of the ambiguities of the form and gave us an appreciation of

the work of Housing Officers to follow up applicants to ensure they have the correct information.

The RP had looked at the application form to explore if any improvements could be made. During the discussions, some of the questions were clarified. A panel member had compared our application form with that of Shetland Islands Council (SIC). She found that SIC asked for proof of identity (ID), proof of residency and evidence of employment. This highlighted that neither OIC nor OHAL request this information. The panel members were unanimous in thinking this was unusual as these are usually requested as the norm for other applications or registrations for other personal business processes. Both OIC and OHAL are considering looking into this.

At our next meeting, we scrutinised the Post Allocation Survey and found it a lengthy form. After some deliberation, well, a lively discussion, more coffee and cake to keep the energy levels up, we finally drew up a new, more current questionnaire, its title and to whom it was to be sent out to, e.g. to tenants who have moved into their current abode within the previous twelve months. Some of the panel drew on their own experiences in the allocations process, any delays, blips, forms, decoration packs and multi properties becoming available at once, causing potential delays in getting carpet fitters, white goods installation and such like. It was agreed that we look at the responses at the next meeting.

Out of 105 surveys sent out by OHAL, only 10% were returned and out of 121 surveys issued by OIC, only 10% was returned. This poor response is apparently a common occurrence when it comes to surveys and there doesn't seem to be much of an increase (if any) if incentives were offered.

- 45.83% respondents were OHAL tenants
- 54.17% respondents were OIC tenants
- There was quite a range of timescales between completing their application to the offer of a property. The shortest being 4 weeks, the longest being over 3 years. *On hindsight, when we set up this question, we didn't consider the factors previously discussed, e.g. platinum to bronze allocation with OIC, or OHAL's choice based lettings, where the offer of that property would be relativity quickly to the successful applicant.*
- 39.13% of those who answered found the allocations process very easy,
- 43.48% found it easy.
- 13.04% found it neither easy or difficult
- 4.35% found it difficult.
- The numbers were the same for how they found completing the application form.
- 30.43% respondents needed help completing the form,
- 69.57% didn't.
- 45.45% found completing the form with assistance very easy,
- 36.36% found it easy and
- 18.18% found it neither easy nor difficult. *On reflection, this question could be misinterpreted as how the respondent found the assistance rather than the completion of the form.*

- 43.48% responded that they were offered assistance to complete the form and
- 56.52% said they weren't. *On analysing this, we found that respondents would be offered assistance if they've requested the form in person or by phone. This is not the case if respondents requested the form by email, online or if on mainland Britain.*
- Out of the 43.48% offered assistance, 7 received assistance, 5 from housing officers, one from a family member, and one from an external agency.
- There was a high number of respondents kept up to date with the allocations process, 71.43%, whilst
- 28.57% weren't.
- 90.91% of respondents felt they were made aware of where they could find information on available properties.

There was quite a selection of differing comments regarding the allocations process. Almost half were satisfied with the process. One response highlighted the difficulties/restrictions of island life, with the time constraints of ferries. There appeared to be confusion regarding eligibility and allocation of property on medical grounds. On discussing this we found that at least one doctor's surgery has started to charge for medical reports/evaluations necessary for points based allocations, therefore its no longer requested. One respondent seemed confused with the OHAL's policy of choice based lettings, where it was thought by the respondent that one has to apply for every property advertised on a weekly basis, rather than applying for suitable property fit for the applicant's purpose. OHAL was to follow this up.

As the RP, we found how the application and allocation process can be a long and difficult process for tenants and housing officers alike. The application form's ambiguity, seeing first hand how questions can be interpreted in differing ways dependant on its wording. We discussed the difficulties that have arisen when new tenants receive keys on mass for newly completed builds, causing delays with carpet fitting, installation of white goods and such like.

Comparisons were made with SIC's allocations policy and some differences were highlighted, proof of residency and ID, to name a few. It was quite a task, but a very constructive one, completing application forms, assessing them, then looking at the post allocation questionnaire and revamping it to make it easier to complete. Analysing this was both very interesting and again thought provoking and highlighting anomalies in questions. Keeping focus on the two differing letting and allocations processes, with regards to timescales between application and the offer of a property. Clarity of whether assistance was offered and by whom. Choosing to use an external agency, is different to taking up the offer of assistance from OIC.

Phew, time for more coffee and cake, me thinks.

Kath Fennell
Resents Panel Member