



Consultation on changes to our lettings policy – Information leaflet

Why we are Consulting

A change in the legislation which covers our lettings practice has recently been introduced.

This means that we are required to:

- Undertake a review of our Lettings Policy in accordance with the changes to the law.
- To ensure that our Lettings processes remain reflective of legislation.
- Undertake a consultation accordingly.
- Publish a report on the outcome of that consultation.

In addition to the above, there are parts of our Lettings Policy which would benefit from a review so that it reflects local needs.

We will undertake a consultation for a four week term and then report the outcome to our committee for consideration.

Following this, changes will be made to our Lettings Policy and these changes will be considered by our elected Members before they can be introduced.

The Council's Lettings Policy

The Council has a Lettings Policy which determines how we allocate our Council houses in general.

Council properties that have been designated as follows are subject to different arrangements for letting:

- Sheltered housing.
- Extra care housing.
- Amenity housing.
- Housing designed or adapted for disabled people.
- Supported accommodation for disabled people.

The Council has just under nine hundred Council properties and in order to allocate these, it must give reasonable preference to certain housing groups. These groups are:

- People who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.
- People living in unsatisfactory housing.
- Tenants of social landlords who under-occupy their homes.

Note: In the first two cases, the applicant must have unmet housing needs that cannot be met through other options.

We currently use what is called a “group system”. This means that applicants in housing need are categorised into various groups. Then properties are allocated to those in the highest level of housing need and date of application.

Our Housing Groups

We currently have thirteen separate housing groups (further information is available from our Lettings Policy

https://www.orkney.gov.uk/Files/Housing/Housing%20Options/Housing%20Policy/Lettings_Policy.pdf). These are:

- Emergency.
- Homelessness.
- Medical Assessments.
- Statutory Overcrowding.
- Under Occupation.
- Unsatisfactory Housing.
- Unsatisfactory Living Arrangements.
- Specific Need to be in a Community.
- Service Tenancies/ Tied Accommodation.
- Relationship Breakdown.
- Insecurity of Tenure.
- Corporate Parenting.
- Emergent Households.

We are proposing simplifying this list as follows:

- Housing for Particular Needs.
- People who are affected by homelessness.
- Local needs.
 - Examples to be included in this group would be Specific Need to be in a Community, Service Tenancies/ Tied Accommodation and Emergent Households.
 - Urgent local needs to include Emergency.

- Transfers.
 - Examples to be included in this group would be Under-occupancy.
- Unsatisfactory housing.
 - Examples to be included in this group would be Medical Assessments, Overcrowding (both statutory and non-statutory), Unsatisfactory Housing (including housing below the tolerable standard), Unsatisfactory Living Arrangements and Insecurity of Tenure.
- Social needs.
 - Examples to be included in this group would be Relationship Breakdown and Corporate Parenting.
- Other.

The Priority Pass System

The Council currently lets its houses through a system of priority passes. We award priority passes on the basis of housing need. Therefore someone who has a higher level of housing need, under the legislation, is awarded a higher level of priority pass.

Priority passes are in the following order:

- Platinum.
- Gold Plus.
- Gold.
- Silver Plus.
- Silver.
- Bronze Plus.
- Bronze.

And thereafter by date order of receipt of the Housing Application.

The priority passes which include the word “plus” apply to people who have housing need from more than one of the groups.

We currently do not use targets. Instead we let a vacant property to the person on the housing list who has a need for that size of house, in the relevant area and has the highest level of priority pass and has held that pass for the longest time.

We would propose to keep the priority pass system.

We are however, proposing certain changes. These include:

- Setting targets to be assigned to each housing group on an annual basis.
- Removing the priority passes which include the word “plus” and instead giving a priority pass for more than one group.

This may be done by the setting of targets. This means that a target will be set for each group and therefore a number of lets will be made each year to a range of groups. Properties may be let to people from the overcrowded group for instance or to those affected by homelessness.

The housing groups deemed to reflect housing needs recognised in law can then receive a larger target of lets.

This method is also beneficial as it allows the Council to shift targets in line with changes in demand.

This happens as housing needs continually change as applicants either leave the housing list or join the list.

Choice in Letting Council Houses

You may remember that we recently undertook a consultation on introducing a choice based lettings system. This is the process by which properties becoming available for re-let would be advertised and applicants would bid for properties they are interested in.

To date this hasn't been progressed due to various changes being introduced nationally. In particular, this included a requirement for all Councils to endeavour to rehouse homeless applicants much more quickly than previously. This would mean that there would be fewer properties available for other groups and led to us reconsidering how we would approach this. There would also be difficulties in ensuring that people who are vulnerable for various reasons and less able to bid, were able to equally access housing.

The Scottish Government has issued allocation guidance and we will promote this by providing applicants with more information about our housing and its location.

To promote this, we will encourage applicants to specify more precisely the areas in which they want to be re-housed. This will then allow us to link any offers to their stated preferences.

We would propose that we expand the level of choice available to applicants by allowing them to indicate particular streets or areas that they would be interested in living in and excluding others. Currently someone can only choose areas by choosing the whole town. For instance Kirkwall has properties in seventy seven different streets, twenty five in Stromness, though we may group some of these together to simplify this while still extending choice.

This change would mean that it would take longer to complete the housing application initially and staff may need to spend more time with an applicant while they complete the form. However, it would mean that they do not have to bid for individual houses and therefore the Council would not need to advertise houses.

Transfers

Allocation law requires us to give reasonable preference to tenants of Scottish secure landlords who are under-occupying their homes.

We propose to do this in our lettings policy by giving tenants who under-occupy their homes additional priority to free up a larger property for a family in need.

Suspension of Offers

The law allows us to suspend offers to applicants in specific circumstances. For example, if a tenant is in rent arrears over one month and has not made an arrangement to repay the debt.

Currently we refer to suspensions within our Lettings Policy.

We would propose to have a separate organisational suspension policy instead. This ensures that suspensions are covered comprehensively. It also ensures that applicants can find information clearly about the law and their appeal rights, as appropriate.

Introduction of identification

We are considering introducing a requirement for applicants to provide evidence of who they are.

This would require an applicant to produce two pieces of identification such as:

- Photographic identification if held (passport or driving licence).
- Birth, marriage certificate.
- National Insurance Card.
- UK residence permit or equivalent.
- Electricity bill etc.
- Other standard documents to prove residence.

Collection of Your Responses

We are holding two consultation events. These are on:

- Tuesday 17 September 2019 from 17:30 in the St. Magnus Centre in Kirkwall.
- Wednesday 18 September 2019 from 17:30 in the Warehouse Building in Stromness.

It is available electronically from:

<https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/lettings-consultation/>

In addition a survey form is available in paper copy to be returned to:

Housing Services, Orkney Islands Council, Council Offices, School Place, Kirkwall, KW15 1NY.

Thank you for taking the time to give us your views.