

Agenda Item	<b>5.</b>
Report No	<b>CC/08/23</b>

## HIGHLAND COUNCIL

**Committee:** Caithness Committee

**Date:** 29 May 2023

**Report Title:** Caithness Area Housing Allocations

**Report By:** Executive Chief Officer – Housing & Property

### 1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Highland Housing Register (HHR) allocates properties in Caithness through a system called Choice Based Letting. Following an officer review of Choice Based Letting, several procedural recommendations have been identified to improve outcomes for housing applicants wishing to reside within Caithness.
- 1.2 A policy recommendation has also been identified. This proposes an amendment to the HHR's suspension policy surrounding refusals of reasonable offers of housing.

### 2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to: -
  - **Note** the unique housing allocation system used within Caithness and the challenges that exist in allocating properties within the area.
  - **Approve** the amendment to the suspension rule for housing applicants within Caithness. Applicants who refuse one reasonable offer of housing will have their housing application suspended for 6 months. Currently, this suspension only takes place after an applicant refuses two reasonable offers of housing.

### 3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resources:** There are no specific implications arising from this report.
- 3.2 **Legal:** There are no specific implications arising from this report. The recommendation is in line with the Scottish Government's Guidance on Allocating Social Housing in Scotland (updated 2019).

- 3.3 **Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural):** Quality, low-cost affordable housing is a key means for mitigating poverty. The Highland Housing Register Allocation Policy enables equitable access based on evidence of each applicant's need for housing. An Equalities Impact Assessment has been provided as part of the HHR Allocations Policy approved at Housing & Property Committee on 27 April 2023.
- 3.4 **Climate Change / Carbon Clever:** There are no specific implications arising from this report.
- 3.5 **Gaelic:** Housing applications and related published material about access to housing meet the Council's standards in relation to Gaelic.
- 3.6 **Risk:** There are no specific implications arising from this report.

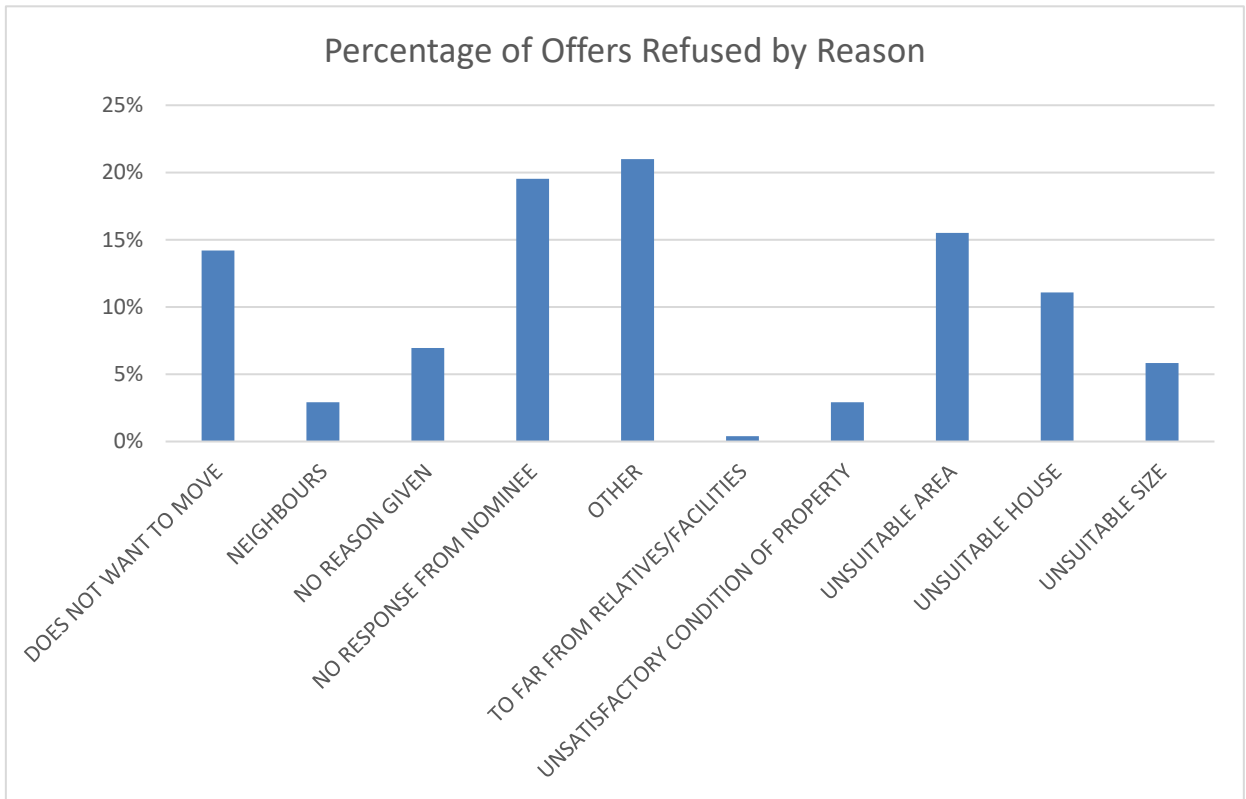
## **4 Background**

- 4.1 Since 2015, the HHR has operated Choice Based Letting for all allocations within Caithness (except for allocations to Sheltered Housing). Choice Based Letting is a method of allocating social housing where the housing applicant registers an interest (also known as a 'bid') in a void property. Only applicants who have registered an interest in the property will be considered for allocation.
- 4.2 Choice Based Letting was introduced specifically for Caithness to address the problems associated with low demand.
- 4.3 The HHR Allocation Policy currently allows a housing applicant to refuse two reasonable offers of housing. After two refusals of reasonable offers of housing, the applicant's housing application is suspended for six months. This means the applicant will be ineligible for an allocation during this time. HHR Partner Landlords can use their discretion and not suspend an application.
- 4.4 When an applicant currently refuses an offer of housing, the local housing team will review the offer of housing to confirm if it was a reasonable offer of housing. If it is determined that the offer of housing was not reasonable, then the application will not be suspended. An example of an unreasonable offer of housing could be that the property offered did not meet all the medical needs of the applicant.

## **5 Proposed Amendment**

- 5.1 Housing & Property Committee approved a number of changes to the HHR Allocations Policy on 27 April 2023. It was agreed that this specific recommendation be delegated for approval at Caithness Committee.
- 5.2 It is recommended that applicants who refuse one offer of reasonable housing – following a bid under Choice Based Letting - are suspended for six months. This will be a change from the current policy which sees an application suspended after refusing two reasonable offers of housing.
- 5.3 The reason for proposing this amendment is to reduce the total number of refusals taking place in Caithness.
- 5.4 Applicants under Choice Based Letting register an interest in the property they are being offered. This means they are aware of the location, property type, rent, heating

type, accessibility, Council Tax band and garden arrangements in advance of ‘bidding’ for the property. Despite this, many applicants still refuse properties based on reasons which would have been known to them in advance of the offer of housing. The graph breaks down why each offer of housing since 2016/2017 has been refused as a percentage of all refused offers.



5.5 Caithness has the highest proportion of refusals of a reasonable offer of housing across Highland. The table below highlights significant difference between Caithness and Highland total. This highlights the specific issue of ‘speculative bids’.

	2021/2022		2022/2023	
	% of refusals of a reasonable offer of housing	% of refusals of an unreasonable offer of housing	% of refusals of a reasonable offer of housing	% of refusals of an unreasonable offer of housing
Caithness	88%	12%	89%	11%
Highland Average	57%	43%	54%	46%

5.6 It is hoped that the amendment will mean housing applicants will not make a ‘bid’ on a property that they have no interest in accepting. This should in turn reduce the level of refusals that take place in Caithness and reduce the administrative burden on officers. Minimising delays in allocating properties as a result of unreasonable refusals should also mitigate against void rental loss.

5.7 The HHR landlords will ensure that all effort is made to make applicants aware of this policy and, if possible, have a discussion with an applicant before any formal offer of housing is made.

5.8 The local Caithness housing teams also have the discretionary power not to suspend a housing applicant who has refused a reasonable offer of housing. This may be appropriate in cases where they believe the applicant needs for re-housing outweigh the reason to suspend their application.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer – Housing & Property

Date: 11 May 2023

Author: Aodhan Byrne - Housing Policy Officer

Background Papers: Scottish Government's Guidance on Allocating Social Housing in Scotland (updated 2019)