

<b>Committee(s)</b>	<b>Date:</b>
Housing Management & Almshouses Sub Committee	14 September 2015
<b>Subject:</b> Horace Jones House – review of allocations	<b>Public</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Director of Community & Children’s Services	<b>For Information</b>

### **Summary**

Horace Jones House (HJH) is a new block of social housing which was built by Berkeley Homes as part of the One Tower Bridge development and was passed to the City as part of the development agreement. The flats in the block are of a high quality and extremely desirable, not least because of the location and superb views of many. This report outlines the process by which those flats were allocated and the findings of a review of the allocations.

### **Recommendation**

Members are asked to note the report.

### **Main Report**

#### **Background**

1. The City of London took possession of HJH, a new block of 43 flats for social rent and part of the prestigious One Tower Bridge development, in May 2015.
2. The first residents moved in during June 2015. This was the culmination of a year-long process to allocate the 29 flats in which the City can place tenants. The London Borough of Southwark has nomination rights to the other 14 flats, which means that they must be made available to people on Southwark’s Housing Register, not the City’s.

#### **Allocations Process**

3. The allocations process started in June 2014, when publicity about the opportunities at HJH was sent to all existing tenants, asking them to express interest if they wished to be considered for a property there. All households on the Housing Register were also sent the same publicity. A spreadsheet of all interested households was developed.
4. In July 2014, a Local Lettings Plan for HJH was adopted by the Housing Management & Almshouses Sub-Committee. This plan allowed the properties to be allocated in a different way, rather than advertising them on the Choice Based

Lettings website. This was because the flats are different from the rest of our properties for two main reasons:

- They are more expensive as, although they are let at a social rent, the service charges are high;
- There are no on-site staff, unlike at other estates, as the size of the block would not make this cost-effective.

5. It was, therefore, important to ensure that tenants would be in a position to maintain their tenancies financially and would require little or no support to do so. It was also felt that this was an opportunity to encourage existing tenants living in accommodation which was larger than needed to downsize, thus freeing up homes for families.
6. The Local Lettings Plan for HJH departed from the normal Allocations Policy, then, as it allowed existing tenants to transfer to a property of the same size as their existing home. It gave priority to the City's existing tenants and, within this group, prioritised those in overcrowded accommodation, those with a severe medical need and those wishing to downsize. In the event of multiple households meeting the criteria, they would then be prioritised according to the length of time on the Housing Register.
7. Two officers were seconded part-time to the HJH allocations. They first prioritised expressions of interest using the criteria of the Allocations Policy and Local Lettings Plan. They then made contact with all the interested tenants who fell into higher priority bands. They discussed the costs and nature of the new properties with the potential applicants and a number withdrew from the process at this point, citing high charges and lack of parking as their reasons. Tenants with significant arrears were ruled out at this stage on the basis that they would be unlikely to maintain higher payments.
8. The remainder were then visited at home by the officers to be given detailed information on rents and service charges of individual properties. The interviews were also used to check the details of the prospective tenants and to check that there were no current tenancy breaches (eg that unauthorised alterations had taken place to the property). This eliminated more prospective applicants, and had the unexpected side effect of uncovering a number of potential fraud cases, which were subsequently investigated.
9. Once the block had been handed over, prospective tenants were invited to view the flats. In all cases except one, the first tenants to see the property accepted it.
10. The lengthy allocations process and amount of information and contact provided by officers meant that, by the time the flats were ready to be viewed and allocated, the list of prospective tenants matched the number of flats available. The flat which was declined on viewing was offered to, and accepted by, a tenant who had not expressed an interest originally, but had done so more recently. Happily, at the end of the process, all the applicants who met the criteria and had not dropped out were accommodated.

## **London Borough of Southwark Nominations**

11. Officers at Southwark accepted the Local Lettings Plan for HJH approved by the City and agreed to prioritise their nominations using similar criteria. Southwark's allocations scheme awards additional preference to working households, so they advertised the properties on their Choice Based Lettings site for applicants in employment.
12. They produced a list of applicants from those working households and informed us that they had put each household through a full audit by their fraud team before passing the list of accepted bidders to the City. These households were invited to view properties and all accepted them. As we had been assured that the applications had been audited, we did not carry out further checks ourselves and simply asked for City of London forms and normal documentation to be completed.

## **Issues**

13. There were two cases during the process where errors were made. In the first, a flat was erroneously offered to a household on Southwark's waiting list having already been viewed and accepted by another family. This was a staff error and the household concerned was, understandably, extremely disappointed, as there was no other property available for them at HJH. In recognition of the stress and inconvenience caused, the household was accepted onto the City's waiting list and has since been housed in a property meeting their needs and wishes.
14. In the second case, a prospective tenant was offered a different flat to the one he had viewed, which turned out to have already been accepted by someone else. An investigation took place and it transpired that the mistake came about because a plan provided to the City was inaccurate and had transposed the numbers of the two flats. Fortunately, this only affected the two flats concerned but it was also a great disappointment to the prospective tenant as the property he viewed was slightly larger than the one actually offered and had better views from the lounge. However, he accepted the other flat and assistance was given to help him move home, in recognition of his disappointment.

## **Case Review**

15. The Assistant Director, Housing & Neighbourhoods carried out, at the Director's request, a review of the process used for allocating the HJH properties to City of London tenants. Having reviewed the process outlined above and found it to be effective, she then looked at a sample of applicants to see who the process had been followed.
16. Twelve cases were selected randomly from a list of exiting City of London tenants who expressed interest in a transfer to HJH. These were tracked from the initial expression of interest until the end of the process. Of the twelve cases, five were offered flats and accepted. Two were ruled out on financial grounds. Two

withdrew because of a lack of parking. One was offered a flat but declined before viewing, having decided she did not wish to move from the City to Southwark. Two withdrew from the process citing a variety of factors in their decision.

17. In all cases, the process had been followed correctly. The officer managing the allocation process was able to provide information on each case and to show how the applicant had met the criteria.

18. As a further check, the officer carried out a brief review of all the successful applications from City of London tenants. All paperwork appeared to be in order, and no anomalies or errors were discovered, other than the one regarding the wrongly numbered flat, which is outlined in paragraph 14, above.

## **Conclusion**

19. The review of the process has found no evidence to suggest that the allocations process for Horace Jones House was not carried out correctly and that the Allocations Policy and Local Lettings Plan were both applied properly.

## **Background Papers**

Horace Jones House Local Lettings Plan – Housing Management & Almshouses Sub-Committee 210 July 2015.

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