



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and date of Committee	EXECUTIVE – 11 MARCH 2026.
Subject	HOMESEAKERPLUS POLICY REVIEW
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	Cllr Geoff Saul, Executive Member for Housing and Social Care Email: Geoff.saul@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Jon Dearing, Executive Director Operations Email: jon.dearing@publicagroup.uk
Report author	Caroline Clissold, Business Manager Housing Email: caroline.clissold@publicagroup.uk
Summary/Purpose	<p>The HomeseekerPlus Policy has been in place since 2016 and was last reviewed in 2022.</p> <p>Due to legislative and other changes, the policy needs to be updated. It is considered good practice to consult the public and associated stakeholders on the new policy therefore the HomeseekerPlus partnership is seeking approval to consult and implement suggested changes.</p> <p>Although there is no recommended or set timeframes for how often allocations policies should be reviewed, it is anticipated that this the newly reviewed HomeseekerPlus Policy will remain in place until after the completion of the Local Government Reorganisation.</p>
Annexes	Annex A – Equalities Impact Statement Annex B – SIAT Outcome
Recommendation(s)	That the Executive resolves to: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Approve the draft Policy for public consultation2. Delegate authority to the Business Manager Housing in

	consultation with Executive Member for Housing and Social Care and Publica Executive Director – Operations to adopt the new policy following consideration of the consultation results
Corporate priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Putting Residents First • A Good Quality of Life for All • Working Together for West Oxfordshire
Key Decision	YES
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	The HomeseekerPlus Partnership will undertake a full public consultation to run for 4 weeks to seek views on the proposed Policy amendments and to ensure that residents, stakeholders and all other interested partners are able to have their say.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1** HomeseekerPlus is a choice-based lettings (CBL) scheme run by the seven local authorities in partnership with social housing landlords operating within Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire.
- 1.2** The seven local authorities are West Oxfordshire District Council, Gloucester City Council, Cheltenham Borough Council, Stroud District Council, Forest of Dean District Council, Cotswold District Council and Tewkesbury Borough Council.
- 1.3** Demand for affordable social housing within the HomeseekerPlus area is very high so any allocations policy must be fair, transparent and prioritise those in housing need. The policy explains who is eligible and qualifying to apply on HomeseekerPlus and sets out how applications will be assessed based on housing need.
- 1.4** Due to legislative and other changes, the policy needs to be updated. It is considered good practice for the partnership to consult the public and associated stakeholders on the new policy.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1** The Ministry of Housing and Local Communities (MHCLG) sets out Statutory Guidance relating to the fair and transparent allocation accommodation in the 'Allocation of Accommodation: Guidance for Local Authority's' document. The introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 has also impacted on how those applicants who are threatened with homelessness or are homeless should be assessed. Homeless applicants are given reasonable preference for social rented allocations.
- 2.2** Local Authorities are tasked with ensuring that all affordable and social rented accommodation made available through its Choice Based Lettings scheme is allocated fairly, transparently and to those in the highest housing need.
- 2.3** HomeseekerPlus is a choice-based lettings (CBL) scheme run by the seven local authorities in partnership with the Social Housing Landlords operating within Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire. This enables Social Housing Landlords to advertise their homes and for applicants to bid for properties they are interested in. The HomeseekerPlus Policy was created to provide the framework for making those decisions and to ensure that all its partners were acting in a consistent way.
- 2.4** The Policy explains who is eligible and who qualifies to apply on HomeseekerPlus and sets out how applications will be assessed and awarded a subsequent Emergency, Gold, Silver or Bronze banding based on housing need.
- 2.5** A full review of the Policy, including a public consultation was carried out in 2022, however since then there have been further legislative changes. Officer working groups have also identified some inconsistencies in language requiring clarification as well as best practice changes learnt over the years since the previous review.
- 2.6** To remove ambiguity, add clarity and explore wider options for groups such as Armed Forces Veterans an updated Policy is being proposed.

- 2.7 The partnership is seeking approval from each of its own governance systems to run a public consultation regarding these proposed changes. This consultation will run through May 2026.
- 2.8 The Forest of Dean District Council is the Lead Authority responsible for HomeseekerPlus so will coordinate the consultation on behalf of the partnership.

3. PROPOSED CHANGES

- 3.1 A summary of the major changes is outlined below:

Qualification Criteria

- Shift in assessment of financial resources from ability to purchase a property to assess whether applicants have sufficient resources to access housing that meets their needs across multiple tenure types.
- Applicants who deliberately worsen their housing situation will be placed in lowest priority band for 6 months. After this period, they can only move to a higher band if they demonstrate reasonable steps to find alternative housing and actively try to resolve their situation.
- Only the main or joint applicant's employment (not other household members) would count toward establishing local connection, except in exceptional circumstances.
- Expand Armed Forces local connection options for members/former members can apply for connection to all HomeseekerPlus partners or select specific partners.
Should this expansion be:
 - **opt-in** (choose districts),
 - **opt-out** (automatic for all partners unless applicant opts out), or;
 - **No change** beyond current legislation.

Assessment and Prioritisation

- Higher banding will only be awarded if applicants act on reasonable professional advice; the Lead Authority decides what is reasonable.
- Emergency banding for downsizing would only apply if the move released a property in high demand or limited supply (currently awarded automatically for moves from family to non-family housing).
- Time-limited bands: set a fixed 6-month demotion period for applicants who do not act urgently. Reassess after 6 months, if no reasonable steps have been taken, lower banding remains indefinitely until evidence of improvement provided.
- Additional bedroom need:
 - add category for couples unable to share a bedroom due to medical/disability reasons (assessment may consider alternatives e.g. separate beds).
 - 3rd trimester of pregnancy

- 3.2 There are a number of other minor changes however these are predominately housekeeping updates to sections already contained within the policy such as:

- Clarity on data protection arrangements
- Updates on who is /is not eligible to register in line with immigration control legislation
- Clarity on applicant's responsibilities to provide correct and up-to-date information
- Clarity on how banding start dates are applied
- The Review and Appeals processes

4. CONSULTATION

- 4.1** It is proposed to consult the public on the policy for 4 weeks in May 2026 which will ensure an open, transparent and fair process.
- 4.2** The consultation will seek comments from the public and a range of stakeholders on the proposed changes in Policy
- 4.3** The Forest of Dean District Council is the Lead Authority responsible for HomeseekerPlus so will coordinate the consultations on behalf of the partnership.

5. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 5.1** In order to ensure an open, transparent and fair process to changes in Policy there are no other alternative options.

6. CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1** To remove ambiguity, add clarity and explore wider options for groups such as Armed Forces Veterans an updated Policy is being proposed
- 6.2** Approval is sought from Executive to carry out a public consultation regarding these proposed changes. It is anticipated that the consultation will run for 4 weeks in May 2026
- 6.3** Further approval is sought from Executive to delegate authority to the Business Manager Housing in consultation with the Executive Member for Housing and Social Care and the Publica Executive Director of Operations to adopt the new policy following consideration of the consultation responses
- 6.4** Should the outcome of the consultation differ significantly or raise strong objections to any of the points under consideration, a further report will be brought forward to Executive to consider.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1** The adoption of the updated HomeseekerPlus Policy will have no financial implications.

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1** The Housing Act 1996, Part VI ("the Act") sets out Local Authority responsibilities in the Allocation of Housing Accommodation. S166a of the Act states that 'Every local housing

authority must have a scheme (their 'allocation scheme') for determining priorities and as to the procedure to be followed in allocating housing accommodation.'

- 8.2 The Localism Act 2011 introduced significant amendments to the Act including Section 166a, amongst others, but notably: To include assurance that certain categories of applicants are given reasonable preference including ex-Armed Forces personnel and their families (s166A(3)) or consideration of anti-social behaviour (s166A(5)(b)).
- 8.3 The requirement for an allocation scheme to contain a statement of the Authority's Policy on offering a choice of accommodation or an opportunity to express preferences about their accommodation (section 166a (2))
- 8.4 Publica's Legal Team have reviewed all proposed changes, as have One Legal on behalf of all the other partners and have deemed them compliant with current legislation.

9 RISK ASSESSMENT

- 9.1 Should all seven HomeseekerPlus Partners not agree to the Policy update, this may result in dissolution of the Partnership
- 9.2 If the Partnership dissolves due to non-agreement, the financial implications would be significant, with increased costs for each of the partnership organisations.
- 9.3 The HomeseekerPlus partnership offers a strong approach to the allocation of social rented accommodation.
- 9.4 It is unlikely that any new administration will have a new common choice-based lettings system and policy in place following Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) therefore the HomeseekerPlus partnership is likely to continue beyond vesting day.
- 9.5 Dissolving the partnership prior to LGR could cause additional costs and potential unnecessary uncertainty and disruption to both staff and applicants.
- 9.6 To not bring the HomeseekerPlus Policy up to date with recent legislation changes could leave the Partner Authorities open to legal challenge or criticism should a complaint escalate to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

10. EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 10.1 Equalities Impact Assessment has been carried out – Annex A

11. SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 SIA summary- Annex B

12. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 12.1 None

(END)