

June 2019 Edition

Homeseekerplus

Common Allocations Policy Document



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Introduction and policy statement

Introduction

Homeseekerplus is a choice based lettings (CBL) scheme run by the seven local authorities in partnership with social housing landlords and Blenheim Palace Estates operating within Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire.

The seven local authorities are Tewkesbury Borough Council, Gloucester City Council, Cheltenham Borough Council, Stroud District Council, Forest of Dean District Council, Cotswold District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council.

Demand for affordable social housing within the Homeseekerplus area is very high and cannot be met from the available social housing resources. Only those in the highest housing need, with a local connection to the area are likely to obtain housing through the homeseekerplus scheme. Each district's Housing Advice Service will be able to advise on a range of housing options including the private rented sector.

The policy explains who is eligible and qualifying to apply on Homeseekerplus and sets out how applications will be assessed based on housing need.

Homeseekerplus aims to allocate social housing in their area in a fair and transparent way while complying with all legal requirements.

Overview of how the partnership functions

Homeseekerplus enables social housing landlords and Blenheim Palace Estates to advertise their homes and applicants are able to express an interest in them. This is known as a "bid" for a property. Once a bid is placed the system will generate a shortlist placing applicants in order of band, band start date and whether they meet the criteria of the advert. Priority for properties goes to those who have a local connection with the local authority in which the property is located, then to those who have a local connection with any of the other Homeseekerplus districts and finally to anyone else.

All applicants seeking social housing across Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire will complete the same application process and will be assessed against the same clear set of criteria. Depending on their circumstances, applicants will be placed into one of four bands Emergency, Gold, Silver or Bronze subject to final verification by a Homeseekerplus partner.

Once an application has been made, applicants are advised of their banding and banding start date, together with details of how to access the system. This enables applicants to bid for suitable social housing vacancies being advertised across the whole of Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire.

Once the Bid deadline has passed, the successful applicant is the highest priority household at the point of shortlisting. This is assessed against the criteria for the property, including where local connection applies and any local letting plans.

Responsibility for letting each available property lies with the social housing landlord. The appropriate landlord must confirm that the details on the application are still correct and may undertake their own assessment to ensure the property is right for the applicant before making an offer. Incorrect information will result in the offer being withdrawn and the applicant circumstances being re-assessed.

Application for sheltered and extra care housing schemes may need an assessment of the support needs, prior to an offer being made.

Policy statement

This policy aims to:

- Assist in building sustainable communities.
- Enable informed choice of housing/ housing options and improve levels of customer satisfaction.
- Operate a common selection system that offers realistic, informed choice for all applicants.
- Ensure that those who have the greatest need for housing have the greatest opportunity to secure it.
- Ensure that less able applicants are involved in the lettings process and they have choices offering equality of opportunity for all.
- Make best use of available housing resources to meet local need.
- Minimise the refusal of offers of accommodation and reduce rent loss by allowing people to choose where they live thereby supporting sustainable communities.
- Where possible, give people with a local connection to a district priority in the letting of housing within that district.
- Enable mobility within social housing in Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire.
- Enable the authorities to meet their statutory duties including where duties are owed to homeless Applicants under Part VII of the Housing Act 1996, as amended and the homelessness reduction act 2017.
- Contribute towards tackling discrimination.
- Use a common eligibility criteria and housing application process.
- Ensure fairness, simplicity and transparency with a system that is easily understood.
- Promote a feeling of ownership and commitment to their area as they have chosen to live there.
- Assess applications according to the applicant's needs under the framework of the policy.

Equal opportunities and social inclusion

All partners of Homeseekerplus agree that applicants should be given every possible assistance to access the housing register and search for suitable properties. Applicants who are identified as potentially disadvantaged by the scheme maybe contacted to discuss alternative options.

All partners of Homeseekerplus are committed to the elimination of discrimination. They promote equality of opportunity for all and work towards this goal in the provision of services.

We are committed to:

- Eliminating discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by the Equalities Act 2010.
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and others who do not share it.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not share it
- Removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by people who share a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic
- Taking steps to meet the needs of people who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of people who do not share it
- Encouraging those people who share a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low
- Making the best possible use of the existing and potential workforce and resources by enabling cross boundary moves.

Applicants should be given every assistance to access the housing register and search for suitable properties.

Applicants potentially disadvantaged by the scheme will initially be identified from the application process and they may be offered a home visit or interview. Staff will seek to establish what the support needs are and identify ways of enabling the applicants to participate in Homeseekerplus. This may include sending copies of the adverts in large print to an applicant or simply providing advice. Translation services may be provided where appropriate.

Disadvantaged applicants are able to nominate a person (including family members, friends or a professional worker) to help them bid or bid on their behalf for suitable properties. Signed consent will be required if requests are made by a 3rd party.

The local authority may bid for suitable vacancies on a vulnerable applicant's behalf if they are at risk of being disadvantaged by the scheme and have no support to enable them to do so. This may include the use of the Autobid function.

Any supporting agencies should be able to provide their clients with help on housing issues including the application and bidding process.

Legal

Legal Framework

The Homeseekerplus complies with the local authority's statutory duties under Part VI and VII of the Housing Act 1996 as amended and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, in addition to any other relevant legal duties and has regard to the following:

- Allocation of accommodation: guidance for local housing authorities in England 2012
- Equalities Act 2010
- Public Sector Equality Act 2010
- Data Protection Act 2018
- Localism Act 2011
- Immigration Act 2014
- Local letting plans
- S.106 agreements

Data retention

As part of the application process, personal data is required to support any housing application. We will comply with all data protection legislation. This includes:

- For active applications, data is stored for as long as your application is active.
- For housed applications, data is stored for 3 years
- If you do not use Homeseekerplus for a period of 1 year, then your case will be set to removed and removed after 6 months.
- Homeless applications are kept for 3 years.

Definition of social housing providers for Homeseekerplus

Affordable housing is social rented and affordable rented provided to eligible households who otherwise would be unable to secure alternative provisions and have been assessed under this policy. For this policy, housing providers who operate within the Homeseekerplus boundaries are registered providers, arm's length management organisations or Council owned stock, eligibility and qualifying criteria is set by this policy.

All partners have a common goal to provide homes for local people in housing need with eligibility determined within this policy framework.

Types of tenancies

Depending on the landlord and applicants circumstances, an applicant may be offered either an introductory; secure; starter; assured; fixed term; assured short hold; or flexible tenancy.

Who is eligible to register?

Homeseekerplus is open to anyone in housing need who is not subject to immigration rules which would otherwise exclude them. This may include but not is limited to existing tenants looking to transfer to another property, homeless families looking for a permanent home and other households who either rent in the private sector or lodging with family and friends. A household may include anyone that may reasonably be expected to live with them as part of their application.

Who is not eligible to register?

Consistent with Right to Rent regulations within the Immigration Act 2014, persons from abroad who do not have leave to remain are ineligible this includes those who are:

- Subject to immigration control and has over stayed their visa or is a visitor
- Illegal entrants
- Asylum seekers
- People in the UK on condition that they have no recourse to public funds
- A person from abroad who is in breach of the European community right of residence directive
- A person whose only right to reside in the UK arises under European law based on their status as a job seeker or an initial 3 months right of residence
- A person from abroad who has been the subject of a sponsorship agreement for less than five years and whose sponsor is still alive
- A person with limited leave not granted as a result of a claim for asylum

If the local authority decides that an applicant is not eligible to register under any of these criteria, they will notify the person of the decision in writing including the reason.

Persons who are ineligible for a tenancy in their own right may still be included within a household application and for determining the bedroom need of the household.

Applicants under 16 years of age at the date they apply.

Scheme conditions

Who does not qualify?

Homeseekerplus has been established under the terms of the Housing Act 1996, as amended and the Localism Act 2011. This gives local authorities the right to decide who will not qualify for social housing.

Some applicants may be eligible to register on Homeseekerplus but subsequently do not qualify and are excluded to be included. Others may be eligible and qualify to be included but are subsequently suspended from bidding.

The following are persons who do not qualify for Homeseekerplus.

An applicant may not hold two tenancies at one time, applicants must be able to end their current tenancy within a reasonable period from being made an offer.

An applicant will be non-qualifying for social housing if the local authority has undertaken an affordability check which has shown that they have sufficient financial resources to adequately resolve their own particular housing need through outright purchase, lease or mortgage. This check will consider the type of accommodation needed to meet these needs to resolve their own housing need within their district.

Homeowners who own or part own a property which is suitable for their needs or where those needs can be resolved through adaptation and where it is safe to remain.

If the local authority decides that an applicant does not qualify, they will notify the applicant of their decision in writing and the reasons for it.

Applicants who do not qualify will need to reapply in full if they feel their circumstances have changed where they may now qualify.

Suspending and demoting an application

If an applicant has rent arrears or other housing debt with a social landlord or Blenheim Palace Estates, which accrued less than 6 years ago, the applicant will be given the opportunity to clear the debt before a decision to suspend is made. If the applicant is unable to do this, they may be suspended for a period as required to reduce the debt to below 8 weeks arrears and have a repayment plan in place and in payment before they can bid for other properties.

Each case will be considered on their own merits, for example if the rent arrears arose directly due to domestic abuse, an application would not be suspended.

Existing social housing tenants who may be suspended because of rent arrears will be considered as an exception on an individual basis if proved that they cannot afford to stay in their current tenancy as a result of Welfare Reform Act changes.

If a partner landlord becomes aware of such a debt they will advise the relevant local authority when arrears are reduced. The local authority may suspend the application or advise the applicant to undertake a change of circumstances for their application to be reassessed.

Applicants who have been awarded time limited bands are expected to bid on all suitable property types across all areas if no suitable properties are available within their local connection area. Failure to do so may result in suspension or demotion for a period the local authority deem fit.

Whilst Homeseekerplus aims to give applicants choice, it also needs to help social landlords let their available homes in an efficient way. If an applicant refuses 3 properties that the local authority considers were suitable, the application will be demoted or suspended for a period of 6 months from the time of their last offer. This provision does not apply to final offers of accommodation made in order to discharge homeless duties under part VII of the housing act 1996 (as amended) or homelessness reduction act 2017.

Applicants who have unreasonably disposed of financial resources that could have enabled them to purchase/obtain their own accommodation.

An applicant will not be non-qualifying if the applicant, or a member of their household, has been responsible for unacceptable behaviour serious enough to make them unsuitable to be a tenant of the local authority or a social housing landlord at the time of application.

Behaviour that may be regarded as unacceptable is as follows: -

- Criminal activity in the vicinity of the property
- History of anti-social behaviour or disruptive nuisance to neighbours
- Racial harassment
- Drug use or dealing
- Any other breach of the tenancy agreement such that the landlord would be likely to apply for and obtain a possession order.

As part of the assessment consideration will be given to the household's personal circumstances, the level of the debt, the household's history of arrears and any other factors that may be relevant.

Such applicants will be informed of the actions required from them to demonstrate that there has been a change in their behaviour such that they will become qualifying e.g. obtaining a satisfactory landlord reference for a period of 6 months or where regular repayments are made without fail against an agreed repayment plan for a period of 6 months.

Exceptions to these qualifying criteria include:

- Those people fleeing harassment or violence where the Police, Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVA) or MultiAgency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) support a move
- proven social or medical/welfare needs

In exceptional circumstances where the applicant has an urgent need to move, the local authority may waive this qualification and suspension criteria.

An immediate review of an application will be undertaken if an applicant is found to have acted (or failed to act) in a way which deliberately worsened their housing situation. This could lead to the applicant being suspended, or being demoted to a lower band, for a minimum of 6 months.

Applicants will be advised as to what action/s will be necessary to lift the suspension or demotion.

Applicants who are suspended will need to reapply in full if they feel their circumstances have changed and their application will be reassessed.

Providing false information and change of circumstances

Any applicant who knowingly or recklessly gives false information or knowingly withholds information in order to secure a home to which they are not entitled may lose any home provided to them and may also be prosecuted. Where false information is given and the applicant becomes non-qualifying or not eligible, the application will be removed. Where false information is given and the applicant still qualifies, the application will be suspended for a period of 3 months and the applicant will have to reapply with correct information. The law imposes severe penalties, including substantial fines up to £5000 or imprisonment, when an offence is proven.

Local Connections

Due to the exceptional demand for housing across the Homeseekerplus area and the difficulty in solving local housing need, preference will usually be given to applicants with a local connection to the appropriate district.

Homeseekerplus local connection is defined by any of the following:

- Those who are, or were in the past, normally resident there, and that residence was of their own choice during 6 out of the past 12 months or during 3 out of the past 5 years.
- those who are employed in the local authority area
- Those who have immediate family connections in the local authority area for 5 years
- Members of the armed forces

- Other special circumstances

Local connection will be award by the lead authority only.

Local connection clarification

‘Normal residence’ is to be understood as meaning ‘the place where at the relevant time the person in fact resides.’ Residence in temporary accommodation provided by a housing authority will not constitute normal residence of choice and will not contribute towards a local connection. In the case of a person who is street homeless or insecurely accommodated (‘sofa surfing’) within their district, the housing authority will need to satisfy themselves that applicant has no settled accommodation elsewhere, and if from inquiries the authority is satisfied that they do in fact reside in the district, then they will be considered normally residence.

Where the applicant raises family associations, this may extend beyond partners, parents, adult children or siblings. They may include associations with other family members such as step-parents, grandparents, grandchildren, aunts or uncles provided there are sufficiently close links in the form of frequent contact, commitment or dependency. Family associations should be determined with regard to the fact-specific circumstances of the individual case.

For the purposes of employment, a member of the application should work in the district they are applying too: it would not be sufficient that their employer’s head office was located there but their place of work was not. In the case of self-employment, local connection would be classified by the address their business is registered. For agency, casual or other types of employment, you must be able to prove that the employment contract is not short-term, casual, ancillary or voluntary.

Special circumstances would include but are not limited to the need to be near special medical or support services which are available only in a particular district and where transport links would not suffice in the ability to meet those needs. Special circumstances will be assessed on their own individual merits.

In cases of care leavers who are owed a leaving care duty, they will have a local connection to all districts within the area of the children services authority. For care leavers who have been placed in accommodation in a different district to that of the children’s services authority, and they have lived in the other district for at least 2 years, including some time before they turned 16, they will also have the same local connection until they are 21.

Local connection will not be awarded if your accommodation was not of your own choice, this includes but not limited to:

- Approved premises
- Rehabilitation units

Members of the armed forces will have a local connection to a district of their choice. This will be the same for those currently serving, served within the immediately preceding 5 years. Bereaved spouse or civil partner who has recently or will cease to be entitled to Ministry of Defence accommodation

following the death of their service spouse and the death was wholly or partly attributable to their service. Existing or former members of the reserve forces who are suffering from a serious injury, illness or disability which is wholly or partly attributable to their service. local connection will also be awarded for divorced or separated spouses or civil partners of Service personnel who are required to move out of accommodation provided by the Ministry of Defence will also be awarded.

If an applicant has been subject to immigration control where they would not have been deemed eligible and subsequently become eligible, the date of where a local connection would apply would be from the date they have lived in the area. Refugees would have a local connection outside of this criteria to the last area they were housed in by the Home Office under asylum support.

Decisions on local connection must be made based on the facts at the date of the decision and not the date of application.

Assessment of applications

How to register

The applicant will be able to register for social housing through the Homeseekerplus website at www.Homeseekerplus.co.uk. Homeseekerplus is an online application only and has been designed to be accessible to all with easy speech, reading and translation tools. If an applicant needs advice and assistance with their application, they will need to contact the authority they are applying to.

When an applicant applies through the Homeseekerplus website and has registered their household, they will then complete an application for Social Housing explaining their housing situation. If, after completion of the application and provision of any necessary proof or further information, the applicant is eligible, they will be given a band start date and placed in a local housing band.

The applicant should make sure that they include all relevant details on the application so that proper consideration can be given to the application. Homeseekerplus may consult any of the applicants' previous landlords or agencies to check the details they have given.

All applicants will be given unique login details which can be updated from their account.

Applicants will be informed if further information or clarification is required. Failure to complete the online application form will result in this being deleted from the system.

Assessment of an application

By registering to join Homeseekerplus, the applicant will need to freely give their consent for enquiries to be made to verify their circumstances. Applicants will have to confirm that the information they have given is true and accurate.

The information the applicant has provided will guide the decision on which band they will be placed in. Applicants will be required to provide the lead authority with documentation to evidence their housing need stated.

Bedroom need assessment

The bedroom need for a household is assessed to match Housing costs guidance to ensure suitability and affordability for low income households.

One bedroom is required for:

- An adult couple
- A person aged 16 or over
- 2 children aged up to 16 years of age of the same sex
- 2 children aged up to 10 years of age of different sexes

When a child is born, the applicant must provide evidence of the birth as soon as possible and the bedroom need will then be re-assessed. This may not change your bedroom need or banding and any additional award will not be given until evidence of the birth is provided.

Visiting children will not normally be counted in this assessment.

Verification

Applicants will be able to bid for properties advertised, but no tenancy will be offered until verification has been completed by the local authorities. The purpose of the verification is to establish the accuracy or validity of your application.

Documents requested for verification will depend on your individual circumstances. These documents must be provided to verify your medical needs, eligibility and qualifying status.

As standard, verification of key documents will remain valid for 6 months or the validity of the document, whichever is longer.

Key standard documents are as follows, but not limited to:

- Identification of all members of the application
- 2 months bank statements of all members over the age of 18
- Child benefit or an appropriate court order
- Proof of residency to support right to rent checks

Banding reasons

Applicants need to meet the criteria in one box to be assessed in that band in the table below. Applicants will be awarded two bands – one for their “local” band (lead authority) and one for their “global” band (other 6 authorities). In some cases, these maybe with same depending on your circumstances, however, having a local connection to another authority would not automatically deem you to have a higher banding in that district.

Applicants banding maybe time limited due to the type of housing need they have, therefore, they would be expected to bid for and accept any suitable property offered to them during their time limit. Failure to do so may lead to a direct match or demotion.

Right to move

Right to Move is for social housing tenants who need to move to another District in order to take up a job or live closer to employment or training.

In order to qualify, social housing tenants must demonstrate that the job/apprenticeship will alleviate significant hardship and that there are no other options available to them.

- To determine qualification, the following detail will need to be established:
- The distance and/or time taken to travel between work and home
- The availability of transport, taking into account level of earnings
- The nature of the work and whether similar opportunities are available closer to home
- Other personal factors, such as medical conditions and child care, which would be affected if the tenant could not move
- Whether failure to move would result in the loss of an opportunity to improve their employment circumstances or prospects, for example, by taking up a better job, a promotion or apprenticeship

Those who qualify for Right to Move will get a local banding preference of Silver, identifying that there is a “Significant welfare need that would be alleviated by a move to more suitable accommodation”.

Property size

Emergency Band

Existing Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire social housing tenants willing to move from family accommodation to non-family social housing property within the partnership area.

Gold Band

Existing Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire social housing tenants willing to move to smaller family sized accommodation if this has been agreed with your local authority to release a property of higher demand or limited availability.

or

There is major overcrowding in the current property - lacking 2 or more bedrooms (this will not apply if the applicant has unreasonably allowed one or more people to move in to the property, this is called deliberately worsening your own situation).

or

Environmental Health has inspected the property and has served a Prohibition Notice (or suspended Prohibition Licence) on the landlord due to overcrowding - subject also to the applicant not deliberately worsening your own situation.

Silver Band

There is overcrowding in the current property - lacking 1 bedroom - (this will not apply if the applicant has unreasonably allowed one or more people to move in to the property, this is called deliberately worsening your own situation).

Property condition

Emergency band

Where Environmental Health has inspected the property and requires immediate vacation of the property because of an imminent risk of harm due to disrepair, major defects or grossly inadequate facilities. They could serve an Emergency Prohibition Order on the landlord in these circumstances.

This award is time limited for 1 month when it will be reviewed. It can be extended if no suitable properties have become available in this time scale or a direct match can be made.

Gold band

Where Environmental Health has inspected the property and has served a Prohibition Order or Suspended Prohibition Order on the landlord that repairs have to be undertaken but the landlord is unable/unwilling to comply. In most cases the landlord will be required to undertake repairs to remedy the problem and when completed this should resolve the issue. These only apply to the Local band so only when bidding for properties in the home/lead local authority area.

Homelessness

Gold banding

The applicant has made a homelessness application under part VII of the housing act 1996, as amended to one of the Homesekerplus local authorities and the full s193 statutory homeless duty to secure accommodation for the applicant has been accepted by that authority.

This is time limited for 1 month when it will be reviewed. It can be extended if no suitable properties have become available in this time scale. A suitable tenancy in the private sector or a direct match into social housing may be made to end the homelessness duty at any time.

Silver banding

The applicant has made a homeless application to one of the Homeseekerplus local authorities and either:

- A Prevention of Homelessness duty has been accepted
- A Relief of Homelessness duty has been accepted

or

The applicant has made a homeless application under part VII of the housing act 1996, as amended to one of the Homeseekerplus local authorities and remains assessed as eligible for assistance and homeless but has either has been found either non-priority or intentionally homeless.

Medical Need

None of the below refer to having a medical condition in its own right. It is only when the current housing is directly affecting that medical condition that priority is awarded. In other words even when a member of the applicant's household has a very severe set of medical conditions, if their housing has little or no bearing on their health then no priority will be awarded.

Emergency band

The applicant assessed as immediate need of re-housing on medical grounds. This may be when they have had a major incident, are in hospital or another emergency provision and unable to return to the existing home because of their medical condition and immediate adaptations are not available.

This award is time limited for 1 month when it will be reviewed. It can be extended if no suitable properties have become available in this time scale or a direct match can be made.

These are time limited for 1 month when they will be reviewed. It can be extended if no suitable properties have become available in this time scale or a direct match can be made.

Gold band

Urgent medical need or long-term disability that would be alleviated by a move to more suitable accommodation. This would apply when the situation is so serious that it would not be reasonable to expect the applicant to continue to live at the property for any length of time,

given their particular medical circumstances but not a life-threatening emergency.

Proof of the situation would be required from Social Care services, NHS or other medical specialists.

A member of the household seeking accommodation is disabled and re-housing will enable that person to overcome physical barriers created by current accommodation and it has been established that the home cannot be adapted to meet needs e.g. steps and stairs.

Silver band

Significant medical need that would be alleviated by a move to more suitable accommodation. This could be situations/medical conditions that could apply to one or more members of the household which because of the particular household circumstances significant distress is caused. Proof of the situation would be required from Social Care services, NHS or other medical specialists.

Depression and asthma are the most commonly quoted medical conditions. Where these are mild and not directly related to the current property priority is unlikely to be awarded.

Welfare Need

Emergency band

The applicant assessed as immediate need of re-housing on welfare grounds where there has been a major incident and there is proven threat to life or limb. This would normally be based on information provided by the Police or other specialists.

Gold banding

Exceptional circumstances where the current property has a critical long-term detrimental effect on their welfare. This would normally be based on information provided by multi agency meetings or Social Care services.

Silver banding

Significant welfare need that would be alleviated by a move to more suitable accommodation. Proof of the situation would be required from Social Care services, housing association or other specialists to establish that a management move would not be appropriate.

This banding would only be used if the housing provider is unable to provide a management move.

Move on/care leavers

Gold band

A young person owed leaving care duties under section 23C of the Children Act 1989 and in a housing need will be awarded gold banding to the area of the children services authority that owes them the duties. Homeseekerplus comprises of Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire which have different children services authorities, therefore gold will only be awarded to housing authority districts falling within the area of the children services authority.

Move-on from supported accommodation funded County Council commissioned services and where a local connection was agreed at point of referral by the relevant local housing authority.

When someone is placed in accommodation based supported housing and is not in their home/lead authority area there is a presumption that they will be reconnected back to their home area when ready to move-on from the supported accommodation.

There are 2 requirements for this priority:

- that the supported accommodation provider has confirmed that the resident is ready for independent living by completing the standard move-on form detailing the work they have completed with the resident and assessment of any remaining support needs.;
- that the local authority has been involved in the move-on planning and accepts that they are the appropriate local authority to re-house this applicant by awarding this priority.
- The accommodation is not low support, temporary or emergency provision or intensive housing management (unless subject to local individual arrangements).

General

Gold band

As a result of a multi-agency decision agreed by the relevant housing authority. Where multi agencies including the local housing authority are involved with a particular household and meet to agree a way forward to resolve an urgent housing situation this priority can be awarded to better protect the public/local neighbourhood.

BANDING TABLE

Additional bedroom needs criteria

Households will also be assessed to consider the need for one additional bedroom for each of the following if they are assessed as being included as part of the household:

- A tenant requiring a non-resident overnight carer
- Disabled child who cannot share a bedroom with their sibling due to their disability
- An adult child who is serving away with the armed forces
- A room for a foster child or children

You can include someone on your application if they need to live with you in order to give or receive care or support and no one in your immediate household is able to care for you. You will need to evidence on your application the reason why an additional person or a carer needs to live with you and demonstrate:

- they or you need to be supported or cared for and are dependent upon this
- that other satisfactory arrangements cannot be made
- that the arrangement is 'permanent'

We will also require you to provide evidence such as that the person requires your support or care; for example, proof that you/they are providing care, are in receipt of care allowances and are able to meet any costs associated with the additional bedroom either through benefits, income or savings.

We will not include family members currently living abroad on your application and therefore they cannot be re-housed with you until such a time that they return to the UK and the Council is satisfied that they are reasonably expected to reside with you.

In cases where two parents or guardians have joint access to children, bedroom eligibility will be awarded to the main care provider. You will need to demonstrate:

- you are the main care provider (children live with you for more than half the week -four nights or more) and you are in receipt of child benefit and if applicable child tax credits
- that the arrangement is 'permanent'

The protections afforded by the Equality Act 2010 are intended to be available to all, including children and adolescents. Any required additional bedroom need will be awarded on a case by case basis in line with housing benefit rules and affordability.

Time limited bands

Certain categories have a time limit of one month or more. This is given to recognise an urgent need. It is therefore important that applicants in this category are bidding for all suitable properties each week and in a wide range of locations.

At the end of the period the case will be reviewed by the Lead Authority.

If the applicant is in a time limited band and has either not bid for suitable properties advertised within the 1 month or has been unsuccessful in obtaining an offer of a tenancy within the limit, a direct match of a property may be considered. Where a private sector tenancy is available, suitable and affordable at the time the Local authority or its agents may look to secure a tenancy in the private rented sector.

Demotion

The Lead Authority may however decide to demote an applicant to the band below at the end of the time-limited period if it is obvious that the applicant is choosing to wait for a particular type of property or immediate location and not treating their circumstance as urgent.

Applicants are encouraged to make full use of their bids and seek all housing options available to them. Applicants will be assessed by a senior officer if they have unreasonably refused a property or to bid in a reasonable time if the following criteria have been met:

- they deliberately do or fail to do anything in consequence of which they missed out on suitable properties
- it would have been reasonable for them to do so and there is no other good reason why they have not

The demotion period will be what the local authority deems reasonable up to 12 months and will be considered on a case by case basis.

Global banding criteria

Global banding will be awarded to those on bandings where it would be unduly burdening another authority where the duty to house the household should remain with the lead authority.

Applications will be awarded a global band equal to that of their local banding in all but the below cases:

Where the lead authority has accepted a full statutory homeless duty to secure accommodation for the applicant. Your global banding in this circumstance will be silver.

Where the lead authority has a gold move on agreement from support accommodation, your global banding will be bronze.

Where the lead authority has assessed your property as having a prohibition notice then your global band will be bronze.

Where the lead authority has awarded you a downsizing band, your global band will be silver.

Scheme Details

Completed applications

Once the applicant has been assessed and accepted on to the Homeseekerplus scheme, they will receive, where possible within 28 days, notification, confirming their application details.

This will include;

- a) The band in which the applicant has been placed
- b) The property size for which the applicant is eligible
- c) The registration date
- d) Band start date
- e) reminder about the importance of notifying any change in circumstances
- f) A unique reference
- g) Details of the verification documents required
- h) Details of the appeal procedure

Annual renewal process

Where an applicant has not made any bid on any property, nor updated their application in any way within the previous twelve months, they will be contacted to see if they still wish to remain on the Homeseekerplus Register. If there is no response within 28 days from the date of notification, the application will be removed. If the applicant contacts the Local Authority within 28 days of their application being cancelled and indicates that they still wish to be considered for housing, the application will be reinstated.

Applicants must renew their application if requested to do so by Homeseekerplus.

Reapplying

Any former applicant will need to make a new application, which will be dated from when it was received.

Removing applications

An application will be cancelled from Homeseekerplus:-

- At the request of the applicant
- Where an applicant does not respond to an application review within the specified

time limit

- Where the applicant moves and does not provide a contact address
- Where the applicant has died
- Where an applicant ceases to be eligible

Bidding

Once applicants have been registered as active on Homeseekerplus and notified of banding and log in details, they can start to look and bid for a suitable property of their choice subject to the terms and conditions of their banding.

Applicants may bid for eligible properties within the deadline given. It makes no difference to the final shortlist what time during the week the bid was placed. Property details and information should be carefully read as some properties will have additional requirements that make the property unsuitable for the applicant e.g. the number of people the property is suitable for – some have only single bedrooms.

Applicants may have up to a maximum of three bids in any given bidding cycle. Until a decision has been made as to who will receive the offer, a bid will remain live. The applicant can withdraw their bid if they wish to bid for another property during the same cycle.

At the time the bid is placed, the applicant will be given their current position on the shortlist. This is only an indication, as the position can change, as other people bid, or bids are withdrawn. All shortlists are live and subject to change.

Advertisements

All partner landlords are committed to advertising their available properties as widely as possible. Properties will be advertised in several ways on a weekly basis.

- A dedicated website for Homeseekerplus is accessible to anyone with Internet access. The website will allow applicants to view all available properties across the whole of Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire and bid 'on-line' for properties of their choice.
- Adverts displayed in a number of localities across the Homeseekerplus partnership including local authority offices.
- By post in a number of formats to aid those in line with the public sector equality act.

Property descriptions

Properties advertised will carry (where possible) a photograph of the property location and a full description which will include:

- Type of property and eligibility criteria
- Number of bedrooms and eligible household size appropriate
- Location of property
- Any adaptations and therefore restriction on those who may apply
- Services provided
- Heating type
- Rent/service charges
- Local connection requirement
- Additional features, marketing information and pet restrictions
- Details on those who will be given priority
- Where rural settlement or local letting policies apply
- If a Social Housing Landlord's allocation policy applies
- Void start date or new build when it's expected to be ready
- Any rent in advance payable
- Floor level of property

Rural settlements and local letting plans

Additional local connection criteria will apply for properties in rural villages where there are particular shortages of housing sites with planning conditions (Section 106 agreements and rural exception sites) attached to them. In these cases, priority will be given to Applicants who are unable to live in their community due to the lack of affordable housing, who have a local connection to the parish or surrounding parishes by means of living in the parish, working in the parish or having immediate family connections to the parish. Where this applies the details will be explained in the property advertisement.

The Homeseekerplus Partnership is committed to creating balanced communities. For new developments and in areas where there are known problems, such as antisocial behaviour or abandoned properties, a local lettings plan may be applied. The plan will take into account the needs of the current and new residents and the makeup of the block, street or cluster of streets, to ensure a responsible letting is made. The local authorities will review each letting plan periodically with landlords.

Allocations

Shortlisting

Once the advert deadline has passed, a shortlist will be produced for each advertised property showing all the applicants who have bid. For each property advertised, the successful applicant will generally be the applicant who has the highest band and the oldest band start date that is eligible to bid (i.e. who best meets the criteria in the advert and the policy)

The system will produce a shortlist based the applicants banding, banding start date, local connection and any other criteria stipulated in the advert.

Each Social Housing Landlord is responsible for checking to ensure there has been no change of circumstances including eligibility for social housing to the housing need assessment of the applicant since originally verified. This is to ensure that social housing is not allocated incorrectly to applicants who no longer match the criteria.

Each applicant will be given the opportunity to view the property before signing for a tenancy.

Should an applicant be at the top of the shortlist for more than one property, one of the Social Housing Landlords of the properties will contact the applicant as quickly as possible to ask them to decide which property they wish to be considered for. Once they have made their decision, their other bids will become invalid. In this circumstance, viewing of any of the properties before a decision is taken is unlikely to be available and will be at the Social Housing Landlord's discretion.

If an applicant is direct matched for a property, any other bids they have made will become invalid.

Any applicant who has a propriety interest in a property must be able and willing to dispose of that interest in a reasonable period.

By-passing

A by-pass is where an applicant has bid for a property but is not offered the tenancy.

The appropriate Social Housing Landlord will inform the household of the by-pass and of any steps needed to prevent further by-passes for the same reason.

By-passing will be carried out inline with social housing landlords lettings policy, local letting plans and homeseekerplus policy and inform you where reasonable.

Applicants will be required to match the requirements of this policy and match the criteria of the individual property as detailed in the advert. The advert includes details of both the type of applicant that is eligible for the property and any further restriction due to the Social Housing Landlord's own published allocation policy. If the applicant is at the top of the shortlist but does not meet all these criteria, the Social Housing Landlord may not consider the applicant.

Where an offer is being made to a current tenant of a Social Housing Landlord within the partnership, it is made subject to the satisfactory conduct of the present tenancy and approval of that Social Housing Landlord (which may include a home inspection).

If there is an occasion where two or more applicants have the same band start date and application date, the Social Housing Landlord will make a decision which applicant best meets the aims and objectives of Homeseekerplus.

Withdrawal

A shortlist maybe withdrawn at any stage during advertising or shortlisting.

An offer of a tenancy may be withdrawn at any stage up to the signing of the tenancy agreement.

This may happen in certain circumstances, such as the tenant of that particular property has failed to vacate the property or the property has been incorrectly labelled on the advert.

If this happens, the Social Housing Landlord will inform the successful applicant that the property is no longer available. If the property is not ready for occupation following a successful bid and the applicant is likely to wait some considerable time before being able to sign the tenancy agreement, the Social Housing Landlord will inform the applicant and give them the option to withdraw their bid so they can bid for any other suitable properties. If the property was mis-labelled on the advert it will be re-advertised.

Refusals

Applicants are expected to take reasonable care when bidding for a property to ensure it meets their needs. If however an applicant decides to refuse an offer of accommodation, the property will be offered to the next suitable applicant on the shortlist. An application will be reviewed if an applicant refuses 3 offers of accommodation which the local authority or its agents deem suitable. This could lead to the applicant being suspended for a minimum of 6 months or being placed in a lower band.

If an applicant in a time limited band refuses an offer of accommodation the application will be reviewed and may be suspended for a minimum of 6 months or placed in a lower band.

Homelessness

The local authority or its agents will normally expect an applicant to whom it has accepted a full homeless duty to bid for a wide range of suitable properties within the time limit in the Gold Band.

If the main homeless duty is accepted, you will be placed onto autobid from the start of this duty.

At the same time the local authority or its agents may be looking to discharge the homeless duty into an affordable and suitable private sector tenancy. If one is identified, the Homeseekerplus application will be reviewed and any homeless banding priority awarded will be removed whether or not the applicant accepts the private sector property found which will still be subject to the statutory review process.

If a homeless applicant has not been actively bidding for all suitable properties or a suitable private sector property is not available at the end of the one month time limit, the local authority or its agents will secure an offer of suitable, affordable settled accommodation for the household subject to availability.

Due to limited resources, high demand, and duties to provide accommodation to some groups of applicants in urgent housing need the degree of choice that the local authority is able to offer may be limited.

Applicants will be able to express a preference over the area in which they would like to live and the property type they would like, but should be aware that the local authority ability to satisfy a preference will be limited. Expressing a preference over where an applicant would like to live does not mean that this preference can be met, or that the local authority will not offer suitable accommodation outside of a preferred area. The local authority will consider whether the property is suitable for you and is a reasonable offer in order to meet its duties under Section 189B (2) relief of homelessness duty or the main section 193 (2) duty under Part VII of the Housing Act 1996.

Not all properties that become available will be advertised and offered through the Band and date order procedure

Direct matching

A direct match is a property which is not available through Homeseekerplus. All the partner social housing landlords are committed to advertising as many of their vacant properties as possible through Homeseekerplus. There will be occasions when certain properties will not be advertised and the reasons for these exclusions will be monitored. Some examples are: -

- Over-riding social reason to move the household for safety reasons, as recommended by the Police, partner organisations, or as agreed through multiagency need and risk assessment panels.
- Those let to discharge statutory duties to Homeless applicants in certain circumstances.
- Properties required for existing tenants whose properties are subject to major works requiring them to vacate their own properties (either on a temporary or permanent basis).
- Extra-care vacancies and any supported accommodation where there is an applicant with a Care package that needs a specific property.
- Applicants who have succeeded to a tenancy or, in certain circumstances such as following the death of a family member, left in occupation but who need to move to alternative accommodation.
- Where a property has been adapted and meets the specific needs of a client.
- Applications subject to the Rent (Agriculture) Act 1976.

There will be circumstances where for urgent operational reasons there is a need to make direct offers of housing outside of the normal policy banding and date order criteria.

This may also restrict the time an applicant is able to bid for accommodation. The offer of accommodation would be in any area of the district that is considered reasonable and the property is suitable and safe for the applicant to live in.

A decision to make a direct match offer could be where:

- An applicant is not being realistic in the areas they are bidding for accommodation and as a result they may be occupying accommodation provided as homeless longer than they need to.

or

- To assist the local authority in effective management (including financial) of its homeless accommodation

Monitoring and review

Review/appeal procedure

All applicants have the right to request a review of any Homeseekerplus decisions. The review/appeal should include the reason why the applicant believes the decision is incorrect, together with any additional information.

Stage One – Internal Review

If you disagree with the way we have assessed your application for housing, or with the housing need band in which we have placed your application, you may request a review which will be decided by a senior housing officer who was not involved in the original decision from the local authority or the agent dealing with your application. To request a review:

- You must complete a Stage 1 - Internal Review Request Form which can be downloaded from the Homeseekerplus website www.Homeseekerplus.co.uk and when completed in full, send to the council you applied to within 14 days of receiving your letter or notification.
- We will deal with your request within 14 days or let you know if we will require additional time.
- We will write to you with the outcome of the review within a further 7 days of being determined.

Stage Two – Homeseekerplus Appeal Panel

If you disagree with the outcome of the stage 1 internal review, you can request that your case be taken to the Homeseekerplus Appeal Panel. The Homeseeker Panel is made up of 3 or more Senior Housing Officers from 3 of the Partner Councils. These Officers will not have been involved in the original decision or the Officer decision on internal review. The applicant must submit a request for an appeal in writing and send to Homeseekerplus Co-ordinator within 14 days of the review notification letter. The local authority or its agent will acknowledge receipt of the request for an appeal within 14 days and provide the applicant with contact details of the officer dealing with the request and the time it will take to reply to the applicant. If the review cannot be completed within 56 days, the applicant will be informed and the timescales for the review set out.

The panel will be made up of senior housing officers from three or more of the other local authorities. The appeal will consider the facts surrounding the case and your request should specify whether there are additional facts the Panel should take into consideration or whether you feel that the original facts you submitted with your application have not been fully taken into account. If you have additional evidence, such as additional medical reports, then these should also be submitted up to one week before the panel meet.

The Panel will consider the review on the papers submitted by the applicant and the housing officer from the local authority involved in the case. If determined by the Homeseekerplus Co-ordinator the applicant or the relevant Housing Officer maybe asked to attend this review hearing if requiring additional information from either party and, should this be the case, the applicant and the relevant Housing Officer will be asked to personally attend a further review Hearing. The applicant can bring a representative.

The Homeseekerplus Co-ordinator will chair this panel and a nominated representative will be present at the Hearing to ensure that all relevant information has been presented and is dealt with correctly.

The panel must come to a majority decision, should this not be the case, the Homeseekerplus Co-ordinator and chair of the panel will arbitrate.

Once the appeal has been determined, or if the Panel require the applicant to attend a further Hearing, the Homeseekerplus Co-ordinator will write to the applicant giving full details within 14 days or as soon as reasonably practicable thereafter.

Local Authority Complaints Procedure

If you feel that you have been treated unfairly or you believe the process has not been carried out as described above you can use your Local Authority's (or its agents) Complaints Procedure to make a formal complaint.

The complaint must be made in writing to the appropriate authority within 14 days of the date of the written notification of the decision of the Homeseekerplus Appeal Panel.

If the applicant is still dissatisfied, they may complain directly to the Local Government Ombudsman.

Subject access requests

Applicants are entitled under the Data Protection Act 2018 or any superseding legislation to request details of their personal data held by the seven local authorities. A charge will be made for providing this information.

Use of statistical information

The information supplied by Applicants on their housing application may also be used for housing management and research purposes within legal guidelines (such as identifying what size and where new housing is required). No individual will be identified in collating such information.

Policy management

The Homeseekerplus Co-ordinator will run regular reports to monitor performance of the scheme in meeting the aims of the policy.

The Homeseekerplus policy will be regularly reviewed and at least annually to ensure that it takes into account change in demand and need within the district, that it continues to meet its aims and objectives and that it complies with any legislative changes.

Any changes to the Homeseekerplus Policy will be implemented only with the majority agreement of the members of the Partnership. An interested party may contact any of the local authority partners to make observations to be considered at the next review.