Homeseekerplus



Homeseeker Plus
Policy Document

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Section 1 Policy aims and general rules

1 Introduction.

1.1. Homeseeker Plus is a choice based lettings (CBL) scheme run by the seven local authorities in partnership with the majority of Social Housing Landlords operating within Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire.

1.2. It must be recognised that the demand for affordable social housing within the Homeseeker Plus area is very high and cannot be met from the available resources. Only those in the highest housing need, with a local connection to the area are likely to obtain housing through the scheme. Each district's Housing Advice Service will be able to discuss a range of housing options.

1.3 The policy takes into account the Localism Act 2012, Welfare Reform Act 2012 and the Statutory Code of Guidance on the Allocation of Accommodation 2012. It also has regard to the Councils' Homelessness, Tenancy Strategies and Housing Policy.

2. The aims and objectives of the Partnership.

- Assist in building more sustainable communities.
- Enable informed choice of housing/ housing options and improve levels of customer satisfaction.
- To operate a common selection system that offers realistic, informed choice for all Applicants.
- To ensure that those who have the greatest need for housing have the greatest opportunity to secure it.
- To ensure that less able applicants are involved in the lettings process and they have choices offering equality of opportunity for all.
- To make best use of available housing resources to meet local need.
- To minimise the refusal of offers of accommodation and reduce rent loss by allowing people to choose where they live thereby supporting sustainable communities.
- To generally give people with a local connection to a district priority in the letting of housing within that district.
- To enable mobility within social housing in Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire.
- To 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 by the Homelessness Act 2002.
- To contribute towards tackling discrimination.
- To use a common eligibility criteria.
- To use a common housing application process.
- To co-ordinate housing needs assessments.
- To ensure fairness, simplicity and transparency with a system that is easily understood.
- To give new tenants a feeling of ownership and commitment to their area as they have chosen to live there.

3. Overview of Homeseeker Plus

3.1. Homeseeker Plus enables Social Housing landlords to advertise their homes and applicants are asked to express an interest in them. This will be known as a "bid" for a property. Once a bid is placed the computer system will place 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 Homeseeker Plus districts and finally to anyone else. Homeseeker Plus provides a clearer way of letting homes, gives more choice in where people wish to live and information about the homes available.

3.2. 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 laid out in the Banding table (Section 18). Depending on their circumstances, Applicants will be placed into one of four bands Emergency, Gold, Silver or Bronze subject to final verification by a Homeseeker Plus partner. In some cases an applicant may have more than one band (See section 27a). Local connection will be applied to the majority of vacancies to help each local authority meet their housing demand or where it is a legal requirement.

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

3.4. The majority of social rented housing vacancies are advertised as per local nomination agreements, however social housing landlords may choose to apply their own published allocation policies to the remaining vacancies arising.

3.5. The method of bidding for properties is via the internet on the Homeseeker Plus website.. Applicants are able to monitor the success of their bid (and their bidding history) via the Homeseeker Plus website.

3.6. Once the Bid deadline has passed, the successful applicant is normally the highest priority household matched against the criteria for the property, including where local connection applies. 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 before making an offer. Incorrect information will result in the offer being withdrawn and the applicant re-assessed.

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

3.8. The banding and the application date of the successful applicant, together with the total number of bids made for each property, will then be published. This enables as applicants to develop realistic expectations regarding their chances of success and likely waiting period.

4. Equal opportunities.

4.1. All partners of Homeseeker Plus 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:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by the act
- 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 disproportionally low
- Making the best possible use of the existing and potential workforce and resources by enabling cross boundary moves.

5. Social inclusion

5.1. All partners of Homeseeker Plus agree that applicants should be given every assistance to access the housing register and search for suitable properties.

5.2 In order to ensure that all applicants are able to use Homeseeker Plus fully, we have developed an Access and Inclusion strategy, which can be found under the heading "Our Documents" on the Homeseeker Plus website

5.3. The Mental Capacity Act 2005 introduced a legal obligation on health and social care commissioners to jointly commission advocacy services. All statutory and voluntary agencies who work within the community either helping or advising applicants are given information and training in order to fully understand the Homeseeker Plus scheme and assist their clients to register and search for suitable housing.

5.4. To further assist applicants the following methods may be used: -

5.4.1. Applicants potentially disadvantaged by the scheme will initially be identified from the application process. Staff may contact these applicants and offer them 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 Homeseeker Plus. This may include sending copies of the adverts in large print to an applicant or simply providing advice.

5.4.2. Any agencies funded through Supporting People should be in a position to provide their clients with help on housing issues.

5.4.3. 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.

5.4.4. Translation services may be provided wherever appropriate (this will reflect the demand for such a service).

5.4.5. If no other alternative is available, Homeseeker Plus staff may bid for suitable vacancies on a vulnerable applicant's behalf where they have no support or use the system Autobid function.

6. Who is eligible to register?

6.1. Homeseeker Plus is open to almost anyone in housing need. This may include 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, own (or are buying) a property 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.

7. Who is not eligible to register?

7.1. Persons from abroad deemed ineligible through immigration rules and regulations as follows:

- Person subject to immigration control who is an over-stayer or visitor to the country
- Illegal entrant
- Asylum seeker
- Person in the country on condition that they have no recourse to public funds
- Person from abroad who is in breach of the European Community Right of residence Directive
- 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
- Person from abroad who has been the subject of a sponsorship agreement for less than 5 years and whose sponsor is still alive
- Person with limited leave not granted as a result of a claim for asylum

7.2. Persons under 16 years of age. (It should be noted that a tenancy would not usually be given to Applicants under the age of 18 years. A guarantor would normally be required for any person under 18 years of age who is offered and accepts a tenancy).

7.3. 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.

8. Who does not qualify for affordable social housing in Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire?

8.1 Homeseeker Plus has been established under the terms of the Housing Act 1996, as amended and the Localism Act 2012. This gives local authorities the right to decide who will not qualify for social housing.

8.2 Anyone found to be non-eligible or non-qualifying will be entitled to a review of the decision with the reasons and actions needed to remedy the situation for future application given in writing. – see section 41 for the review/appeal process.

8.3 An applicant may not hold two tenancies at one time. They must be able to end the current tenancy before any further offer is made.

8.4 A joint tenancy shall only be granted to eligible and qualifying Applicants subject to the policies of each individual Social housing landlord.

8.5 An applicant will not be accepted for social housing if we are satisfied that: -

a) They have sufficient financial resources to resolve their own housing need.
b) Where they have unreasonably disposed of financial resources that could have enabled them to purchase/obtain their own accommodation.
c) They own or part own a property which is suitable for their needs, or where those needs can be resolved through adaptation, sale or where, if they sold it, they could afford to buy another property. We may make exceptions to this rule in the case of proven social or medical needs.
d) 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 Authority or a Social Housing Landlord at the time of application. Each case would be considered upon its own merits and subject to the spirit of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 according to individual circumstances.

8.6 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 able to apply for a possession order:

    i. Ground 2a Domestic violence causing a partner or other family member to leave the property
    ii. Ground 3 Deterioration of the dwelling-house due to waste, neglect or default
    iii. Ground 4 Deterioration of furniture provided by the landlord due to ill treatment
    iv. Ground 5 Tenancy induced by a false statement
    v. Ground 6 Premium received or paid in connection with a mutual exchange
    vi. Ground 7 Eviction from a dwelling within the curtilage of a building held for non-housing purposes due to conduct such that given the nature of the building it would not be right for occupation to continue

8.7 The applicant or any member of the household has former or current rent arrears (8 weeks rent or more) or other housing debts such that the registered social landlord would be able to apply for a possession order. This will apply unless there is evidence that the debt arose directly as a result of a person's disability.

Existing social housing tenants who are non-qualifying 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.

8.8 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.

8.9 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 be become qualifying

e.g. a satisfactory landlord reference for a period of time or regular repayments are made without fail against an agreed repayment plan for a period of time.

9. Reasons for suspending an application.

9.1 If we become aware that a household has rent arrears or other housing debt accrued after an application has been registered the applicant will be given the opportunity to clear the debt before an offer proceeds. If the applicant is unable to do this, they may be suspended for a period as required to clear the debt before they can bid for other properties but each case will be considered upon its own merits. If a partner landlord becomes aware of such a debt they will advise the relevant local authority who may suspend or cancel the application as non-qualifying depending on the circumstances.

9.2 Applicants who have been awarded time limited bands are expected to bid on all suitable property types in a reasonably wide range of areas. Failure to do so may result in suspension or demotion for a period.

9.3 Whilst Homeseeker Plus aims to give applicants choice for good reason 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 may be demoted or suspended for a period.

9.4 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.

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

10. Giving false information

10.1. 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, the application will be removed. Where false information is given and the applicant still qualifies, the application will be suspended. The law imposes severe penalties, including substantial fines up to £5000 or imprisonment, when an offence is proven.

10.2. It is the applicant's responsibility to update an application for any change of circumstances which can include moving home, changes to household members, birth of a child, changes in medical condition and changes in welfare situations.
Failure to update an application following a change in circumstances could mean the application is inaccurate, contains false information, and has the wrong priority banding.

10.3. Any future application would be subject to review before acceptance onto the scheme.

11 Local Connection

11.1. Due to the exceptional demand for housing across the Homeseeker Plus area and the difficulty in solving local housing need, preference will usually be given to applicants with a local connection to the appropriate district. Each local authority within Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire may set quotas of dwellings available for cross boundary moves if necessary, to increase mobility but will balance this against the local connection requirement.

11.2. Local Connection is defined in Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 as:

- Those who are normally resident in the local authority area, and that residence is or was of their own choice.
  (Local Authority Agreement guidelines suggest this as having resided in the area for six of the last twelve months, or three of the last five years, where residence has been out of choice);
- Those who are employed in the local authority area.
  (Local Authority Agreement guidelines suggest this as employment other than of a casual nature);
- Those who have family connections in the local authority area.
  (Local Authority Agreement guidelines suggest this as immediate family members who have themselves lived in the area for five years).
- Members of the armed forces have a local connection to the district of their choice
  (Those currently serving, served within the immediate 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).
- Other special circumstances.

11.3. In addition, for certain properties which were developed under restrictions imposed by a Section 106 agreement (Town and Country Planning Act 1990), applicants may need a connection to a defined local area.

12. Multi agency arrangements.

12.1. All seven local authorities within the scheme have entered into an agreement to use the Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) in dealing with the exchange of information on any household who has been convicted of a serious offence. Any household that confirms on their application form, or who is suspected, or accused, of being a high-risk offender, will be subject to the provisions set out in the information sharing protocol.

12. 2. Before any known offender is offered housing, full consultation will be undertaken with the relevant support agencies to assess the risks involved. It does not however guarantee the provision of a tenancy.

12.3. Re-housing of high-risk offenders will be carried out in consultation with the relevant agencies to minimise the risk to the public. The long-term aim is to influence the successful accommodation and resettlement of high-risk offenders, thereby minimising the risk of re-offending, protect the public and the victims of offenders. The local authority in partnership with MAPPA may bid on behalf of any household that falls within this category.

12.4. The authorities also take part in Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) meetings which aim to provide risk information for people who have experienced domestic abuse.

13. Balanced communities.

13.1. To help maintain balanced and sustainable communities, each local authority may decide the proportion of properties to be allocated to the four housing need bands and where local connection applies.

Section 2 Scheme details-applications

14. How to register

14.1. The applicant will be able to register for social housing through the Homeseeker Plus website @ www.homeseekerplus.co.uk

- Assistance can be provided through the Local authority and some Social Housing Landlord offices or through support agencies.

14.2. An applicant residing in Gloucestershire or West Oxfordshire who needs advice and assistance with their application will need to contact their own local authority.

14.3. Where the applicant lives outside the Gloucestershire or West Oxfordshire boundary they will need to contact the local authority within whose area they wish to live.

14.4. Where the applicant lives outside the Gloucestershire or West Oxfordshire boundary and wishes to live in more than one local authority area, they should contact the district with whom they have a local connection. If the applicant has no local connection, they can choose to contact any one of the chosen districts (who will become the lead authority for the application).

14.5. When an applicant applies through the Homeseeker Plus 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 an effective date and placed in a housing band. They will then be able to bid for suitable properties.

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

14.7. If a Lead Authority refuses the application on any grounds, the applicant will be notified of the reasons for the decision in writing and be advised of the Homeseeker Plus review / appeal procedure.

14.8. The applicant can re-register after a refusal but should be able to demonstrate that they have addressed the reasons for the refusal.

14.9. All applicants their own unique user name and password. This will also enable them to access their own application information and easily update any change in their circumstances.

14.10. 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.

15. Assessment of an application.

15.1. By registering to join Homeseeker Plus, the applicant will be giving 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.

15.2. 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 the housing need stated.

15.3. Applicants will be able to bid for properties advertised, but no tenancy will be offered until verification has been completed.

16 Housing Needs Bands- see table below

16.1 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 many cases these will be the same but in some circumstances, notably when one local authority has accepted a duty under homelessness legislation, applicants will have a different "local" and "global" band.

16.2 Special rules are required for those in the armed forces to comply with The Localism Act recognising the services they have offered the country. On discharge members of the armed forces, as defined in 11.2, with Homeless priority need (dependent children or vulnerable as a result of disability) will be awarded Gold band for 6 months from the discharge date. Homeless with a non - priority need are given Silver band from their discharge date. Should they become homeless again within 5 years of the discharge priority need or unintentionally homeless applicants will be awarded Gold band again for 6 months from Notice being received. Non-priority need or Intentional homeless will get Silver band backdated for 6 months from the Notice being received.

16.3 **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 applying for Right to Move must be able to prove that the employment contract is:

- for 12 months or more
- for a minimum of 16 hours per week
- not short-term, ancillary or voluntary

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

Homeseeker Plus expects that a maximum of 1% of the allocations in each district per year would be to assist tenants who need to move for work related reasons.

Please refer to the full Right to Move guidance for more detail
www.homeseekerplus.co.uk

16.4 Property size

Emergency Band

Existing Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire social housing tenants willing to move to a smaller non family social housing property within the county. This means that the tenants are willing to move to any other non-family property that is smaller than their current home.

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 allowed one or more people to move in to the property, this is called deliberately worsening your own situation) - See Section 9.4

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 – see Para 9.4

Silver Band

There is overcrowding in the current property - lacking 1 bedroom - (this will not apply if the applicant has allowed one or more people to move in to the property, this is called deliberately worsening your own situation) - see Para 9.4

16.5 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.

16.6 Homelessness

Gold Band

The applicant has made a homelessness application to one of the Homeseeker Plus local authorities and the full 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 Band

Applications to Homeseeker Plus before the commencement of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (3rd April 2018)
The applicant has been assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness before 3rd April 2018. This was taken as within 28 days of being homeless before the new legislation. Homelessness legislation is complicated so contact should be made through Housing Options/Advice Team to discuss the circumstances if threatened with homelessness.

Applications to Homeseeker Plus after 3rd April 2018

The applicant has made a homelessness application to one of the Homeseeker Plus local authorities and:

A Prevention of Homelessness duty is ongoing or

A Relief of Homelessness duty is ongoing or

The applicant has made a homeless application to one of the Homeseeker Plus local authorities and remains assessed as eligible for assistance and homeless after homeless duties have ended.

Homelessness legislation is complicated so contact should be made through your Housing Options/Housing Advice Team to discuss the circumstances if threatened with homelessness.

16.7 Medical/welfare needs

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 applicants 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 is most likely to be when they have had a major incident, are in hospital or other emergency provision and unable to return to the existing home because of changed medical condition.

Or

Exceptional circumstances where there is proven threat to life or limb. This would normally be based on information provided by the Police or Emergency services.

Or

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

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/welfare 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/welfare circumstances but not a life threatening emergency. Proof of the situation would be required from Social Care services, NHS or other medical specialists.

Silver Band

Significant medical or welfare 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.

16.8 General

Gold Band

Move-on from supported accommodation where a planned move is agreed 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. The support provider will also discuss other housing options before putting them forward for social housing.
There are 2 requirements for this priority:-
1. 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.;
2. 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.

Or

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.
Or

Left in occupation/succession of social rented housing such as succession where the household is required to move. This applies to an applicant who is living in a social rented property but does not have a tenancy. This may be because the household is too big or too small for the accommodation and they are required to move into a property suitable for their size or age. This applies whether or not they have a right of succession. These are time limited for 1 month when it will be reviewed. They can be extended if no suitable properties have become available in this time scale, a direct match may be made.

	Property Size etc.	Property conditions (this only applies to the district where the Notice is made)	Homelessness (this only applies to the district where any duty is owed)	Medical/welfare needs	General
EMERGENCY BAND	Giving up family sized social rented housing in the County to move to smaller non-family accommodation	Where a property has been assessed by Environmental Services as causing an imminent risk of serious harm due to disrepair, major defects, inadequate facilities. e.g. Emergency Prohibition Notice served (Time limit 1 month)		Assessed as immediate need of rehousing on medical grounds OR Exceptional circumstances where there is a proven threat to life or limb OR Exceptional circumstances where the current property has a critical detrimental effect on their welfare (Time limit 1 month)	
GOLD BAND	Giving up family sized social rented housing in the County to move to smaller family sized accommodation based on local housing demand OR Major overcrowding – lacking 2 or more bedrooms OR Where a Prohibition Notice (or Suspended Prohibition Notice) has been served by Environmental Services due to overcrowding (Does not apply if already awarded gold for Homelessness)	Where a Prohibition Notice (or Suspended Prohibition Notice) has been served on a property by Environmental Services due to disrepair, major defects or inadequate facilities and the landlord is unable/unwilling to comply	Full Statutory Homelessness Duty accepted (Time limit 1 month)	Assessed urgent medical/welfare need or long-term disability that would be alleviated by a move to more suitable accommodation	Move-on from Supported Accommodation where a planned move is agreed by the relevant local housing authority OR As a result of a multi-agency decision agreed by the relevant local housing authority OR Left in occupation of social rented housing such as Succession where the household is required to move (Time limit 1 month)
SILVER BAND	Overcrowding – lacking one bedroom (Does not apply if already awarded silver for Homelessness)		Applications before 1st April 2018 Homeless or threatened with homeless Applications after 1st April 2018 Homeless prevention or relief duty owed or assessed as homeless after all homeless duties have ended.	Assessed significant medical or welfare need or long-term disability that would be alleviated by a move to more suitable accommodation.	
BRONZE BAND	All other Applicants				

17. Time limited bands.

17.1. Certain categories have a time limit of one month. 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.

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

17.3. 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 one month 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.

17.4. The Lead Authority may however decide to demote an applicant to the band below at the end of the one month 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.

18 Definition and implication of dates.

18.1. The date when the application is registered and assessed into a housing needs band is important as this will form part of the short-listing process.

18.2. The application date is the date a fully completed online application form is submitted by the applicant.

18.3 The effective date is the date a completed application form is placed into a housing band after verification by the lead local authority.

18.4 The band start date is the date of application or the date an applicant moves up to a higher band following a change of circumstances.

18.5 If moving to a lower band, normally the original effective date will apply. If however there have been a previous number of changes of band, the effective date will be reviewed by the Lead Local Authority to ensure that the applicant is not disadvantaged (or given an advantage) by the change in circumstances.

18.6. Where an applicant has been unable to obtain settled accommodation due to their employment (e.g. Armed Forces Personnel, tied accommodation) the case will be reviewed and the application date may be backdated depending on the circumstances.

18.7. If the applicant's circumstances change, they must update their online application to show the change as this may lead to moving up or down the housing needs bands. An offer of a tenancy will be withdrawn if any change is not declared.

19. Bedroom need assessment

19.1. The bedroom need for a household is assessed to match Housing Benefit rules because from April 2013 the same rules apply to all renting households including social housing.

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.

19.2 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 to ensure it is still correct.

19.3 An extra bedroom will be considered where the following applies:

- A carer who provides the applicant or their partner with regular overnight care, who is not normally living with you. Evidence will be required to substantiate any claim which may include the care component of DLA (Disability Living Allowance), PIP (Personal Independent Payment) or attendance allowance, or details of a care package from a care providing agency funded by Social Services.
- An independent medical adviser has confirmed the need for an extra bedroom.

In all cases an assessment of affordability will be undertaken, with discretion for the final decision being with the relevant local authority and social housing landlord.

19.4 Potential children of foster or adoptive carers will be considered in the bedroom need assessment on an individual basis once they have been accepted by the appropriate Social Care Panel.

19.5. No visiting children should be included on the application and they will not be included in the bed room need assessment.

20. Medical / Disability assessment.

20.1. Physical disability.

An applicant's (or member of the household included within the an application) physical condition will be assessed by an officer of the local housing authority or its agent or, where deemed necessary and feasible, referred to Children & Families or Adult Social Care for a Occupational Therapist Housing Needs Report. An assessment will then be carried out and a detailed report forwarded to the appropriate local authority or its agent to determine housing need.

20.2. Medical condition.

Applicants will be asked for details of any medical condition and the reasons why their current property affects that condition. An officer of the local housing authority or its agent will assess whether the current property has a detrimental effect on their social and or medical well-being. Where necessary a medical report may be

requested from the appropriate independent medical advisor. The applicant may be required to pay towards the related costs incurred. Their assessment will be based on the applicant's (or member of the household included in the application) medical condition, the affect their property has on that condition and how moving to an alternative property can help.

20.3. Following the assessment, the applicant will be informed in writing of the outcome and any change to their banding. If the applicant disagrees with this assessment they may ask for the matter to be reviewed under the Homeseeker Review/Appeal Procedure - See Section 41

20.4. Where an applicant's (or member of the household included in the application) medical circumstances change substantially, a new medical assessment form should be submitted along with any supporting evidence.

21. Hazard assessment/disrepair.

21.1. The application form asks applicants about the condition of their current home. Where an applicant indicates the property possesses potential risks to Health and Safety they should contact their landlord in the first instance. If unresolved, the applicant may ask the Environmental Health service of the local authority where they live to inspect the property.

21.2. Following an inspection the landlord may be required to undertake works to rectify the problem. Where this is not possible or appropriate a level of priority will be awarded which will determine the band in which the applicant is placed. Any damage caused by the applicant may be deemed as deliberate, therefore worsening your circumstances (see section 9).

22. Completed applications.

22.1. Once the applicant has been assessed and accepted on to the Homeseeker Plus 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 (bronze, silver, gold or emergency). In certain cases, applicants may be given different bands for different local authority areas (where a homeless duty is accepted by a local authority or where a prohibition notice is served). This "dual banding" reflects the fact that a higher duty exists in one area and the household will therefore have a higher band just in that area.
b) The property size for which the applicant is eligible.
c) The effective date (and band start date if applicable).
d) A reminder about the importance of notifying any change in circumstances.
e) A unique reference will enable applicants to make bids.
f) Details of the documents required before an offer of accommodation can be made.
g) Details of where to find the Homeseeker Plus appeal procedure.

23. Change of circumstances

23.1 It is the responsibility of each applicant to update their own information every time there is a change in their circumstances. (see 10.2)

23.2. Applicants will be notified of any effect of a change of circumstances on their banding within 28 days of providing any requested evidence.

24. Annual renewal process

24.1. 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 Homeseeker Plus Register.
If there is no response within 28 days from the date of notification, the application will be cancelled. 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 from their last effective date.

24.2. Applicants must renew their application if requested to do so by Homeseeker Plus.

25. Cancelling applications.

25.1. An application will be cancelled from Homeseeker Plus:-

- 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

25.2. An application will be cancelled from the Homeseeker Plus Register and the applicant will be notified where the household has been deemed non qualifying as a result of perpetrating Anti-Social Behaviour or Racial Harassment since registering on Homeseeker Plus.

26. Re-applying to Homeseeker Plus.

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

Section 3 Scheme details - properties

27. Looking for a home.

27.1. Once applicants have been registered as active on Homeseeker Plus and notified of banding and log in details, they can start to look and bid for a suitable property of their choice.

28. Advertisements.

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

Website:

A dedicated website for Homeseeker Plus 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.

Newsletters:

Adverts placed into free Homeseeker Plus newsletters, which can be viewed in a number of localities across the area–details are available from your local authority.

29. Bidding for a property.

29.1. Where an applicant meets the eligibility criteria, they may bid for that property 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.

29.2. Applicants may have up to a maximum of three bids in any one week. 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 weekly cycle.

29.3. Applicants may bid for properties via the Homeseeker Plus website.

29.4. 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. Even if an applicant's position is shown as number 1, they may not be offered the property if they do not meet the criteria of the advert or the scheme.

30. Advertisement deadlines.

30.1. All advertisements will carry a weekly deadline by which time all bids for particular properties must be received - before midnight each Tuesday. The advert will be published on the same day each week starting one minute past midnight on Wednesday morning.

31. Property descriptions.

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

- Type of property and eligible Applicants i.e. any restrictions such as age, family size or composition.
- Number of bedrooms and eligible household size appropriate (taking into account issues such as community sustainment or local lettings plans).
- Location of property.
- Any adaptations (e.g. disabled facilities such as stair lift etc.) and if this places a restriction on those who may apply.
- Services provided (e.g. support, caretaker, cleaning etc.).
- Heating type.
- Rent/service charges.
- Local connection requirement.
- Additional features and marketing information.
- Housing Bands that 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

32. Rural settlements.

32.1. Additional local connection criteria will apply for properties in rural villages where there are particular shortages of housing e.g. villages with populations under 3000 or 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.

33. Local Letting Plans.

33.1. The Homeseeker Plus Partnership is committed to creating balanced communities. For new developments and in areas where there are known problems, such as anti-social 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 make-up 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.

34 Short listing for the successful applicant

34.1. 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).

34.2 The system produces the shortlist by the following sort criteria;

- Local district connection (if specified in the advert).
- Local ward/parish connection (if specified in the advert).
- Preferred band (if specified in the advert).
- Band start date.
- Application date.

34.3. 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.

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

34.5 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.

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

35 By-passing the top of the shortlist

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

35.2. 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.

35.3. There may be a number of reasons for by-passes such as:-

- Family composition unsuitable.
- Rent or other debt outstanding.
- Unsuitable for older person/extra care accommodation.
- An Applicant has not responded to contact to view the property.
- The Applicant has had a change in circumstances since verification.
- Unsatisfactory current property inspection.
- No local connection.
- Pets not allowed.
- Local lettings plan.
- Anti-social behaviour.
- Unsuitable for property.
- Support package not in place.
- Making best use of available housing stock.

35.4. 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.

35.5. Homeseeker Plus partners reserve the right to prevent an offer going ahead where the offer is considered not suitable for the applicant. This could be on the grounds of public safety, risk or sustainability of the tenancy.

35.6. 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).

35.7. 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 Homeseeker Plus.

36. Withdrawal of property.

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

36.2. 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.

36.3. 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.

37. Refusals

37.1. 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.

37.2. 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.

38. Refusals by Applicants to whom the full homeless duty is owed.

38.1. 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 one month time limit in the Gold Band.

38.2 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 Homeseeker Plus 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.

38.3 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. (Also see section 39 – Direct Matching)

38.4 If a homeless applicant refuses an offer of suitable settled accommodation, the local authority or its agents is likely to decide that its duty under the Homeless Legislation is discharged, subject to the statutory review process.

38.5. Homeless applicants have the right to request a review of certain decisions made by the local authority in respect of their homeless application. This includes the decision to bring to an end the full homeless duty by making a suitable offer of settled accommodation.

38.6. If an applicant wishes to request a review of the reasonableness of an offer or the suitability of the property, this should be submitted in writing to the appropriate local authority within 21 days of the offer. The applicant has this right whether or not they refuse or accept the offer of accommodation. If the review finds in favour of the homeless applicant, alternative suitable, affordable and settled accommodation will be offered. However if the suitability of the offer is upheld, the homeless duty is ended and the banding will be reviewed and the applicant may be moved to a lower band. **Applicants are therefore advised to accept an offer, occupy the property and then appeal under these grounds.**

39 Direct matching of properties.

39.1. A direct match is a property which is not available through Homeseeker Plus. All the partner social housing landlords are committed to advertising as many of their vacant properties as possible through Homeseeker Plus. 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 multi-agency 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.

40. Feedback/Recent lets.

40.1. Recent Lets on the web page gives details of the properties previously let once the new tenancy has actually been set up. This will be some weeks after the property was advertised but can help applicants see how long they may have to wait for the size of property they want in the locations of choice. Applicant's personal details will not be included.

The feedback given will include:
- Property size and type.
- Property location.
- Number of Applicants who applied for each property.
- Band of successful applicant.
- Effective date/ Band start date of successful applicant.

40.2. Using this information, Applicants will be able to see where properties are more likely to become available and where they may have the best chances of making a successful bid in order to help them make an informed evaluation of their housing options.

Section 4 Monitoring and review

41. Review/appeal procedure. (The Homeseeker Plus Appeal Process can be found at www.homeseekerplus.co.uk)

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

41.2. 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 with 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 an Stage 1 - Internal Review Request Form which can be downloaded from the Homeseeker Plus website www.homeseekerplus.co.uk and when completed in full, send to the Homeseeker Plus Co-ordinator 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.

41.3. Stage Two –Homeseeker Plus Appeal Panel
If you disagree with the outcome of the review, you can request that your case be taken to the Homeseeker Plus Appeal Panel. The Homeseeker Panel is made up of 3 Senior Housing Officers from 3 of the Partner Councils. These Officers will not have been involved in the original decision or the Senior Housing Officer decision on internal review. The applicant must submit a request for an appeal in writing and send to their Local Authority or the agent that is dealing with the application 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 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.

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. The applicant does not need to attend this review hearing but occasionally the Panel may require 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 Homeseeker Plus Co-ordinator (or a nominated representative) will be present at the Hearing to ensure that all relevant information has been presented and is dealt with correctly.

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

41.4. 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.

41.5 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 Homeseeker Plus Appeal Panel.

41.6 If the applicant is still dissatisfied, they may complain directly to the Local Government Ombudsman. The Oaks, 2 Westwood Way, Westwood Business Park, Coventry. CV4 8JB. Telephone 024 7682 0000.

42. Access to personal Information.

42.1. Applicants are entitled under the Data Protection Act (1998) to request details of their personal data held by the seven local authorities. A charge will be made for providing this information.

43. Use of statistical information.

43.1. 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.

44. Policy monitoring and review

44.1 The Housing Advice/Options Manager of each local authority will run regular reports to monitor performance of the scheme in meeting the aims of the policy.

44.2 The Homeseeker Plus 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.

44.3 Any changes to the Homeseeker Plus 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.