

Cheltenham Borough Council

Cabinet – 17th March 2026

Consultation on revisions to Homeseeker Plus

Allocations Policy

Accountable member: Cabinet Member for Housing and Customer Services, Councillor Flo Clucas

Accountable officer: Head of Strategic Housing, Martin Stacy

Ward(s) affected: All

Key Decision: Yes

Executive summary:

The Homeseeker Plus Partnership consists of the six local authorities within Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire District Council, working in partnership with social landlords to provide affordable homes for people to rent. Properties from these housing providers are advertised on the Homeseeker Plus website, which applicants can then apply for.

The purpose of the [Homeseeker Plus Policy](#) is to explain who is eligible to apply for affordable housing and how their housing needs will be assessed. This assessment must be in line with relevant legislation and the statutory code of guidance on the allocation of accommodation, as these set out how applications will be assessed in a fair and transparent way based on housing need.

The last review of this policy was consulted on and updated in 2020, and it is now considered timely to review our Homeseeker Plus Policy again.

This report highlights some of the key changes that we will be seeking consultation on. Following consultation, relevant approval will then be sought to adopt the agreed changes.

Recommendations: That Cabinet:

- 1. authorises this Authority to consult on the proposed changes to the Homeseeker Plus Allocations Policy; and**
 - 2. delegates authority to the Head of Strategic Housing, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Customer Services, to approve the new policy after the consultation period has ended, provided that there are no further material changes other than those that have already been identified within this report.**
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1. Implications

1.1 Financial, Property and Asset implications

None as a direct result of this report.

Signed off by: Ela Jankowska, Finance Business Partner,
ela.jankowska@cheltenham.govuk

1.2 Legal implications

As a Local Housing Authority, the Authority has a statutory duty in respect of the allocation of housing to applicants within the Borough. These duties are contained in Part VI and VII of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended) and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. In addition to these duties the Authority has a duty to ensure that it operates in accordance with its duties under the Equalities Act 2010. When considering changes to the policy the Authority must undertake a fair, reasonable and transparent consultation and consider any responses to that consultation before determining whether or not to make changes to the policy.

Signed off by: Alison McKane, Interim Deputy Monitoring Officer,
alison.mckane@cheltenham.gov.uk

1.3 Environmental and climate change implications

This report relates to updating an existing policy and is regarding an online housing system, and as such will not have any impact on the council's and borough's carbon emissions

Signed off by: Maizy McCann, Climate Officer, maizy.mccann@cheltenham.gov.uk

1.4 Corporate Plan Priorities

This report contributes to the following Corporate Plan Priorities:

- Quality homes, safe and strong communities

1.5 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Implications

Equality impact assessment completed on behalf of the Homeseeker Plus partnership is found at Appendix 2 of this report.

1.6 Performance management – monitoring and review

The Homeseeker Plus Co-ordinator will run regular reports to monitor performance of the scheme in meeting the aims of the policy, and these will be considered via our county-wide partnership arrangements.

This Homeseeker Plus policy will be regularly reviewed to ensure that it considers changes in demand and need within the district, and that it continues to meet its aims and objectives and complies with any legislative changes.

Any changes to the Homeseeker Plus Policy will be implemented only with the agreement of the members of the Partnership, as specified within the partnership agreement following any necessary consultation, and the relevant approvals being given by each Authority.

2 Background

2.1 Homeseeker Plus is a choice-based lettings (CBL) scheme run by the Homeseeker Plus Partnership, which consists of the six local authorities within Gloucestershire along with West Oxfordshire District Council, who work in partnership with social housing landlords to provide affordable homes for people to rent.

2.2 The seven local authorities within the Homeseeker Plus partnership are Cheltenham Borough Council, Cotswold District Council, Forest of Dean District Council, Gloucester City Council, Stroud District Council, Tewkesbury Borough Council and West Oxfordshire District Council.

2.3 Households who wish to apply to go onto Homeseeker are assessed for eligibility, and if eligible, they are then placed into one of four different 'bands' (Emergency, Gold, Silver and Bronze) depending on the nature of their housing need. Those in the highest housing need are placed in the Emergency band, whilst those with the lowest housing need are placed into the Bronze band. Please see Appendix 4 for more information on the banding matrix.

2.4 Homeseeker Plus enables affordable housing providers to advertise their homes on the Homeseeker Plus website, and applicants are able to express an interest in them. This is known as placing 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 in the highest (i.e. Emergency) band, and then to people who have been waiting the longest within that band. If there are no bids from applicants in the highest band, then the local authority will look to those households in the Gold band, and so on until an applicant is identified. Priority is also initially given to people who have a local connection with the local authority in which the property is located, followed by those who have a local connection with any of the other Homeseeker Plus districts, and finally to anyone else.

3 Reasons for recommendations

- 3.1 It is necessary that Homeseeker Plus Policy is up to date, reflects current legislation and housing priorities.
- 3.2 The Homeseeker Plus policy is open to interpretation and can be implemented differently across the partnership. It is recommended that we provide greater clarification within the policy to ensure consistency throughout the partnership.
- 3.3 The review has provided an opportunity to consider the Homeseeker Plus Policy more generally, and to consult on several proposed changes and additions to the scheme.

4 Proposed main changes

4.1 Who qualifies for social housing

It is proposed to consider a change on how applicants are assessed and to who qualifies to join the housing register for social housing. At present, an applicant who can reasonably afford to buy a home that meets their essential housing needs would not qualify to join the housing register.

The proposed change is to whether the assessment should take into account whether an applicant has sufficient financial resources to rent a suitable home in the private rented sector. For the avoidance of doubt, this would be part of the assessment and not a single consideration

Under this proposal, if an applicant can reasonably meet their housing needs through private renting or buying a home, they would not qualify to join the housing register.

This change would help ensure that social housing is provided to those most in need, and not able to more easily resolve their housing.

4.2 Deliberate worsening of circumstances

It is proposed to consider a change to how deliberate worsening of circumstances is treated. This means situations where applicants make choices that worsen their housing situation, for example, giving up suitable accommodation without good reason.

Under this change, these applicants would be placed in the lowest priority band (Bronze) for six months. After that, they would only move to a higher band if they can show they have taken all reasonable steps to find alternative accommodation and actively tried to resolve their situation.

4.3 Acting on professional advice

A new requirement is being proposed to ensure applicants follow reasonable advice before being awarded a higher priority band.

Where an applicant's housing situation could reasonably be improved without a move, advice or support may be offered by the Council or other professionals, such as Environmental Health or Disabled Facilities teams. This may include working with a landlord on repairs, allowing time for improvement works to take place, or exploring whether adaptations could enable a household to remain safely in their home.

Under this proposal, if applicants choose not to follow the reasonable advice that has been offered, they may not be awarded a higher banding.

4.4 Employment and local connection

A proposal to review how employment is used to establish local connection.

At present, any household member included on an application who works in the district can help establish a local connection. Under the proposed change, only the main or joint applicant's employment would count — unless there are exceptional circumstances.

This would mean the policy would mirror government guidelines for local authorities on local connection in this area and help improve consistency across the partnership.

4.5 Expanding local connection options for members of the Armed Forces

National rules already allow members and former members of the Armed Forces to be treated as having a local connection without needing to meet the usual tests, recognising the frequent moves required during service. Homeseeker Plus complies with this requirement, and eligible applicants are currently awarded a local connection to one local authority area of their choosing.

The proposal is to look at how local connection should work across the Homeseeker Plus partnership.

There are several options for how local connection could apply within the partnership for eligible Armed Forces applicants, and the proposal is to consult on the following:

A. Choice by the applicant (opt-in)

Applicants choose which Homeseeker Plus council areas they wish to be considered for. They are then treated as having a local connection to each area they select.

B. Automatic across the partnership (opt-out)

Applicants are automatically treated as having a local connection to all Homeseeker Plus council areas, unless they ask to limit their choices.

C. No change (current approach only)

No additional local connection beyond what legislation currently requires. Applicants would continue to choose one council area to be treated as having a local connection to.

4.6 Emergency banding for downsizing

Emergency Banding is awarded to social housing tenants who agree to move to smaller housing.

At present, social housing tenants in Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire who are willing to move from family accommodation to non-family housing within the partnership area are automatically awarded Emergency Banding.

The proposed change is that this banding would only be awarded if the move releases a property that is in high demand or limited supply, helping to ensure individual local authority areas have more autonomy over managing supply and demand specific to their district.

4.7 Additional Bedroom Need

Some households may qualify for an extra bedroom, for example, if they have a foster child or a carer.

The proposal is to consider whether couples who cannot share a bedroom due to medical or disability reasons should be awarded an additional bedroom. In these cases, consideration may be given to whether separate single beds could resolve the issue without needing an extra bedroom.

4.8 Demotion Period and Reassessment

Some categories of housing need are time limited to recognise urgency. Applicants in these categories are expected to bid for all suitable properties each week and across a wide range of locations. If, at the end of the time limited period, it appears that an applicant is waiting for a particular property and not treating their circumstances as urgent, they may be demoted to a lower banding.

At present, demotion periods vary case by case. We are therefore seeking to provide greater consistency across the partnership, and provide clarity for applicants, by consulting on a proposed change to set a fixed demotion period of 6 months. After this, the local authority would reassess the applicant's situation. If the applicant has not taken all reasonable steps to resolve the issue that led to the demotion, the lower banding would remain in place indefinitely until sufficient evidence is provided.

4.9 Bedroom Need Assessment for pregnant households

Proposal to update the allocation scheme so that households who currently have a one-bedroom housing need and include a pregnant applicant will be assessed as needing an additional bedroom once the pregnancy reaches 28 weeks (i.e. the start of the third trimester).

5 Consultation and feedback

5.1 These proposals have been developed in collaboration with key stakeholders, including the other local authorities and housing providers who make up the Homeseeker Plus Management Board.

5.2 The consultation will be carried out on behalf of the partnership by Ark Consultancy, who have extensive experience of working within the social housing sector and providing consultancy services.

5.3 It is proposed that the next steps are to put the proposed changes out for consultation in order that we can establish a more fully informed local policy position.

6 Key risks

6.1 Please refer to Appendix 1, which sets out our risks. These relate principally to the need for consultation before any changes to our policy are implemented, and to ensure that we have considered any impact on Equalities. (Our Equality Impact Assessment can be found at Appendix 2).

Report author:

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Appendices:

1. Risk Assessment
2. EQIA Homeseeker Plus Partnership, March 2026

Background information:

N/A

Appendix 1: Risk Assessment

Risk ref	Risk description	Risk owner	Impact score (1-5)	Likelihood score (1-5)	Initial raw risk score (1 - 25)	Risk response	Controls / Mitigating actions	Control / Action owner	Deadline for controls/ actions
	If the proposed changes do not take account of the Equalities Act, then the Homeseeker Plus Allocations Policy could be challenged and deemed unlawful.	Martin Stacy	3	1	3	Reduce	An equality and diversity impact assessment has been completed by the partnership to help alleviate against this risk, and it will be reviewed post consultation and then published once approval is given to make any relevant changes to the Homeseeker Plus Policy. The policy is drafted in such a way as to still enable flexibility to be retained around key issues	Paul Tuckey	Winter 2026
	If the proposed changes to Homeseeker Plus Allocations Policy are not consulted on, then	Martin Stacy	3	3	9	Reduce	Cabinet approves recommendation to go out for consultation to stakeholders.	Paul Tuckey	Winter 2026

Risk ref	Risk description	Risk owner	Impact score (1-5)	Likelihood score (1-5)	Initial raw risk score (1 - 25)	Risk response	Controls / Mitigating actions	Control / Action owner	Deadline for controls/ actions
	opportunities for the changes to be carried out on an informed basis will be missed.								
	If the council does not review the Homeseeker Plus Policy, then opportunities to reduce inconsistency in operational practices across the districts will be missed and the policy will fail to reflect most recent case law and good practice.	Martin Stacy	2	3	6	Reduce	Recommendation to go out for consultation to reduce this risk.	Paul Tuckey	Winter 2026

