

Gloucestershire HOMESEEKER



Policy Document

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1. Introduction.

1.1. Gloucestershire Homeseeker is a choice based lettings (CBL) scheme run by the six Gloucestershire local authorities in partnership with the majority of Registered Providers operating within the County. The scheme is being introduced to meet the Government's target to implement choice based lettings in all local authority areas by 2010.

1.2. It must be recognised that the demand for affordable housing within the Gloucestershire Homeseeker 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/ Options Service will be able to discuss a range of housing solutions.

2. The aims and objectives of the Partnership.

- Assist in building more sustainable communities.
- Enable informed choice of housing/ options and improve levels of customer satisfaction.
- To operate a common selection system that offers realistic, informed choice for all households.
- To ensure that those who have the greatest need for housing have the greatest opportunity to secure it.
- To ensure that less able households 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.
- To enable the authorities to meet their statutory duties including where duties are owed to homeless households 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. The Homeseeker CBL Scheme.

3.1. Gloucestershire Homeseeker will enable landlords to advertise their homes and people will be asked to express an interest in them. This will be known as a "bid" for a property. The Homeseeker scheme will place in order those people who are eligible and have bid for a property, depending on their band and time on the waiting list and the criteria in the advert. Gloucestershire Homeseeker will provide a clearer way of letting homes, give more choice in where people wish to live and information about the homes available.

3.2. All households seeking social housing across Gloucestershire 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, households will be placed into one of four bands Emergency, Gold, Silver and Bronze subject to final verification by a Gloucestershire Homeseeker partner. In some cases an applicant may have a dual 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, households will be advised of their banding and an application date, together with a personal reference number. This will enable them to bid for social housing vacancies being advertised across the whole of Gloucestershire.

3.4. Initially only registered provider or local authority vacancies will be advertised through the scheme but it is hoped to link in with the private sector landlords at a later date.

3.5. The majority of social rented housing vacancies will be advertised as per local nomination agreements however registered providers may choose to apply their own published allocation policies to the remaining vacancies arising.

3.6. The preferred method of bidding for properties is via the internet on the Gloucestershire Homeseeker website. Alternatively bids can be made in person by visiting various locations throughout the County or by using an automated phone line. Households will be able to monitor the success of their bid (and their bidding history) via the Gloucestershire Homeseeker website.

3.7. Once the Bid deadline has passed, the successful household will normally be the highest priority household matched against the criteria for the property, including where local connection to a district or Gloucestershire County applies. The responsibility for letting each available property lies with the landlord. The landlord, subject to confirmation that the details on the application are current (this is known as verification and in most cases undertaken by the local authority), will then make an offer. Incorrect information will result in the offer being withdrawn and the household re-assessed. Landlords may sometimes choose to invite the “top” three households to a viewing of the property before a final offer is confirmed.

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

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

4. Equal opportunities.

4.1. All partners of Gloucestershire Homeseeker are committed to the elimination of discrimination and promotion of equality of opportunity for all and will work towards this goal, in the provision of services. We are committed to:

- Taking effective action to achieve the goal of removing discrimination and inequitable barriers.
- Making the best possible use of the existing and potential workforce and resources by enabling cross boundary moves.

- Not discriminating directly or indirectly through application conditions or requirements.
- Making equality of opportunity an integral part of our values, policies and practices and promote equal opportunities in the wider community.
- In pursuit of excellence of service to the customers, seeking to identify where groups or individuals face particular disadvantages and considering how services can best respond.

5. Social inclusion.

5.1. All partners of Gloucestershire Homeseeker believe that households should be given every assistance to access the housing register and search for suitable properties.

5.2. The Mental Capacity Act 2005 came into effect in England in April 2007, introducing a major overhaul of the law relating to individuals who lack capacity in decision making, particularly around changes in accommodation. The Act introduces a legal obligation on health and social care commissioners to jointly commission advocacy services and will have significant implications for the provision of supported housing, care and support services. To assist further, all statutory and voluntary agencies who work within the community either helping or advising households will be given information and training in order to fully understand the Gloucestershire Homeseeker scheme and thereby assist at first hand their clients to register and search for suitable housing.

5.3. To further assist households the following methods may be used: -

5.3.1. Households potentially disadvantaged by the scheme will initially be identified from the application process. Staff may contact these households and offer them a home visit or interview. Staff will seek to establish what the support needs are and identify ways of enabling the households to participate in Gloucestershire Homeseeker. This may include sending copies of the adverts in large print to a household or simply providing advice.

5.3.2. Staff may contact any professional or voluntary workers from health services, Children and Young Peoples Directorate or Gloucestershire Community and Adult Care Directorate with whom the household is involved to ensure they understand the procedures and that necessary support is provided. All agencies funded through Supporting People should be in a position to provide their clients with help on housing issues.

5.3.3. Disadvantaged households 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.

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

5.3.5. If no other alternative is available, Gloucestershire Homeseeker staff may bid for suitable vacancies on a vulnerable household's behalf where they have no support.

6. Who can register.

6.1. Gloucestershire Homeseeker is open to almost anyone. It 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.

6.2. You may not hold two tenancies at one time and must be able to end your current tenancy if you accept an offer of a tenancy.

6.3. A joint tenancy shall only be granted to eligible and suitable households subject to the policies of each individual landlord.

6.4. Owners of property may need to give an undertaking about the disposal of their property should they be offered a property.

7. Who cannot register.

- Persons from abroad deemed ineligible through immigration rules and regulations.
- Persons under 16 years of age. (It should be noted that a tenancy would not usually be given to households 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).
- Social housing is only available as your only or principal home so if you or anyone in your household own any other property, you are generally not eligible to have a tenancy (see section 9 for details of exceptions).

8. Local connection.

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

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

- Those who are normally resident in the local authority area.
(Local Government Association guidelines define 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 Government Association guidelines define this as employment other than of a casual nature);
- Those who have family connections in the local authority area.
(Local Government Association guidelines define this as immediate family members who have themselves lived in the area for five years).

8.3. 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.

9. Financial resources available to applicants.

9.1. An officer of the local housing authority or its agent will consider whether the household has the financial means to resolve their housing need. All eligible households are entitled to register for housing, but if they have an income or capital that will enable them to access suitable owner-occupied accommodation (including low cost home ownership), they will be encouraged and supported to take this option.

9.2. Some Registered Providers (such as those with charitable status) may have additional restrictions that prevent them from considering households who have sufficient financial means to access other forms of housing.

9.3. Homeowners with a proven social or medical need that they are not able to solve through sale or adaptation to their existing property may be considered regardless of income or capital (subject to an agreement regarding the disposal of the property).

10. Who may be excluded.

10.1 Gloucestershire Homeseeker has been established under the terms of the Housing Act 1996, as amended. Regulations made under the Act permit authorities to decide that a household is to be treated as ineligible for a letting of housing accommodation by them if they are satisfied that: -

(a) The household, 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 Registered Provider and

(b) In the circumstances at the time that their application is considered, they are unsuitable to be a tenant of the authority or a Registered Provider by reason of that behaviour.

10.2. Behaviour that may be regarded as unacceptable is: -

(a) Behaviour of the person concerned which would (if they were a secure or assured tenant of a local authority or a Registered Provider) entitle the landlord to a possession order under Section 84 of the Housing Act 1985 (c68) on any ground mentioned in Part 1 of the Schedule 2 to that Act (other than ground 8); or

(b) Behaviour of a member of their household which would (if they were a person residing with a secure tenant) entitle the landlord to such a possession order.

10.3. Whilst Gloucestershire Homeseeker aims to identify and re-house those in greatest housing need, this objective must be balanced by considering the effect on existing tenants of lettings decisions. The letting of housing to a household should not, in turn, create a need to re-house other households in the immediate neighbourhood for example because of disruptive or criminal behaviour.

10.4. Such cases will be subject to review to allow any subsequent changes in circumstances to be taken into account.

11. Reasons for suspending an application.

11.1. Households will not be entitled to bid for available properties and will be suspended by the lead authority if one of the following applies:-

- Any former or current rent arrears that could have led to a possession order being made against a tenant.

Households with rent arrears accrued after application, or other forms of existing housing debt to a former landlord, will not be able to bid for advertised vacancies until all debts are cleared or a satisfactory repayment arrangement (made with either an officer of the local authority or its agent or the current registered provider) has been maintained for an agreed period. The household will be notified and advised to contact the landlord to whom the debt is owed. Once an acceptable agreement has been reached and kept to, the household must inform the local authority to whom they applied or their current social landlord.

Where a household in the emergency band has former tenant arrears, Gloucestershire Homeseeker, in consultation with the landlord, may decide the individual circumstances of the case mean that the household can bid once payments have been made in line with an agreed repayment plan.

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. Households with a disability may not be suspended if the reason for the arrears is related to the person's disability.

- Anti-social behaviour that could lead to a possession order being made against an assured or secure tenant.

Where Gloucestershire Homeseeker is satisfied that a household or member of a household has been responsible for behaviour that would make the household unsuitable to be a tenant, their application may be suspended until the local authority is satisfied that the household can demonstrate there will be no recurrence. Households with a disability may not be suspended if the reason for the anti-social behaviour is related to the person's disability, except if the person's behaviour renders it necessary to exclude them to prevent endangerment to any person's health or safety.

Information will be given to explain what action will be necessary to lift the suspension.

12. Deliberately worsening situation or giving false information.

12.1. An immediate review of an application will be undertaken if a household is found to have acted (or failed to act) in a way which deliberately changed or worsened their housing situation in order to be placed into a band higher than they would normally have been awarded or if they have refused an excessive number of offers. This review could lead to the applicant being demoted to a lower band or the application being suspended.

12.2. If a household is re-housed after providing false information, steps may be taken to end the tenancy. It is a criminal offence for any person with a view to obtaining assistance, either for himself or anyone else, under sections 171 and 214 of the Housing Act 1996 to make false statements or deliberately to withhold information the Local Authority may reasonably require, or to fail to notify changes until a decision on the application is determined. There is a fine of up to £5000 for such an offence.

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

13. How to register.

13.1. The household will be able to register for housing in different ways including:

- The Internet.
- Local authority and some Registered Providers offices.
- Through support agencies.

13.2. A household residing in Gloucestershire who needs advice and assistance will need to contact their own local authority.

13.3. Where the household lives outside the Gloucestershire boundary they will need to contact the local authority within whose area they wish to live.

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

13.5. When a household applies, they will be asked a number of questions about their housing situation. If, after completion of the application and provision of any necessary proof or further information, the household is eligible, they will be given a unique application number, an effective date and placed in a housing band. They will then be able to bid for suitable properties. They will be required to supply information to verify their circumstances prior to a tenancy being accepted.

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

13.7. If Gloucestershire Homeseeker refuse the application on any grounds, the household will be notified of the reasons for the decision in writing and be advised of the Homeseeker review / appeal procedure.

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

13.9. Giving all households their own personal application number ensures confidentiality. This will also enable them to access their own application information and easily update any change in their circumstances.

13.10. Households will be informed if the application is not complete or if further information or clarification is required.

14. Applicants consent.

14.1. By registering to join Gloucestershire Homeseeker, the household will be giving their consent for enquiries to be made to verify their circumstances. Households will have to confirm that the information they have given is true and accurate.

15. Multi agency arrangements.

15.1. All six local authorities within the scheme have entered into an agreement to use the Gloucestershire 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 exchange protocol.

15.2. 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.

15.3. 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.

15.4. 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.

16. Balanced communities.

16.1. 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.

17. Assessment of an application.

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

17.2. They will be able to bid for properties advertised, but no tenancy can be granted until verification has been completed.

17.3. Applicants with certain criteria will only keep their priority of full choice for a limited time, after which the priority will be reviewed and a direct match may be made or the band may be reduced.

18. Housing Needs Bands.

Applicants need to meet the criteria in one box to be eligible for that band in the table below. Applicants will be awarded two bands – one for their “local” band and one for their “global” band. In many cases these will be the same, but in some circumstances (notably when one Local Authority has accepted a duty under the homelessness legislation) applicants will have different “local” and “global” banding.

	Property size etc.	Property conditions (This only applies to the district in which the Notice is made)	Homelessness (This only applies to the district in which a homeless application is made)	Medical/ Disability	Multiple Needs	General	Multiple Criteria
<u>EMERGENCY BAND</u>	Giving up family sized social rented housing in the County to move to considerably smaller or non family accommodation.	Where a property has been assessed by Environmental Services as an imminent risk of serious harm such as due to disrepair, major defects, infestation and inadequate facilities. E.g. Emergency Prohibition Notice served. (Time limit 2 months)	Where the homelessness duty criteria applies, plus one or more criteria in the gold band. (Time limit 2 months)	Assessed as immediate need for rehousing on medical grounds. (Time limit 2 months)	Exceptional circumstances where there is a proven threat to life or limb or three or more persons with multiple needs where their current property has a significant detrimental effect on their social or medical well-being. (Time limit 2 months)	Move-on from Supported accommodation and/or where a multi agency planned move is agreed by the relevant local authority and there is continuing relevant support in place. (Time limit 2 months)	Two or more criteria in the Gold Band. (Time limit 2 months)
<u>GOLD BAND</u>	Major overcrowding (lacking two or more bedrooms).	Where a Prohibition Notice (or Suspended Prohibition Notice) has been served on a property by Environmental Services due to disrepair, major defects infestation, or inadequate facilities.	A Statutory duty to re-house as Statutory Homeless or threatened with homelessness. (Time limit 2 months)	Assessed urgent medical need or long term disability which would be alleviated by a move to more suitable accommodation.	Two persons in the household where their current property has a detrimental effect on their social wellbeing or moderate medical need	Left in occupation of Social rented housing such as Succession where the Household is required to move. (Time limit 2 months)	Two or more criteria in the Silver Band.
<u>SILVER BAND</u>	Overcrowding (lacking one bedroom, but not homeless)		Non priority need homeless, Priority need but intentionally homeless. Household threatened with homelessness within the local district, with no resources to solve own housing need, and has accepted a prevention solution, but remains in a non secure tenancy.	Assessed moderate medical need or disability which would be alleviated by a move to more suitable accommodation.	One person in the household where their current property, or lack of facilities, has a detrimental effect on their social well-being (but not homeless)	Child under 10 years in a flat with no exclusive front door and living above or below ground level.	
<u>BRONZE BAND</u>	All Applicants eligible to register who do not meet any of the criteria above.						

19. Time limited bands.

19.1. Certain categories have a time limit of two months. This is given to recognise an urgent need. It is therefore important that Households in this category are bidding for all suitable properties each week.

19.2. At the end of the two month period the case will be reviewed by Gloucestershire Homeseeker.

19.3. If the Household is in a time limited band due to either Homelessness or a Prohibition Notice being served and has either not bid for suitable properties advertised within the 2 months or has been unsuccessful in obtaining an offer of a tenancy within the two month limit, a direct match of a property will be considered.

19.4. If the Household is in a time limited band due to other reasons and no suitable properties have been advertised, the time limit may be extended after the review for a further two months.

19.5. Gloucestershire Homeseeker may however decide to demote a Household to the band below at the end of the two month period if they wish to wait for a particular type of property.

20. Definition and implication of dates.

20.1. 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.

20.2. Households who are currently on the previous Housing Registers operated by the Gloucestershire Homeseeker partners will be given their first application date under that scheme as long as the new application is made within the time allowed in the initial notification letter. If the new application is not made within the time stated in the notification letter, the effective date will be the date the new application is made and verified by a Gloucestershire Homeseeker partner.

20.3. The application date is the date a fully completed online application form is submitted by the household.

20.4 The effective date is the date a completed application form is placed into a housing band after verification by a Gloucestershire Homeseeker partner.

20.5. The band start date is the date a household moves up to a higher band following a change of circumstances.

20.6. 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 Gloucestershire Homeseeker to ensure that the household is not disadvantaged (or given an advantage) by the change in circumstances.

20.7. Where a household 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.

20.8. If the household'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.

21. Bedroom deficiency.

21.1. The bedroom need for a household is assessed using the following guidelines;

One bedroom is required for;

An adult couple,

A person aged 18 or over.

2 young people aged up to 18 years of age of the same sex.

2 children aged up to 8 years of age of different sexes.

21.2. 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.

21.3. An extra bedroom may be considered where a proven need is identified (e.g. medical need, children of the same sex with an age gap greater than 10 years or shared accommodation).

21.4. Where an applicant has part-time access to a dependent child or children and seeks an additional bedroom, consideration will be given to the individual circumstances. This may include whether there is a court order or formal custody agreement, whether the applicant is the payee for child benefit payments, the number of children and if the children stay with the applicant for 50% or more of the week.

22. Medical / Disability assessments.

22.1. Physical disability.

A household'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 Gloucestershire Community and Adult Care Directorate or Children and Young Peoples Directorate. An assessment will then be carried out and a detailed report forwarded to the appropriate local authority to determine housing need.

22.2. Medical condition.

Households 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 will be requested from the appropriate independent medical advisor. The household may be required to pay towards the related costs incurred. Their assessment will be based on the household'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 that condition.

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

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

23. Hazard assessments (such as disrepair).

23.1. The application form asks households about the condition of their current home. Where a household indicates the property possesses potential risks to Health and Safety they should contact the local authority within the district that they reside as in certain circumstances an inspection of the property may be appropriate.

23.2. Following an inspection, depending on the condition of the property, a level of priority will be allocated which will determine the band in which the household is placed. Existing social housing tenants should contact their own landlord direct.

24. Reviewing applications.

24.1. Where a household has not made a bid for any suitable advertised properties within the previous twelve months, they will be contacted to see if they still wish to remain on the Gloucestershire Homeseeker Register. If there is no response within 28 days from the date of the letter being sent, the application will be cancelled. If the household 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 Gloucestershire Homeseeker.

25. Cancelling applications.

25.1. An application will be cancelled from the Gloucestershire Homeseeker Register in the following circumstances.

- At the request of the household.
- Where a household does not respond to an application review, within the specified time limit.
- Where a household's housing need has been met, such as by the offer of a tenancy after a successful bid.
- Where the household moves and does not provide a contact address.
- Where the applicant has died.
- Where the household has been excluded as a result of perpetrating Anti Social Behaviour or Racial Harassment subsequent to registering on the Gloucestershire Homeseeker Scheme.

25.2. When an application has been cancelled, the household or their representative will, if appropriate, be notified in writing or by e-mail. Where a household has been highlighted as vulnerable, the local authority will contact the household to check their circumstances before cancelling the application.

25.3. Any household whose application has been cancelled has the right to ask for a review of the decision within 21 days of notification.

26. Rejoining the Housing Register.

26.1. Where a household wishes to re-join the housing register at a later date, their new date of application will be the date they re-register.

27. Completed applications.

27.1. Once the household has been assessed and accepted onto the Gloucestershire Homeseeker scheme, they will receive, within 28 days, notification, confirming their application details. This will include;

- a) The band in which the household 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 household is eligible (this may show a minimum and maximum figure depending on the family size of the household).
- c) The effective date (and band start date if applicable).
- d) A reminder about the importance of notifying any change in circumstances.
- e) A personal reference number to allow households to make bids.
- f) Details of the documents required before an offer of accommodation can be made.
- g) The Homeseeker appeal procedure.

28. Change of circumstances.

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

29. Looking for a home.

29.1. Once households have been registered on the Gloucestershire Homeseeker scheme and notified of banding and reference number, they can start to look and bid for a property of their choice.

30. Advertising.

30.1. 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 Gloucestershire Homeseeker is accessible to anyone with Internet access. The website will allow households to view all available properties across the whole of Gloucestershire and bid ‘on-line’ for properties of their choice.

Newsletters:

Adverts placed into free Gloucestershire Homeseeker newsletters, which can be viewed in a number of localities across the County.

31. Bidding for a property.

31.1. Where a household meets the eligibility criteria, they may bid for that property within the deadline given.

31.2. Households 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 household can withdraw their bid if they wish to bid for another property.

31.3. Households may bid for properties via the Gloucestershire Homeseeker website, by phone, text or approved assisted bidding (family member, support worker etc.).

31.4. 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 be subject to a by-pass if they do not meet the criteria of the advert or the scheme.

32. Advertisement deadlines.

32.1. All advertisements will carry a deadline by which time all bids for particular properties must be received. The advert will be published on the same day each week.

33. Property descriptions.

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

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

k) Where rural settlement or local letting policies apply.

l) If a Registered Provider's allocation policy applies.

34. Rural settlements.

34.1. 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 households 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.

35. Local Letting Plans.

35.1. The Gloucestershire Homeseeker Partnership is committed to creating balanced communities. 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.

36. Decision procedure.

36.1. Once the advert deadline has passed, a shortlist can be produced for each advertised property showing all the households who have bid for each of them. For each property advertised, the successful household will generally be the household who has the oldest effective date within the highest band that is eligible to bid (i.e. meets the criteria in the advert and the policy).

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

- a) Local district connection (if specified in the advert).
- b) Local ward/parish connection (if specified in the advert).
- c) Preferred band (if specified in the advert).
- d) Band start date.
- e) Effective date.
- f) Application date.

36.3. Each individual landlord is responsible for checking to ensure there has been no change of circumstances, since verification, to the housing need assessment of the household.

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

36.5. A landlord may choose to invite the top three households on the shortlist to view the property at the same time in case it is refused by the highest placed household.

36.6 Should a household be at the top of the shortlist for more than one property (and not subject to a by-pass), one of the landlords of the properties will contact the household as quickly as possible and ask them to decide which one 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 landlord's discretion.

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

37. By-passing the top of the shortlist.

37.1. A by-pass is where an applicant has bid for a property and meets the advertised criteria but is not offered the tenancy.

37.2. The landlord will inform the household in writing of the by-pass and of any steps needed to prevent further by-passes for the same reason.

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

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

37.4. Households 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 household that is eligible for the property and any further restriction due to the Landlord's own published allocation policy. If the household is at the top of the shortlist but does not meet all these criteria, the Landlord may not consider the household. This is not a by-pass.

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

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

37.7. If there is an occasion where two or more households have the same band, effective date and application date, the landlord will make a decision which household best meets the aims and objectives of the Gloucestershire Homeseeker scheme.

38. Withdrawal of property.

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

38.2. 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 labeled.

38.3. If this happens, the landlord will inform the successful household that the property is no longer available. If the property is not ready for occupation following a successful bid and the household is likely to wait some considerable time before being able to sign the tenancy agreement, the landlord will inform the household and give them the option to withdraw their bid so they can bid for any other suitable properties.

39. Refusals.

39.1. Households are expected to take reasonable care when bidding for a property to ensure it meets their needs. If however a household decides to refuse an offer of accommodation, the property will be offered to the next suitable household. An application may however be reviewed (section 12.1) if an excessive number of properties are refused.

39.2. If a household in a time limited band refuses an offer of accommodation the application will be reviewed and may be placed in a lower band.

40. Refusals by Households to whom the full homeless duty is owed.

40.1. The local authority will normally expect a household to whom it has accepted a full homeless duty to bid for a wide range of suitable properties within the two month time limit in the Gold Band or Emergency Band.

40.2. If a homeless household has not been actively bidding for suitable properties or at the end of the two month time limit, the local authority will secure an offer of a property it considers suitable for the household by a direct match.

40.3. If a homeless household refuses an offer of suitable accommodation made by a direct match, the local authority is likely to decide that its duty under the Homeless Legislation is discharged, subject to the statutory review process.

40.4. Homeless households 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.

40.5. If a household 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 household has this right whether or not they refuse or accept the offer of accommodation. If the review finds in favour of the homeless household, alternative accommodation will be offered via a direct match. However if the reasonableness and suitability of the offer is upheld, the homeless duty is ended and the banding will be reviewed and the household may be moved to

a lower band. **Households are therefore advised to accept an offer, occupy the property and then appeal under these grounds.**

41. Direct matching of properties.

41.1. A direct match is a property which is not available through the Gloucestershire Homeseeker Scheme. All the partner landlords are committed to advertising as many of their vacant properties as possible through Gloucestershire Homeseeker. 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 majorworks 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.
- Households 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.

42. Feedback.

42.1. Accompanying each advert will be a feedback section giving details of the properties previously advertised. Household's personal details will not be included. The feedback given will include:

- a) Property size and type.
- b) Property location.
- c) Number of households who applied for each property.
- d) Band of successful household.
- e) Effective date/ Band start date of successful household.

42.2. Using this information, households 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.

43. Review / appeal procedure.

43.1. Once a household has been notified of the band in which they have been placed, or of their ineligibility, they will have the right to request a review of the decision. Reviews must be submitted in writing, to the local authority that dealt with the application within 28 days of the date on the notification. The appeal should include the reason why the household believes the decision is incorrect, together with any additional information. The local authority will then forward the review to the Gloucestershire Homeseeker Assessment Panel.

43.2. Stage One.

All reviews will be considered by the Gloucestershire Homeseeker Assessment Panel, (the panel will include a representative from the authority receiving the complaint and additional officers from two of the remaining local authorities). The household will be notified of the panel's decision within 56 days from the date of the appeal.

43.3. Stage Two.

If the household is still unhappy with the decision made by the Gloucestershire Homeseeker Assessment panel, they may request a further review to be carried out through the relevant local authority's complaints procedure. The request must be made in writing to the appropriate authority within 14 days of the date of the written notification from the Gloucestershire Homeseeker Assessment panel.

43.4. Stage Three.

If the household still disagrees with the decision made through the local authority complaint process they can then complain directly to the Local Government Ombudsman. The Oaks, 2 Westwood Way, Westwood Business Park, Coventry. CV4 8JB. Telephone 024 7682 0000.

44. Access to personal Information.

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

45. Use of statistical information.

45.1. The information supplied by households 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.

46. Policy review.

46.1. The Gloucestershire Homeseeker policy will be regularly reviewed to ensure that it takes into account change in demand and need within the County, that it continues to meet its aims and objectives and that it complies with any legislative changes.

46.2. Any changes to the Gloucestershire Homeseeker 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.

Last amended 22/09/2009