



# Allocation Scheme



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## **HOME CHOICE PLUS PARTNERSHIP**

### **List of partners**

#### **Local Authorities**

Bromsgrove District Council, Stratford-on Avon District Council and Wyre Forest District Council

#### **Housing Associations**

Anchor Trust, Bourneville VillageTrust, Bromford Group, Bromsgrove District Housing Trust, , Cottsway, Citizen, Community Housing Group, Fosseyway Housing, Fry Housing Trust, Greensquare Housing Group, Hanover Housing Group, Housing 21, London and Quadrant, Midland Heart Ltd, Orbit Heart of England, Optivo, Pershore Alms Houses, Platform Housing Group, Rooftop Housing Group, Sanctuary Housing Association, Sage, Stonewater Housing Association, Warwickshire Rural Housing Association, Walsall Housing Group

## Glossary of terms

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Affordable housing</b>	housing let at a social or affordable rent or a low cost home ownership property let to a specified eligible household whose needs are not met in the market. Also known as social housing
<b>Allocation</b>	an offer of housing from a Housing Association or Local Authority either directly or via a nomination from a Local Authority
<b>Band start date</b>	the date the household is awarded the banding applicable to their housing need
<b>Banding/bands</b>	the prioritisation of households on the housing register based on their housing need
<b>Bid</b>	Households' expression of interest in an available / vacant property
<b>Direct matching</b>	an allocation outside of the Home Choice Policy/Scheme. Please see the policy for more details.
<b>Home Choice Plus Allocations Policy / Allocations policy</b>	the policy document that determines how housing is allocated to households
<b>Home Choice Plus Partnership</b>	A group of local authorities operating the same Allocation Scheme (known as "the partnership")
<b>Home Choice Plus Scheme / Allocations Scheme</b>	the scheme including the software, the policy and the processes involved for allocating housing to households
<b>Homelessness</b>	The legal definition of homelessness in the Housing Act 1996 Part VII / Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 is that a person is homeless if they have no accommodation available to them in the UK or anywhere which would be reasonable for them to continue to occupy. They would also be homeless if they have accommodation but are not able to gain access to it, or if it is a moveable structure but they have nowhere to place it. A person is threatened with homelessness if they are likely to become homeless within the next 56 days.
<b>Housing Association</b>	for the purposes of this Scheme also includes Registered Providers and refers to social housing providers regulated by the Homes England
<b>Housing Register</b>	a database/list of households who have applied for affordable housing
<b>Local Authority Agents</b>	organisations that act on behalf of the Local Authority in relation to the Housing Register and Homelessness, under a contractual arrangement usually Housing Associations
<b>Local connection</b>	a household's connection to a local area or authority including residency, family connections and employment

<b>Persons from abroad</b>	people subject to immigration control and any other persons from abroad where the secretary of state makes regulations
<b>Qualification Criteria</b>	To join the Housing Register the applicant must meet the eligible qualification criteria which relates to connection to the Partnership area and Housing Need
<b>Reasonable preference</b>	categories of housing need which are defined by the Housing Act 1996, Part Six that are required to be included in an allocations policy
<b>Registration / Effective date</b>	the date of registration of the Housing Application
<b>Shared Ownership</b>	Affordable housing option where the applicant parts buys and part rents a property. The Registered Provider owns the remaining share of the property.
<b>Statutorily homeless</b>	This term describes those households who have made a homeless application to a Home Choice Plus local authority or its agent and where the full homeless duty has been accepted. This means the household has been determined to be eligible, homeless, in priority need, unintentionally homeless and having a local connection and has been issued with a written decision which confirms this.
<b>Weekly bidding cycle</b>	the period of time available for households to place bids on properties they are interested in

## 1. Introduction

Home Choice Plus is a scheme used to advertise and/or allocate social rented, low cost home ownership and privately rented properties which has been agreed by the Home Choice Plus Partnership (the Partnership) and operates in the same way across a number of Local Authority areas including;

- **Bromsgrove District Council**
- **Stratford-on-Avon District Council**
- **Wyre Forest District Council**

Within the Home Choice Plus Scheme is an **allocation policy** which outlines how the Partnership will prioritise households on the Housing Register.

The Districts mentioned above work in partnership with a number of Housing Associations to allocate social housing in a fair and transparent way. **Housing Associations and Registered Providers will have their own Allocations Policies which they will apply when allocating to their properties. This means applicants at the top of the Housing Register on banding and date time may not be rehoused by the Housing Association / Registered Provider if they don't meet the requirements of their allocations policy.**

Collectively the partnership has the following aims;;

### **Aims of the partnership**

- We are committed to working in partnership to offer a choice from a range of housing options for people in housing need.
- We aim to challenge the perception that the way social housing is allocated is unfair by ensuring that Home Choice Plus is easy to understand, transparent and fair.
- We will work to ensure that households are able to access the service we provide.
- We will develop sustainable communities by enabling people to make realistic and informed choices about where they wish to live.
- We will make effective use of all affordable housing stock.
- We will ensure that local people will have an enhanced priority within the banding structure.
- We want to encourage and recognise households who make a positive contribution to their community
- We will assist in achieving mobility across the participating Local Authority areas.
- We will enable a better understanding of the housing demand.

- We will ensure the scheme meets our equalities duties.
- We will publish information that enables households to understand how we assist them through the allocations scheme

Access to Home Choice Plus is via a single register for housing; households only have to register for the scheme once and are then able to bid for vacancies advertised in any of the participating Local Authority areas.

Home Choice Plus enables people with a housing need to look for a home in an area of their choice. Households registered with Home Choice Plus will be banded according to the suitability of their current accommodation to meet their needs and their local connection.

### **What are Allocations under this Scheme?**

The following are allocations of accommodation under this Scheme:

1. The nomination of an applicant or existing tenant to be an Assured or an Assured Shorthold tenant of housing accommodation held by a Housing Association (via a Council's Nomination Rights Agreement with the Housing Association). Often the nomination will be that of a 'Starter Tenant' of a Housing Association whereby the Housing Association will grant an Assured Shorthold Tenancy for a set probationary period (usually 12 months) and provided the tenant successfully completes the probationary period the Housing Association will grant an Assured Tenancy or a fixed term tenancy (please see individual Housing Association / Registered Provider's tenancy policies).

By 'affordable housing' we mean social rent and affordable rent, allocated to specified eligible households whose needs are not met in the market. It should meet the needs of eligible households, including availability at a cost low enough for them to afford, determined with regard to local incomes and local house prices.

The ways in which we advise and assist applicants on a whole range of housing options, including access to the private rented sector and low cost home-ownership opportunities, can be found on the Home Choice Plus website [www.homechoiceplus.org.uk](http://www.homechoiceplus.org.uk) and the partner Local Authorities' websites.

A list of Local Authorities' contact points can be found at Appendix 1

The scheme may also be used to advertise intermediate market rent, shared ownership and private rented properties. Please see the eligibility criteria of the relevant landlord for more details regarding allocation of these types of properties.



## **Allocations Policy**

This Allocations Policy describes how you can qualify for the Home Choice Plus scheme and how it prioritises housing applicants to identify their housing need with regard to the legal definition of Reasonable Preference and other categories of housing need that the Steering Group have recognised.

Whilst all applicants are assessed in accordance with the scheme, the allocation of properties will be subject to the allocation policies of individual Housing Associations where they have one who will assess applicants on the Housing Register according to their stated priorities. They may have different rules about the number of people who can live in a home of a particular size. This will be made clear when a property is advertised. For more information regarding the letting of properties please see the Home Choice Plus Partnership website.

This policy sets out in detail who can or cannot be accepted under the policy and how this assessment is made. It also sets out how applicants can apply for and access housing.

We have designed the Allocations Policy to meet current legal requirements and to promote sustainable communities and balance housing markets.

## The Legal Framework

This Allocations Scheme complies with the requirements of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended) and takes into account the relevant code of guidance Allocation of Accommodation Code of Guidance 2012 which replaced the previous codes of guidance. All of these documents can be obtained through the DCLG website. The Scheme also complies with the Localism Act 2011, Welfare Reform legislation and Equalities Act 2010 where applicable.

This section describes this legal framework.

The 1996 Housing Act (as amended by the 2002 Homelessness Act and Homelessness Reduction Act 2017) requires local authorities to make all allocations and nominations in accordance with an Allocations Scheme. A summary of the Allocations Scheme must be published and made available free of charge to any person who asks for a copy. A summary of the Allocations Scheme and general principles is available through the Home Choice Plus website [www.homechoiceplus.org.uk](http://www.homechoiceplus.org.uk) and at partner Local Authority and Housing Associations offices.

The Housing Act 1996, (as amended) requires local authorities to give Reasonable Preference in their allocations policies to people with high levels of assessed housing need. This includes homeless people, those who need to move on welfare or medical grounds, people living in unsatisfactory housing and those who would face hardship unless they moved to a particular locality within the local authority's area.

The Act also requires local authorities to state within the policy its position on offering applicants a choice of housing accommodation, or offering them the opportunity to express preference about the housing accommodation to be allocated to them.

The policy is also drafted and framed to ensure that it is compatible with the Partnership's equality duties including the duty to eliminate unlawful discrimination and to promote good relations between different racial groups, as well the duty to promote equality between disabled persons and other persons and between men and women. The Partnership has carried out an Equality Impact Assessment in relation to the policy.

This Policy has considered:

- The partner Local Authorities' statutory obligations and discretion as to who is eligible for housing allocation
- The partner Local Authorities' statutory obligation to provide Reasonable Preference to certain categories of applicants set down by law i.e. those who must be given a greater priority under the Allocations Policy.
- The partner Local Authorities' statutory discretion to grant "additional preference" and/or to determine priority between applicants with Reasonable Preference.
- The general and specific statutory discretions the partners can exercise when allocating housing.

## Service Standards

### We will aim to;

- Register all eligible applications within 10 working days (where full information is available) Please note some applications can take up to four weeks to assess
- Process all supporting information within 10 working days
- Complete shortlists (match suggested) for properties within 5 working days of advertising cycle ending
- Advise all applicants excluded from the housing register within 5 working days with the reason for the exclusion
- Assist applicants to bid for properties where required
- Respond to applicants letters, client messages and emails within 10 working days
- Respond to telephone calls within 1 working day

### What we ask of you...

- Speak to us in a polite and courteous manner
- Provide us with the information we need, so we can help you
- Contact us if you are unable to keep appointments
- Inform us with any changes in your circumstances which may affect the service we provide to you
- If you are unhappy with the service you have received, please contact us
- If you are happy with the service let us know

## 2. Statement on Choice

### Choice and Constraints

We are committed to offering the greatest choice possible in the allocation of housing through the Home Choice Plus scheme. However this is in the context of considerable pressure on allocations within our affordable housing stock and which means we will therefore have qualification criteria covering who is and isn't eligible to join the waiting list.

Whilst keen to encourage and facilitate mobility within housing, the Home Choice Plus Partnership recognises that provision of choice has to be balanced along with local needs. Those without a connection to any Local Authority within the partnership, will not be eligible to go on the housing register unless they meet one of the exceptions criteria.

In determining priority for housing within the banding structure, a higher degree of preference will be awarded to applicants who have the greatest need and have a local connection within a Local Authority area.

Applicants have the opportunity to view details of all properties that are available and to choose to 'bid' for properties for which they are eligible.

Whilst a key objective of the Home Choice Plus scheme is to offer applicants more choice, there will be a number of exceptional situations where this may not be possible, for instance;

- Where the applicant does not meet the eligibility criteria for the scheme or the vacant property.
- Where a Local Lettings Plan has been agreed and the applicant does not qualify.
- Where there is a legal agreement restricting who can be offered the property.
- Where the applicant is statutory homeless, or is a prevention or relief case under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017

These exceptional circumstances will be made clear when the property is advertised, unless the exceptional circumstance concerns the individual specifically (who has bid for the property) in which case it will be discussed with the applicant at the point of allocation.

Applicants who bid on and subsequently refuse properties for no reason will be moved into the Reduced Priority Band – for further details please see the relevant section in the Allocations Policy.

The Home Choice Plus Partnership will collect information from applicants about their particular preferences regarding where they want to live. This is to support our work in identifying housing needs and demands within specific parts of districts.

### **3. Eligibility and Reasonable Preference**

#### **Who is and who is not eligible under this Scheme.**

#### **Who can apply to register on the Home Choice Plus scheme?**

Any United Kingdom resident aged 16 years or over can apply to join the scheme by completing an application form. The Home Choice Plus policy does exercise an eligibility criteria and so not all applications will be accepted where there is no close association to the area and/or where there is no housing need (please see information on Bronze Plus and Bronze Banding). Please see the following sections regarding the eligibility criteria.

Anybody can make joint applications including married couples, civil partners, cohabiting couples, same sex couples, and brothers and sisters. In such cases, it is usual for a joint tenancy to be granted in the event of an offer of accommodation being made. The eligibility of applicants to be on the Housing Register will also be checked at the point of allocation.

#### **Qualification Eligibility Criteria**

Applicants are not eligible to join the Home Choice Plus housing register unless they met the qualifying criteria of a close association outlined below;

In determining whether the household has a close association we will agree a connection exists in the following circumstances;

- Where the local connection arises due to residency the applicant(s) must have lived in the partnership area (by choice) for a minimum period of two years.
- Where the applicant(s) meets any of the statutory homelessness definitions included in the allocations policy.
- Where the local connection arises due to employment and the applicant(s) have been in permanent, paid employment for a minimum period of six months, within one of the Local Authority areas included in the Partnership, immediately prior to the application (please see further information below).
- Where the applicant(s) has a close (immediate) family member living in the HC+ partnership area and has done so for a minimum period of five years, immediately prior to the application (please see further information below).
- Where the applicant has resided in the Partnership area for three out of the last five years at the point of application
- Has a local connection as a result of special circumstances (this would include people with a reasonable preference without a local connection identified above)

Local connection for homeless purposes will be assessed having regard to the definition of local connection contained in Section 199 Housing Act 1996 (in the case of homeless applicants) and the various codes of guidance.

In determining permanent employment we will give consideration to the Local Government Association guidelines which state that this is employment other than that of a casual nature.

In determining close family member we mean mother, father, sister, brother or adult child (aged 18 and over).

If an applicant(s) hasn't got a connection that meets the qualification criteria and claims a connection on the basis of special circumstances e.g. a care leaver from the partnership area accommodated elsewhere, then the decision about allowing them on the list must be made by a senior officer or manager.

Where the applicant is a member of the armed forces there are special arrangements – please see further details within this policy.

Applicants with a local connection to the Partnership area will be awarded Gold Plus, Gold or Bronze Plus band depending on their housing need for Districts where they have a connection. For Districts where they do not have a connection, the applicant will be awarded Silver Plus, Silver or Bronze in accordance with their housing need.

### **Residency of Choice**

For the purposes of determining eligibility on residency grounds, living in the Local Authority area will not include the following:

- Occupation of a mobile home, caravan or motor caravan where it is not their only or principal home
- Occupation of a holiday letting (which includes a permanent building, hotel or bed and breakfast accommodation) for the purposes of a holiday.
- Resident of a prison, Bail Hostel or other such accommodation.
- In-Patient of Hospitals/specialist centres where they have a connection elsewhere

Under the Homeless Reduction Act, Care Leavers will have a local connection with the area of the local authority that owes them leaving care duties – therefore if someone is placed in care by Worcestershire County Council they will have a local connection with all six Local Housing Authorities in Worcestershire.

A care leaver aged under 21 who normally lives in a different area to that of the local authority that owes them leaving care duties, and has done for at least 2 years including some time before they turned 16; will also have a local connection in that area. For example if Worcestershire County Council places a young person in Stratford District Council before they turn 16 and they are in care in Stratford District Council for two year period the young person will have a local connection with Stratford and all of Worcestershire.

### **Housing Need**

Applicant(s) wishing to join the Home Choice Plus Housing Register must have a housing need recognised by the Allocations Scheme. This will include those applicant(s) with reasonable preference, those who are underoccupying social housing stock and those covered by the categories outlined on page 37 under the Bronze Plus / Bronze sections. Applicant(s) not satisfying at least one of these

criteria will not be registered and will be offered alternative housing options. Applicant(s) will also be offered the right to request a review of this decision.

### **Age Eligibility Criteria**

#### **Young people aged between 16 – 18**

Young people aged between 16 and 18 can apply to Home Choice Plus and will be registered. For young people under the age of 18 years the Housing Association may grant permission to allow the occupation of a property by way of an “Equitable Tenancy” however a Housing Association / Registered Providers will not normally grant a tenancy to anyone under the age of 18 years unless they are also able to provide a guarantor to cover rent. Please refer to individual Housing Association and Registered Providers policies for more details.

#### **Persons from abroad**

Applicants must have a right to live in the United Kingdom and be entitled to claim public funds. This will include applicants who are British Citizens, EEA nationals who are habitually resident in the United Kingdom, exercising their right as a worker or have settled or pre-settled status. People applying to join the Housing Register have to provide documents to confirm their identity and their immigration status.

A person from abroad (or two or more persons jointly if any of them is an ineligible person) is ineligible for an allocation of housing accommodation if they are subject to immigration control within the meaning of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996, or are excluded from entitlement to housing benefit by s.115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 (c 33) (exclusion from benefits) unless they are of a class prescribed by regulations made by the Secretary of State. Persons who are subject to immigration control and eligible for housing assistance are;

- Refugee status
- Exceptional leave to remain
- Indefinite leave to remain

This does not apply to a person who is already a secure or introductory tenant of the Council or housing association.

If an applicant has any further questions regarding their status they should contact the Council or seek independent legal advice.

Households who are living abroad and therefore not habitually resident will not be eligible to register.

Applicants who have been considered as ineligible due to immigration status can re-apply at any time.

#### **Persons with no local connection to the Partnership**

Applicants who have no local connection to the partnership area will not be eligible to join Home Choice Plus.

However the following categories will be exempt and will be eligible to register;

- Households accepted as statutory homeless under the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by Homelessness Act 2002 and Homelessness Reduction Act 2017) by a Local Authority (or its agent) in the Home Choice Plus Partnership which has not yet been discharged

- Households with a reasonable preference under the 1985 Housing Act
- Households where one of the Local Authorities are satisfied that the applicant(s) needs to live in the area to provide ongoing, regular and significant care and support to a relative who lives in the area and their application is supported by the local Adult or Childrens Services team.
- Households where one of the Local Authorities (or its agent) has agreed to rehouse the applicant under a reciprocal agreement with their current landlord or local authority
- Households where rehousing or relocation into the Local Authority area is accepted by the Local Authority (or its agent) as being essential due to public protection issues or for other exceptional reasons.
- Members of the armed forces as outlined in the Allocations Scheme
- Social housing tenants who need to move because they work or have been offered work in the Partnership Area and they have a genuine intention to take up the offer and will suffer hardship otherwise
- Where a Local Letting Plan or s106 restriction applies on a specific site

### **Section 106 sites**

Where an applicant meets the eligibility criteria established in the s106 agreement, but not the Qualifying Criteria in the Allocations Policy, they will be permitted to join the housing register but will only be considered for the relevant s106 property/site.

### **Unacceptable behaviour**

Where the applicant, or a member of their household, has been guilty of unacceptable behaviour serious enough to make him unsuitable to be a tenant of the relevant authority, they will be ineligible for registration.

Unacceptable behaviour is defined as behaviour which would, if an applicant or member of their household was a secure tenant, entitle a landlord to outright possession under any of the Grounds 1 to 7, Schedule 2 of the Housing Act 1985.

Unacceptable behaviour can include:

- Owing significant rent arrears and/or failing to comply with a current tenancy condition with a Council, Housing Association or private landlord to such an extent that a Court would grant a possession order.
- Conviction for using the property for an illegal or immoral purpose.
- Causing nuisance and annoyance to neighbours or visitors for example anti-social behaviour.
- Being convicted for committing certain indictable offences in or near the home and still posing a threat to neighbours or the community.



- Being violent towards a partner or members of the family.
- Allowing the condition of the property to deteriorate.
- Allowing any furniture or fixtures provided by the landlord to deteriorate due to ill treatment.
- Obtaining a tenancy by deception, for example by giving untrue information.
- Paying money to illegally obtain a tenancy.
- Having lost tied accommodation provided in connection with employment due to conduct making it inappropriate for the person to reside there.

In determining whether an applicant is ineligible due to unacceptable behaviour, the Council, or its agent, will consider:

- Has the applicant or a member of the applicant's household been guilty of unacceptable behaviour?
- Was the unacceptable behaviour serious enough to have entitled the Landlord to obtain an order for possession?
- At the time of the application, is the applicant still unsuitable to be a tenant by reason of that behaviour, or the behaviour of a member of their household who wishes to reside with them?

The applicant will be excluded from the housing register and the applicant does have a right to review against this decision. This decision will be taken by the District Council, or its agent. An applicant may be rendered ineligible at anytime during the process should Home Choice Plus become satisfied that they are ineligible.

Applicants classified as being ineligible for any reason can make an application for accommodation in the future if their circumstances have changed for any reason. It is for the Local Authority (or it's agent) to consider behaviour, at the point of application to the housing register, and whether they are now eligible under the Policy.

Each application will be assessed on its merits and a decision regarding eligibility will be made accordingly. Anyone deemed ineligible for the Scheme will be provided with a full written explanation for the decision and will have a right of review of the decision.

Please see the section on Reviews below.

### **Applicants who are not eligible to join the housing register**

At the point of registration all applicants are asked for information about their housing history and legal status to establish eligibility to join the housing register under the relevant legislation and this allocations policy.

Applicants are not assessed for the Scheme or placed into a Band until a decision has been made regarding their eligibility.

## Armed Forces

Members of the UK armed forces stationed abroad will be considered as living in the United Kingdom for the purposes of applying for social housing.

The Localism Act 2011 amends the Housing Act 1996 to give local housing authorities in England the power to decide what classes of persons are or are not qualifying persons under section 160ZA(7) of the Housing Act 1996, for an allocation of housing accommodation.

The Secretary of State has the power to prescribe in Regulations criteria that may not be used by local housing authorities in deciding what classes of persons are not qualifying persons (section 160ZA(8)(b)). These Regulations require that local housing authorities do not use local connection (within the meaning of section 199 of the Housing Act 1996) as a criterion in deciding whether the following are not qualifying persons:

(a) persons who are serving in the regular forces or have done so in the five years preceding their application for an allocation of housing accommodation;

(b) bereaved spouses or civil partners of those serving in the regular forces where their spouse or partner's death is attributable (wholly or partly) to their service and the bereaved spouse or civil partner's entitlement to reside in Ministry of Defence accommodation then ceases;

(c) seriously injured, ill or disabled reservists (or former reservists) whose injury, illness or disability is attributable wholly or partly to their service.

The allocations policy will also extend the provision above, to include divorced or separated spouses or civil partners of Service personnel who are required to move out of accommodation provided by the Ministry of Defence.

## Social housing tenants

The Secretary of State has the power to prescribe in Regulations criteria that may not be used by local housing authorities in deciding what classes of persons are not qualifying persons (section 160ZA(8)(b)). These Regulations require that local housing authorities do not use local connection (within the meaning of section 199 of the Housing Act 1996) as a criterion in deciding whether social housing tenants are a "relevant person"

A relevant person has a need to move because the relevant person—

(a) works in the district of the local housing authority, or

(b)(i) has been offered work in the district of the local housing authority, and

(ii) the authority is satisfied that the relevant person has a genuine intention of taking up the offer of work.

This regulation does not apply if the need to move is associated with work or the offer of work which is—

(a) short-term or marginal in nature,

(b) ancillary to work in another district, or

(c) voluntary work.

In this regulation “voluntary work” means work where no payment is received by the relevant person or the only payment due to be made to the relevant person by virtue of being so engaged is a payment in respect of any expenses reasonably incurred by the relevant person in the course of being so engaged.

Specifically a qualification criteria may not be applied to existing social housing tenants seeking to transfer from another local authority district in England who have a reasonable preference under s166(3)(e) because of a need to move to the local authority’s district to avoid hardship where they need to move because the tenant works in the district, or need to move to take up an offer of work.

In considering registering applications the Council’s (or their agent) will take into account the Right to Move Statutory Guidance March 2015 (or any relevant successor document).

Any other social housing tenant, who satisfies the eligibility criteria will be eligible to join the Housing Register, even if they have no housing need and don’t currently live in the Partnership area.

### **The Application of Reasonable Preference**

Home Choice Plus is required by law to assess the relative priority that housing applicants are awarded. This is particularly important when, as is the case with the Home Choice Plus partnership area, the demand for social housing is greater than the availability of homes.

The law, as it applies to local housing authorities, requires that Reasonable Preference for housing must be given to those in the categories set out in the Housing Act 1996 (as amended). The statutory Reasonable Preference categories cover:

- All homeless people as defined in Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 and Homelessness Reduction Act 2017
- People who are owed an accommodation duty because they have a priority need but are intentionally homeless (under s190 (2)), because they are not in priority need and not homeless intentionally 193 (2) or because they are threatened with homelessness, in priority need and not intentionally homeless (195 (2) of the 1996 Act (or under section 65 (2) or 68(2) of the Housing Act 1985) or who are occupying accommodation secured by any housing authority under section (192 (3).
- People occupying unsanitary, overcrowded or otherwise unsatisfactory housing;
- People who need to move on medical or welfare grounds (including grounds relating to a disability);
- People who need to move to a particular locality within the district to avoid hardship to themselves or others.

Specific details and examples of how Reasonable Preference and priorities are determined and applied are detailed in section 5: The Banding Structure.

## **Determining priority between applicants with Reasonable Preference**

Home Choice Plus determines priority between applicants with Reasonable Preference by taking into account various factors including:

- The financial resources available to a person to meet their housing costs.
- Any local connection – as defined in s199 Housing Act 1996 (as amended) – that an applicant has with the Home Choice Plus area.
- The length of time the applicant has been waiting within their current band
- Any community contribution made by the household

Households with a reasonable preference can have their banding reduced because of their behaviour or circumstances

## 4. Registration and Assessment Process

### How to Apply

Before anyone can apply for vacancies advertised through the Home Choice Plus scheme they must first register.

Initial registration can be completed;

- online [www.homechoiceplus.org.uk](http://www.homechoiceplus.org.uk)
- by requesting and completing a registration form
- at Home Choice Plus partner offices

An advocate (for example, a family member, friend or support agency) can complete the registration form on behalf of an applicant who is requesting assistance.

If the applicant is not eligible to register they will be notified in writing giving the reason for the decision and informing them of their right to request a review.

All applications once received will be assessed and placed in the appropriate band. Assessment may involve a home visit or interview to discuss housing options.

Where additional information is required to confirm that a higher band is appropriate, the application may be placed in a lower band until the circumstances of the applicant have been confirmed.

Once registered with the Home Choice Plus scheme the applicant will be given a membership number.

Applicants to the scheme are entitled to request details from any of the partners about information that has been used to make a decision on their registration. Partners' contact details can be found at Appendix 2.

### Help with registration

Help with registration can be given to applicants by any member of the Home Choice Plus Partnership as well as other organisations such as County Council social care services, health workers, support workers and voluntary bodies.

In particular, help will be provided to applicants who find it hard to fully participate in the scheme.

Support can be offered to assist an applicant to use the system where they are interested and ready to move. Access to the system can be provided through the Customer Service Centres, Registered Provider/Housing Associations' offices and Local Authorities' offices.

Training can also be offered to a range of local organisations and support workers on a regular basis to enable them to be able to help applicants with accessing the scheme. Staff from the partner Local Authority and Housing Associations will be able to work with anyone that the applicant has requested to act on their behalf, subject to the applicant's written consent.

### Definition of Household Types

An Applicant(s) type determines the size and type of housing they may be eligible for.

Single person (under 60)	One person household and with no resident children  A woman who is less than 25 weeks pregnant
Couple	Married, cohabiting, civil partnership and same sex couples without resident children or with a woman who is less than 25 weeks pregnant
Family	Single parent or couple (as defined above) with minimum of one dependant child, who lives with parent (s) as the main or principal home  A woman who is 25 weeks pregnant or more
Pensioner / Disability Living Allowance (DLA)	One person household and couples over 60 or person in receipt of DLA / Personal Independence Payment (PIP) or households with a disabled household member
Other	Any other household group including friends, brother and sister and families with non dependent children

In order to reflect your housing requirement for a particular property type or size the Local Authorities, or their agents, may need to put the applicant into a different category in order to achieve a correct allocation

Example – if the applicant is a single person with a medical need that means they require a larger property for a resident carer, their household type will be amended to “family” or “other” to enable them to bid.

<b>Home Choice Plus Bedroom Standard</b>			
<b>Household Make-up</b>	<b>Suitable Property Size :</b>		
	<b>1 Bed</b>	<b>2 Bed</b>	<b>3 Bed</b>
Single Person	✓		
Childless Couple	✓		
Parent(s) & 1 child		✓	
25+ weeks pregnant woman with or without partner and no other children		✓	
Parent(s) and 2 children of same sex aged between 0 and 16		✓	
Parent(s) and 2 children of same sex over 16			✓
Parent(s) and 2 children of different sex under the age of 10		✓	
Parent(s) and 2 children of different sex when the oldest reaches 10			✓
Parent(s) and 3 children – 2 of same sex aged between 0 and 16. Plus 1 other child			✓
Parent(s) and 3 children - 2 of different sex under the age of 10. Plus 1 other child			✓

To calculate the property size eligibility for larger households, please use the following guidance:

- 2 children of the same sex are able to share a room until the oldest reaches the age of 16, at which point an additional bedroom will be required.
- 2 children of different sex are able to share a room until the oldest reaches the age of 10, at which point an additional bedroom will be required.

For example:

A family with 2 parents and 3 children of the following age and sex:

- one girl aged 4
- one girl aged 6
- one boy aged 10

are eligible for a 3 bedroom property (one bedroom for the parents, one for the two girls and one for the boy).

A family with 2 parents and 3 children of the following age and sex:

- one girl aged 4
- one girl aged 16
- one boy aged 10

are eligible for a 4 bedroom property (one bedroom for the parents, one for the boy, one for the 4 year old girl and one for the 16 year old girl).

The appropriate Home Choice Plus senior officer within the Local Authority / agent may exercise discretion in deviating from the Bedroom Standard to increase the number of rooms an applicant requires. Examples would include where an extra room is required to accommodate a carer on health grounds, or where the applicant is a registered foster carer. In some circumstances it may be possible to award this banding and direct match a potential foster parent living in social housing to a more appropriately sized property with the agreement of the landlord.

The bedroom standard allows the policy to determine whether there is underoccupation or overcrowding for the purposes of banding. The HA will determine, through their allocation policy the type and size of property an applicant can occupy.

Gold Plus or Gold (please see below) will also apply to applicants needing to be re-housed on the application if they have no bed spaces available to them.

Evidence of overcrowding must be provided at the point of registration and allocation of accommodation and may be verified by a home visit.

There may be some exceptions to the bedroom requirements including the following;

- where there is a carer included in the household who cannot share a bedroom
- where the household contains "a child who cannot share a bedroom". This definition applies to a child who (1) is entitled to the care component of disability living allowance at the highest or middle rate, and (2) by reason of their disability is not reasonably able to share a bedroom with another child.
- where the household has care and supervision responsibilities for other children not normally residing with the household

A carer is someone who, with or without payment, provides help and support to a partner, relative, friend or neighbour, who would not manage without their help. This could be due to age, physical or mental health, addiction, or disability. In all cases the carer must have been identified by the applicant as the person who is primarily responsible for providing them with care and that they need to live with them.

Even if a carer is in receipt of Carer's Allowance this does not necessarily mean that it is necessary for them to reside with the person who is being cared for. An application to include a carer on a housing application will be considered if the need for a carer has been assessed by a relevant specialist organisation e.g. a social care, health professional as needing to provide overnight support by a resident carer. In these circumstances the applicant must provide supporting evidence from other agencies e.g. Social Care or a Health professional.



In some limited circumstances it may be possible to consider cases where the carer is not in receipt of Carer's Allowance but would be eligible. Under these circumstances it will still be necessary for the applicant to demonstrate that the person looked after is in receipt of a relevant care related benefit.

### **Household with a disabled child**

Where the household includes a disabled child and the child isn't able to share a room with another child because of its disability then an additional bedroom requirement can be considered. The disabled child would need to be in receipt of the care component of the disability living allowance at the highest or middle rate.

### **Households with access to other children**

Anyone with access to children will need to demonstrate their involvement in the care and supervision of the child. A senior officer within the Local Authority or their agent will give consideration to factors including regularity of contact, who claims the relevant benefits for the child and any residency orders as well as legislation, codes of guidance and case law in determining which parent has **primary responsibility** for the children. Therefore unless there is an exceptional circumstance we would be unlikely to provide family accommodation where they are not the primary carer for the child even if they have 50% access rights to their child.

Currently case law around eligibility for benefits and homeless case law has found that separated parents do not have an automatic right to benefits or a bedroom for a child they do not have primary responsibility for.

Please note: the bedroom standard assessment is for determining overcrowding and does not guarantee that an applicant will be offered the exact property size for their household needs. In particular, where their housing need exceeds four bedrooms but there is a limited supply of larger properties within the Home Choice Plus partnership they are unlikely to be offered social housing that exactly meets their needs.

Also households that include other adults rather than children may find it difficult to obtain social housing where they require larger properties normally allocated only to households with children, as priority is usually given for family houses to people with dependant children within the Housing Association / Registered Provider's allocation policies.

There may be other special circumstances subject to emerging case law where the bedroom standard does not apply and this will be determined by a senior officer or manager.

### **Adding adults to an application**

Applicants can add other adults to their application, in addition to Applicants 1 and 2. In such cases, Home Choice Plus would require written confirmation from the adult that they wish to be added to the application. We would also require a 5 year address history; ID; proof of address; confirmation of immigration status; confirmation of income or benefits etc.

## The Home Choice Plus process

- 1** You can register for Home Choice Plus by filling in a housing application either online at [www.homechoiceplus.org.uk](http://www.homechoiceplus.org.uk) or requesting a paper application form from any of the contact points.
- 2** Once we have registered you, we will send you confirmation of the registration number and the band you have been placed in.
- 3** Vacant properties will be advertised each week and applicants are advised to look for suitable vacancies regularly.
- 4** You can make up to 3 bids per week, as long as you match what the advert asks for.
- 5** The applicant with the highest priority and who has been in the relevant band the longest will be considered for the property.
- 6** The successful applicant will be contacted by the Landlord and asked for information such as proof of identity. A viewing will be arranged and if you are accepted an offer will be made.

## 5. The Banding Structure

Home Choice Plus operates a needs-based banding system as described below. Bands are arranged to reflect housing need, with the highest band indicating the greatest need for housing. The scheme consists of eight bands, as summarised below. A more detailed description of the bands and of Reasonable Preference can be found under each band section.

The bands within the policy are based on the reasonable preference criteria set out within the 1996 Housing Act.

Once registered the applicant can only be in one band per Local Authority and the highest banding possible will always be applied according to the policy.

The table below describes the bands into which households will be placed according to their housing circumstances.

### **Priority (3 month time limit)**

Applicants who are statutorily homeless with a duty to re-house under s193 of Housing Act 1996 (eligible, homeless, priority need, not intentional and with a local connection). Applicants owed the relief duty who are likely to be accepted as statutorily homeless with a duty to rehouse under the above Act (except in Stratford on Avon District)

### **Gold Plus (6 months time limit) (Local Connection)**

- Homeless cases where no statutory duty to re-house (excludes intentional homeless)
- Homeless cases accepted for a full rehousing duty by a Local Authority within the partnership (but not the LA that accepted the duty)
- Occupying property in a serious state of disrepair; factors taken into consideration by the Local Authority or its agent include where the Local Authority could have served an improvement notice for a Category 1 hazard or equivalent (not for overcrowding and space hazards)
- Verified high medical need / disability that is directly affected by the current housing situation and would be immediately improved by moving
- Applicant is homeless or threatened with homelessness, through no fault of their own (excludes those in priority band)
- Applicant is homeless or threatened with homelessness under the HRA 2017 (Prevention and Relief)
- Requiring move-on from supported accommodation
- Tenants who are under-occupying social rent or affordable rent housing in the Home Choice Plus partnership area
- Tenants who are occupying a social housing property in the Home Choice Plus partnership area with major adaptations that they do not need
- Households suffering with serious overcrowding (3 or more bedrooms lacking)
- Two or more criteria in Gold

### **Gold (12 months time limit) (Local Connection)**

- Households who have been determined to have become homeless intentionally

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Households suffering from harassment (excludes priority band cases)</li> <li>▪ Overcrowding or lacking up to and including 2 bedrooms</li> <li>▪ Living in exceptional circumstances</li> <li>▪ Households with children under 10 years old and living in flat with no access to a private garden</li> <li>▪ Households suffering with some disrepair in their property</li> </ul>
<p><b>Silver Plus (6 months time limit) (No Local Connection)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Homeless cases where there is no statutory duty to re-house (excludes intentional homeless and those in a priority band)</li> <li>▪ Homeless cases accepted for a full rehousing duty by a Local Authority within the partnership (but not the LA that accepted the duty)</li> <li>▪ Properties in a serious state of disrepair; factors taken into consideration by the Local Authority or its agent include where the Local Authority could have served an improvement notice for a Category 1 hazard or equivalent (not for overcrowding and space hazards)</li> <li>▪ Verified high medical need / disability that is directly affected by the current housing situation and would be immediately improved by moving</li> <li>▪ Applicant is homeless or threatened with homelessness, through no fault of their own</li> <li>▪ Applicant is homeless or threatened with homelessness under the HRA 2017 (Prevention and Relief )</li> <li>▪ Applicant requires move-on from supported accommodation</li> <li>▪ Tenants who are under-occupying social rent or affordable rent housing in the Home Choice Plus partnership area</li> <li>▪ Tenants who are occupying a social housing property in the Home Choice plus partnership area with major adaptations that they do not need</li> <li>▪ Households suffering with serious overcrowding (3 or more bedrooms lacking)</li> <li>▪ Two or more criteria in silver</li> </ul>
<p><b>Silver (12 months time limit) (No Local Connection)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Households who have been determined to have become homeless Intentionally</li> <li>▪ Households suffering from harassment (excludes priority band cases)</li> <li>▪ Overcrowding or lacking up to and including 2 bedrooms</li> <li>▪ Living in exceptional circumstances</li> <li>▪ Households with children under 10 years old and living in upstairs flat</li> </ul> <p>Households suffering with some disrepair in their property</p>
<p><b>Reduced Banding (with reasonable preference)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Households with financial resources above defined limits</li> <li>▪ Households who have deliberately worsened their circumstances to qualify for a higher banding</li> <li>▪ Households with housing-related debts</li> <li>▪ Households who have committed acts of anti-social behaviour and other tenancy breaches but not severe enough to have obtained outright possession</li> <li>▪ Households who aren't bidding for properties that are available and suitable for their needs or successfully bid but then refuse properties that are suitable for their needs</li> </ul>

**Bronze Plus (12 month time limit) (Local Connection)**

- Households who do not meet any of the above reasonable preference criteria and with a local connection, and who may have a low housing need including;
  - Eligible and interested in shared ownership
  - Eligible and interested in older peoples accommodation
  - Households with low level medical or welfare issues
  - Households that are newly forming
  - Households who are suffering financial hardship
  - Households who are sharing facilities with other non-related households
  - Households residing in an institution or supported housing scheme e.g. hospital with no access to settled accommodation
  - Households who have insecurity of tenure (those in tied accommodation or lodging with family members)
  - In social housing and seeking a transfer

**Bronze (12 month time limit) (No Local Connection)**

- Households who do not meet any of the above reasonable preference criteria and without a local connection, and who may have low housing need (please see Bronze Plus above)

**Cumulative Preference in Gold and Silver Bands**

Applicants whose circumstances match more than one criterion in the Gold or Silver bands will be awarded 'cumulative preference', which means that they will move up a band. For example, an applicant who met two or more criteria in Gold band would be awarded Gold Plus banding. An applicant who met two or more criteria in Silver band would be awarded Silver Plus banding. If you fit the criteria for two or more reasonable preference categories in Gold you will move into Gold Plus but can't then move to the higher (priority) band unless you are accepted for the rehousing duty under s193 Housing Act 1996. This also applies to applicants with two or more reasonable preference categories in silver band. If they move into Silver Plus and have further reasonable preference categories they can't move up into Gold or Gold Plus unless they have a local connection.

Applicants who have been found to be intentionally homeless, within the Gold and Silver Band, will not qualify for a cumulative preference award.

## The Bandings Explained

### Priority Band

(Awarded for 3 months)

The following criteria will lead to Priority band being awarded:

#### Statutory Homeless with a duty to re-house

Priority band is awarded by the Local Authority or their agent where the local authority or its agent has accepted a full duty under Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002) to provide accommodation for an applicant.

The priority band can only be used in the Local Authority area where the homeless duty exists or in another Local Authority area within the scheme if a referral has been agreed. Within the other Partnership areas the applicant will be in a reasonable preference band, usually Gold Plus where there is a local connection to the District, or Silver Plus where there is no local connection.

This may include victims of domestic abuse who are accommodated in refuge or other temporary accommodation, who the authority owe a rehousing duty to.

Homeless cases owed the relief duty under HRA 2017

Where households are owed the relief duty under the HRA 2017 and it is likely that they would be owed the full statutory rehousing duty (if their homelessness doesn't come to an end through one of the potential discharge routes during the relief period) they will be placed in this band at the point the determination is made (except in Stratford on Avon District).

### Gold Plus

(Local Connection and High housing need – awarded for 6 months)

The following criteria will lead to Gold Plus band being awarded:

#### Homeless cases where no statutory duty to re-house (excludes intentional homeless)

Gold Plus band is awarded by the local authority or its agent where an applicant is determined under the homelessness legislation to be eligible for assistance, homeless, not in priority need, not homeless intentionally and has a local connection to that Local Authority.

#### Homeless cases covered by the prevention (HRA 2017)

Gold Plus band is awarded by the local authority or its agent where the applicant will become homeless within 56 days (the prevention duty) The Gold Plus banding award will last for 56 days and then the banding will be reassessed and a band based on housing need / duties owed at the time will be awarded. This will also be awarded to households owed the relief duty where they will not meet the thresholds for a main rehousing duty to be owed.

#### Properties subject to serious disrepair

Gold Plus band is awarded where an applicant is living in sub-standard accommodation (regardless of the tenure) and (following confirmation or notification

by the relevant Officer) it is determined that action is required under the Housing Act 2004. This would be for a Category 1 hazard that is very severe and may have lead to the service of the following notices (only);

- Emergency Remedial Action
- Demolition or Clearance Orders
- Improvement Notices for Category 1 hazard (other than for overcrowding and space)

NB In circumstances where the applicant is in a Local Authority tenancy and the LA can't serve notice upon itself then this category would still be awarded where a notice would be served if the tenure was different.

Where applicants report poor housing conditions, the relevant Officers may inspect the property to consider using their powers to remedy hazards.

Home Choice Plus will need to liaise with the relevant Officer on a regular basis to check that the property circumstances are still in disrepair prior to an offer of accommodation being made.

Where the property disrepair has been remedied the applicant's banding will need to be reassessed.

Where a notice has been served that prohibits occupation or the disrepair is so serious that the relevant Officer advises occupation of the property is not appropriate on health and safety grounds, applicants will be dealt with under the Homelessness legislation.

### **High Medical Need or Disability**

This band is awarded following an assessment by Home Choice Plus, of the evidence provided by the applicant and/or by the preferred medical advisor in relation to their health and/or disability.

An applicant will normally be expected to complete a medical assessment if they have indicated that there is a medical or disability problem that is made substantially worse by their current housing. Their circumstances will be assessed by a Home Choice Plus officer based on evidence provided by the applicant, and we will consider evidence from all appropriate medical professionals.

This banding will only be awarded if the current accommodation is so unsuitable in relation to their medical, welfare or disability needs that a move is essential. The assessment is not of the applicant's health, but how their health or welfare is affected by their accommodation.

The following are examples of cases that would qualify for this band:

- The applicant's accommodation is directly contributing to the deterioration of the applicant's health; e.g. severe chest condition requiring intermittent hospitalisation as a result of prolonged periods of exposure to damp (i.e. mould spore allergens). The most vulnerable group is that of persons aged 14 and under. The effects of damp must be recognised as severe under the Housing, Health and Safety Rating System as assessed by the relevant Officer.

- A person with a severe disability requiring substantial adaptations to a property which are not provided in their current accommodation and where the property cannot be adapted.
- A person suffering with a severe and enduring mental illness or disorder where the medical condition would be significantly improved by a move to alternative accommodation, including members and former members of the armed forces
- A victim, and their family, of domestic abuse being accommodated in a refuge or other temporary accommodation
- An applicant suffering from terminal illness where they have not already been accepted for a duty under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

### **Households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness through no fault of their own (who have not made a homeless application)**

This status is awarded to all households who are homeless as defined by the Homelessness legislation but have not made a homeless application or don't wish to be considered under the homelessness legislation. and where, following investigation, it is proven that the applicant is threatened with homelessness through no fault of their own.

This banding also applies to households who have made a homeless application and been accepted for rehousing within another area of the Home Choice Plus partnership.

### **Tenants who are under – occupying affordable social housing or living in an adapted property where they do not require the adaptations**

It is important that the best possible use is made of existing housing stock and priority will be given where a Local Authority or Housing Association tenant, in the Home Choice Plus area, applies to move to a smaller, or more appropriate type of property.

Some examples would be;

- a) Applicant's currently living in family sized accommodation, either social or affordable rent, who wish to 'downsize' and free up at least one bedroom.
- b) applicants currently living in family sized accommodation, either social or affordable rent, wishing to move to a one bed property or a two bed property designated for older people e.g. Retirement housing, Extra Care or a bungalow
- c) an applicant occupying an adapted property where they do not require the adaptations.

Please note this only applies where a family sized property or a property with substantial adaptations will become available for reletting following the move

### **Move on from Supported Accommodation.**

This status is awarded where an agreement between the Local Authority or its agent and the Supported Housing provider, is in place for applicants to move on from supported accommodation in the Home Choice Plus area.



This status will only be awarded to applicants in supported accommodation or care-leavers where the following criteria have been met:

- The applicant is ready to move to independent settled social housing on the recommendation of the support provider
- An ongoing support package has been assessed and where required, is in place.

In the case of young people moving on from care, applicants are awarded this category in accordance with the 16- and 17-year old Joint Protocol between the Local Authority and the County Council's Children's Services Department (for the five districts within Worcestershire) and the agreement with Warwickshire County Council (in Stratford-on-Avon). Applicants must be a former "Relevant Child" as defined by the Children Act 1989.

The evidence to support this will be provided by the County Council's leaving care service and will consist of confirmation that:

- The care-leaver is ready to move to independent settled housing and is genuinely prepared for a move to independent living.
- The care-leaver possesses the life skills to manage a tenancy including managing a rent account.
- An ongoing support package has been assessed and where required, is in place.

Applicants are expected to make full use of their priority by placing bids on all suitable properties to enable them to move on to independent accommodation. Home Choice Plus officers may use their discretion to place bids on behalf of the applicant where bids are not being placed or are being inappropriately placed to facilitate move-on through supported accommodation. This will be done in consultation with the applicant and (if relevant) their support worker.

For applicants meeting this criteria the band start date will be the date the applicant moved into the supported accommodation

Children accommodated out of area by Children's Services or Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children under the responsibility of Worcestershire County Council will be awarded a Gold Plus band under move on from supported accommodation and will be granted a local connection with the two District Councils within Worcestershire where they don't have a specific connection to one Local Authority.

### **Serious Overcrowding**

Applicants lacking three or more bedrooms will be awarded Gold Plus band e.g. where the applicant has a four bedroom need and is living in a one bedroom property. Overcrowding assessments will include all household occupants and the overall size of the property in determining the band, regardless of whether the whole household wish to be rehoused together or not. In cases where there is a pregnancy (including multiple births, officers will need to consider whether the current property would be overcrowded when the baby (babies) arrive at the 25 week stage and beyond.

Applicants who claim they are overcrowded will have their circumstances assessed against the Home Choice Plus Bedroom Standard. The table below shows the bedroom entitlement for adults and children:

## **Silver Plus**

(No Local Connection and High Housing Need – awarded for 6 months)

The Silver Plus band is awarded for the above Gold Plus preference categories where the applicant has no local connection to that participating Local Authority.

## **Gold**

(Local Connection and Housing Need - valid for 12 months)

The following criteria will lead to Gold band being awarded:

### **Households who have been determined to have become homeless intentionally.**

Where the local authority or its agent has carried out investigations under Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002) and found the applicant intentionally homeless. Where the applicant's housing need would normally be Gold Plus such as severe overcrowding or serious medical issues they will be awarded Gold Plus. Where the reason for intentionality is one of the five reasons for awarding a reduced banding, the household will be moved into the Reduced Banding category.

### **Households suffering from harassment**

Applicants who cite harassment as the main reason for making the application will be asked to provide information about all the circumstances surrounding the application and each case will be assessed on its merits. Any enquiries will be made in a sensitive manner so as not to prejudice the safety of the applicant. Any claims of harassment should be substantiated by evidence from a third party e.g. Police, Housing Officer etc. If the harassment is deemed so severe that it is not reasonable to continue to occupy the accommodation, this will be investigated under the Homelessness legislation.

If you are suffering from domestic abuse or harassment from outside the home, and unable to remain in your home, it is likely that you will be treated as homeless and therefore awarded the appropriate homelessness-related bands.

### **Overcrowding or lacking required bedrooms**

This applies to households who are overcrowded or lacking up to (and including) two bedrooms. Please see section above (under Gold Plus) regarding how overcrowding is determined.

### **Living in exceptional circumstances**

This banding on Home Choice Plus should only be awarded in those instances where the applicant's living circumstances are considered to be exceptional given the prevailing housing conditions in the district and where no other banding criteria reflects or addresses the problem(s).

In reaching a decision to award the banding, account must be taken of the suitability of the current accommodation and the location of the accommodation in relation to the applicant's needs.

Examples are given below of potential situations where this banding may be granted – the list is not exhaustive and the decision lies with the Local Authority / agent assessing the application.

- The applicant is adequately housed but needs to give or receive support on the grounds of disability or illness that is substantial and ongoing and it is not possible for the person giving care to use public transport or their own transport to provide assistance.
- The applicant needs to move on welfare grounds e.g. hardship.
- The applicant's household is overcrowded, coupled with medical issues that do not accrue medical priority e.g. ADHD, autism.
- The applicant needs to take up or continue employment, education and/or training that is not available elsewhere and they do not live within reasonable commuting distance

### **Households with Children living in flats or maisonettes**

This status is awarded to households with children under 10 and living in a flat or maisonette with no access to a garden. This may be verified by a home visit.

### **Properties suffering from disrepair**

Properties that are suffering from disrepair (regardless of tenure) that is not deemed to be severe or a threat to the health and safety of the occupier will be awarded this band following confirmation or notification from the relevant Officer. Normally disrepair would be assumed to be Category 1 where a hazard awareness notice has been served, and Category 2 where category D (or equivalent) hazards exist (as defined under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System, part 1 of the Housing Act 2004) except for overcrowding and space assessment which is assessed separately under the Home Choice Plus overcrowding policy.

Home Choice Plus will need to liaise with the relevant Officer on a regular basis to check that the property circumstances are still in disrepair prior to an offer of accommodation being made.

### **Silver**

(No Local Connection – valid for 12 months)

The Silver band is awarded for the above Gold preference categories where the applicant has no local connection to that participating Local Authority.

### **Reduced Banding**

(Reasonable preference but reduced priority)

This band will be used for households in reasonable preference categories where their priority is reduced for one of the following reasons;

Applicants will be banded according to their current housing need but demoted to the reduced priority band. This decision will be reassessed by the District Council or their agent after a period of six months, or at the applicant's request at any time.

### **1. Financial Resources**

Owner occupiers and people with sufficient financial resources available to them to meet their housing needs will be placed in reduced band if they have;

a) a gross household income (including benefits) of more than £38,000 per annum

b) savings / capital / assets / equity of £50,000 or more unless they are in receipt of a pension (or fixed income where they would be unable to obtain a mortgage) where they would be allowed savings/capital/assets/equity of up to £95,000. The savings etc. of all adult members of the household should be taken into account for this criteria.

Applicants will be asked to provide income and asset/savings/capital details at the point of application and if, at that stage, they exceed the threshold their banding will be the reduced (where they have a housing need). The income and assets/capital/savings details will also be considered at the point of offer to ensure the applicant is still on the correct banding and they are therefore eligible for the offer.

The financial resources of an armed forces applicant will be disregarded where it is a lump sum that was received as compensation for an injury or disability sustained on active service.

Financial thresholds may also be determined by Registered Providers and applicants should contact individual organisations where they believe income or capital may be an issue at the point they are made an offer of accommodation.

Applicants who are registering for shared ownership purposes only, who have an income above 38k but below 60k will not be adversely affected by the reduced banding category as it doesn't apply to shared ownership schemes.

Where applicant(s) have an exceptional need that can only be met through the provision of affordable housing then the reduced banding won't be applied.

## 2. Deliberately worsening housing circumstances

Where there is evidence that an applicant has deliberately worsened their circumstances or deliberately moved into another property that is unsuitable and as a result qualify for higher priority on Home Choice Plus, this priority will be reduced. This would include circumstances where an applicant surrendered their tenancy, where it was reasonable to occupy and / or against the advice of the Housing Advice / Options Officer or where they moved to a property that was smaller than their requirements.

Where there is evidence that an applicant has deliberately worsened their circumstances in order to qualify for higher priority on Home Choice Plus, this priority will be reduced. This may include the following;

- Unsuitable property choice – e.g. with stairs if need ground floor
- Overcrowding – e.g. moved in with others / moved others in by choice
- Causing disrepair – including not allowing access
- Giving up a suitable tenancy
- Adaptations – apply to move within 5 years and still meets need

- Refused support which could have maintained tenancy

Officer must consider the particular applicants circumstances and particularly issues of vulnerability or where poor advice has been given before reducing the persons banding.

### 3. Housing related debts

Where households have housing related debts these will be assessed by the District Council, or their agent. The officer must establish the debts have arisen from a deliberate act or omission that leads to non-payment.

The applicants will be encouraged to make affordable arrangements to pay and they will be placed within the reduced priority band until an affordable arrangement has been reached with who they owe the money and the applicant is maintaining regular payments. The Local Authority will expect the debtor to demonstrate they have taken reasonable steps to resolve the issue prior to reducing the banding given. For this circumstance to apply the debt must not be more than six years old (as after this the debt cannot be recovered unless it has been secured through a court order / money judgement order in which case the six year timescale does not apply).

The reduced priority band will apply to those with rent arrears, recharges, former tenancy arrears, rent deposit debt, mortgage arrears etc where the debt is £500 or they owe the equivalent of 6 or more weeks target rent (whichever amount is the smaller). The RSL will need to notify the Local Authority (or its agent) of the arrears and any arrangements made with the applicant. Where the applicant can demonstrate a regular payment history (complying with the agreement) for three months or more and the debt is less than £500 the Local Authority will move them back to the higher banding. The Local Authority will exercise its discretion, depending on individual circumstances where there are mitigating factors or an urgent need to move such domestic abuse cases.

### 4. Anti – social behaviour and other tenancy breaches

Where there has been a breach of tenancy such as anti-social behaviour, or due to the property condition, the applicant will be placed within the reduced priority band. The Local Authority will expect the landlord where the problems occurred, to demonstrate they have taken reasonable steps to resolve the issue prior to reducing the banding given.

The reduced priority band will apply to applicants who are guilty of anti-social behaviour or tenancy breaches where formal legal action has been commenced e.g. injunction, ASBO, CRIMBO or Notice etc. This would include anyone found guilty of sub-letting a social housing tenancy and waste /neglect of the property. The officer must consider any particular support needs the applicant might have and whether this is having an impact on their behaviour before we reduce the applicants banding. The officer should only consider recent tenancy breaches / anti social behaviour.

The officer can reinstate the higher banding where the tenancy breach is resolved or the applicant can demonstrate changed behaviour over a reasonable timescale.

### 5. No bidding or refuses offers of accommodation

Where applicants in the Gold Plus, Silver Plus, Gold and Silver bands have failed to place bids, or have placed successful bids but refused properties, and there is

evidence that properties that would meet their needs have been advertised on Home Choice Plus, their banding will be reviewed within the set time period above and they will be placed in the Reduced Banding category.

By successful bids we mean where the applicant(s) have been offered the property and invited to view it (where applicable).

The officer must consider the households' vulnerability and any issues that may have affected their behaviour at the time e.g. domestic abuse, mental health problems.

### **How will the reduced banding be applied**

Applicants will be banded according to their current housing need but demoted to the reduced priority band. This decision will be reassessed by the District Council or their agent after a period of six months, or at the applicant's request at any time (please note review requests where there has not been any change of circumstances will not be considered) but is unlikely to be removed if their circumstances remain the same.

## **Bronze Plus**

(Local Connection)

(Please note this banding will be closed after one year where no bids have been placed)

This applies to all applicants who live, work or have a local connection as defined by s199 Housing Act 1996, to a particular district in the Home Choice Plus partnership and do not meet any of the reasonable preference criteria, as set out above, and have low housing need.

Where the household has a low level housing need due to medical, disability or welfare conditions / issues, the banding will only be awarded where the condition / issue will be improved by a move to alternative accommodation.

Examples of applicant(s) accepted onto the waiting list and awarded Bronze Plus include the following;

- Eligible and interested in shared ownership
- Eligible and interested in older peoples accommodation
- Households with low level medical or welfare issues
- Households that are newly forming
- Households who are suffering financial hardship
- Households who are sharing facilities with other non-related households
- Households residing in an institution or supported housing scheme e.g. hospital with no access to settled accommodation
- Households who have insecurity of tenure (those in tied accommodation or lodging with family members)
- In social housing and seeking a transfer

The Home Choice Plus Allocation Scheme does not recognise insecurity of tenure where the applicant is in an assured shorthold tenancy in the private rented sector unless there is another issue arising such as threat of homelessness or disrepair.

## **Bronze**

(Limited Local Connection - closed after one year where no bids have been placed)

This applies to applicants who meet the eligibility criteria on connection grounds with one of the districts in the Home Choice Plus partnership but no connection to the other partners and do not meet any of the reasonable preference criteria, as set out above, but have a low housing need (please see list in Bronze Plus section above).

## **Time Limited Bands**

All bands are awarded on a time limited basis, i.e. for 3, 6 and 12. At the end of the time limit, if an applicant has not been successfully housed, the Local Authority or its agent will reassess the application and contact the applicant to confirm their circumstances and/or bidding pattern. For applicant(s) in Bronze Plus and Bronze applications will be closed after 12 months if there are no bids. Please see the Reviews / Complaints Section for more information.

## **Local Connection for Banding Purposes**



In order to ensure that Home Choice Plus meets the housing needs of local communities, we will award a higher band to those applicants with a Local Connection to each relevant Local Authority.

Example - Applicant with medical need with local connection to Bromsgrove but no other Local Authority area will be placed in Gold Plus when bidding within Bromsgrove and Silver Plus for all of the other Local Authorities.

To determine the relevant local connection banding of a household, who meet the eligibility criteria for registering on the waiting list, we would use the following;

- has lived in the relevant Local Authority area by choice for a certain time (for six months out of the last 12 months or for three years out of the last five years);
- has close family living in the relevant Local Authority area, who have been permanently resident for at least the previous five years;
- has permanent paid employment in the relevant Local Authority area
- has a local connection as a result of special circumstances

### **Waiting Time**

New applicants are placed into a bronze or bronze plus band, while we assess their housing need and their waiting time will be from the date of registration (the effective date); this will be the date the form is received and date stamped at the office of the Local Authority (or its agent), or on the date the form is received online.

If an applicant is moved up into a higher band (following assessment) then the date they moved into that band will override the registration date (effective date). Please note it can take up to four weeks to assess a banding.

If the applicant remains in or moves down to a Bronze or Bronze plus band then the registration date (effective date) will apply.

### **Removing Applicant from Reduced Band**

Where an applicant is promoted from the Reduced Priority band to a reasonable preference band, the band start date should be back-dated to the date they were originally placed in the Reduced Priority band.

Please note that even once an applicant has been promoted from the Reduced Priority band to a reasonable preference band, housing associations may still refuse to accommodate them due to their own allocations policies and they may therefore continue to be skipped. Applicants demoted to the Reduced Priority band should be encouraged to pursue private rented housing wherever possible and appropriate advice given to assist them to do so.

The decision to promote an applicant from the Reduced Priority band should be undertaken as part of a full review of the applicant's circumstances to ensure that the applicant is awarded the correct banding.

## Change of Circumstances

All applicants are required to notify the relevant Home Choice Plus partner, with whom they are registered, immediately of any change to their circumstances which may affect their priority for housing. Applicants will need to provide proof of their change before it is assessed.

Applicants who have had a change of circumstances and have not informed Home Choice Plus may have their application status changed to 'application pending' whilst an investigation takes place in order to determine eligibility. The applicants' banding will be reassessed at the point that they submit the change of circumstances (not at the point when the circumstances change) and this will then determine their band start date. If an applicant does not respond to contact from Home Choice Plus within one month, their application will be closed.

Applicants should notify the Home Choice Plus Partner of any change in their circumstances. For example:

- A change of address, for themselves or any other person on their application
- Any additions to the family or any other person they would wish to join the application
- Any member of the family or any other person on the application who has left the accommodation
- Any confirmed pregnancy
- Changes of name
- Changes in financial circumstances, including change of employment
- Accommodation issues
- Medical or other housing needs

Most changes of circumstances can be completed online but evidence will still be required.

## Additional Preference – Community Contribution

We want to encourage applicants who can, to work and/ or volunteer so we can raise levels of aspiration and ambition to promote sustainable communities. The following criterion applies to either the applicant or joint applicant. The responsibility will be on the applicant or joint applicant to provide the evidence to be awarded this banding.

We will award an additional waiting time of six months if any of the following circumstances apply (please note households only qualify for one six months waiting time period regardless of how many of the below are relevant).

We will verify all claims of community contribution at the point of registration, at review and at the offer stage.

## Applicants in Employment

This applies where applicants work for a minimum of 16 hours per week (permanent and not of a casual nature) and have been in employment for six out of the last nine months.

### **Applicants Volunteering**

This applies to applicants volunteering for a minimum of 20 hours per month and for a continuous period of at least six months, at the point of application, at review and the same at the point of offer.

Volunteering must be for a not for profit organisation registered with the charity commission or otherwise recognised by the Local Authority (or their agent).

### **Applicants in Education and Training**

This applies to applicants, who have been studying or training, which includes attending higher and further education or who are accessing a vocational course of study or engaging in a programme of work related courses. This must be for a continuous period of at least six months, up to the point of application and the same at point of offer.

Training which is compulsory in order to qualify for out of work benefits will not be taken into account in awarding this additional preference.

### **Applicants who are full time carers**

This applies to applicants who are unable to satisfy the criteria outlined above, but who care for someone on a full time basis and have done so for a minimum period of six months (before applying) and are in receipt of carers allowance (due to disability or frailty).

### **Applicants with a disability**

We recognise that it may not be possible for some applicants to achieve any of the community contribution due to severe disability (e.g. where you are awarded the support element of Employment Support Allowance or higher rate Disability Living Allowance / Personal Independence Payment) and in these circumstances additional waiting time will be awarded.

### **Applicants owed the prevention duty in Gold Plus**

We recognise that a housing solution for potentially homeless applicants to reduce homelessness is beneficial. Where the applicant is owed the prevention duty having made a homeless application, we will therefore award an additional six months waiting time for an applicant under the prevention duty, in Gold Plus only. If the applicant already qualifies for one or more other community contributions the waiting time will be in addition, up to a maximum of 12 months (not in Stratford on Avon district).

### **Members of the Armed Forces and their spouses / civil partners**

By Armed Forces, we mean the “regular forces” and the “reserved forces” as defined by section 374 of the Armed Forces Act 2006(a). The “regular forces” means the Royal Navy, the Royal Marines, the regular army or the Royal Air Force. The “reserve forces” means the Royal Fleet Reserve, the Royal Navy Reserve, the Marine Reserve, the Army Reserve, the Territorial Army, the Royal Air Force Reserve or the Royal Auxiliary Air Force.

Members of the Armed Forces who have been served with a cessation to occupy accommodation will be given housing advice and the appropriate banding and, if required, considered under the Homeless legislation (Housing Act 1996, Part VII and other relevant legislation).

The Home Choice Plus partnership recognise the contribution made by members of the armed forces and we support the principles of the Worcestershire Community Covenant and the Warwickshire Community Covenant.

The Housing Act 1996 (Additional Preferences for Armed Forces) (England) Regulations 2012 require Local Authorities to give additional preference to a person with an urgent housing need and are in one of the reasonable preference categories.

**The regulations are;**

that local housing authorities must frame their allocation scheme to give additional preference to the following persons if they fall within one or more of the statutory reasonable preference categories and are in urgent housing need:

- a) serving members of the regular forces who are suffering from a serious injury, illness or disability which is wholly or partly attributable to their service
- b) former members of the regular forces
- c) bereaved spouses or civil partners of those serving in the regular forces where (i) the bereaved spouse or civil partner has recently ceased, or will cease to be entitled, to reside in Ministry of Defence accommodation following the death of their service spouse or civil partner, and (ii) the death was wholly or partly attributable to their service
- d) 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

If an "Armed Forces" applicant is able to meet the local connection criteria (or is exempt from this) and does not have sufficient resource to meet their own housing need, the Home Choice Plus Allocations Policy will award the applicant an additional six months in waiting time at the point that need has been assessed or date of registration (if need hasn't changed over time).

If the applicant meets the criteria outlined above, also meets the community contribution criteria for one or more of the reasons then they will be awarded an additional six months e.g. a total of 12 months.

## e) 6. Applying for a Property and Lettings

### Looking for available Properties

Once applicants have been registered with Home Choice Plus and been notified of their registration number, they can start to look for a property of their choice.

### Advertising

All Housing Association landlords are committed to advertising their available properties as widely as possible. Properties will be advertised on a weekly basis in the following ways.

- Website – available to anyone with access to the internet. The website enables applicants to view all available properties on line at [www.homechoiceplus.org.uk](http://www.homechoiceplus.org.uk)
- Hub, Landlord and Local Authority Offices – computers will be available to view and bid for available properties. Staff will be on hand to assist where needed

Adverts will provide information about the location, property type and size, rent level, and eligibility criteria.

### How to Bid

Applicants can bid for properties in a number of ways. They will need to have ready their membership number, memorable date and the property reference number they wish to place a bid on.

- **On the Internet**  
[www.homechoiceplus.org.uk](http://www.homechoiceplus.org.uk)
- **By Mobile Phone**  
You can text your Bid from your Mobile Phone to 07784 486 644
- **In Person**  
At any of the Contact Points as listed in Appendix 1

### When to bid for a Property

Vacant properties will be advertised from each Tuesday morning. Applicants can bid any time during that week until 12 midnight on the following Monday. This is called the weekly bidding cycle. The time that a bid is placed during the week does not make a difference to the shortlist position – it is not a 'first come first served' system.

## **Number of Properties an applicant can bid for**

Applicants can make 3 bids each week as long as they match what the advert criteria asks for. Bids must be on separate properties that they are eligible for. Applicants can withdraw their bid if they change their mind and re-bid on a different property at any time throughout the bidding cycle.

## **Multiple Bidding**

Applicants will be able to bid for a maximum of three vacancies during any given advertising period. If an applicant appears at the top of more than one shortlist in a bidding cycle, they will be contacted to discuss which property they wish to consider. The selected Housing Association will then 'Match Suggest' the applicant and further Housing Associations will then skip this applicant if they are at the top of their shortlist(s). If the Housing Association who has Match Suggested the applicant subsequently decides not to offer them the property, the Provider will inform the applicant of the reasons for this directly, but the applicant will retain their banding and be able to continue bidding. Please see the section on "Reasons why an applicant may not be offered a property".

## **Applications from employees, Board Members and Co-optees**

Staff, Board Members and Co-optees will be treated and assessed as any other applicant to the Housing Register.

## **Homeless Households**

Applicants placed into the Priority, Gold Plus or Gold Band on Home Choice Plus will have been accepted as homeless (where a duty is owed under the HRA 2017) by a Local Authority in the Partnership).

The allocation of this banding comes with certain requirements under the Home Choice Plus scheme. We require applicants to try to secure suitable accommodation as soon as possible once they have received their rehousing (s.184, Housing Act Part VII) acceptance letter and therefore would expect them to be bidding for as many suitable properties as available (up to three bids per week)

Failure to bid each and every week on all suitable properties (up to a maximum of 3) may result in the Local Authority or its agent, placing bids on an applicant's behalf to make sure its duties to the applicant as a homeless household are fulfilled. The Local Authority or its agent may also remove bids that an applicant has placed if they are not suitable e.g. where a victim of domestic abuse selects a property near to the perpetrator.

Please note that if applicants choose to only bid on one property when there are three suitable properties advertised, the local authority or its agent may bid on the two remaining properties to ensure that the applicant is re-housed as soon as possible.

All bids in this banding must be on suitable properties (e.g. suitable size, location and type) and must be within the local authority area where the homeless duty applies to meet the requirements of the policy.

When a successful bid is made for a property the applicant will be notified of this and, subject to rights of review under Part VII of the Housing Act 1996, this will constitute an offer of housing under Part VI as a discharge of the Council's homelessness duty. If this offer is subsequently refused and the applicant requests a review of the suitability of accommodation, then the application will be suspended and no further bids made until the outcome of the review has been determined.

Should the applicant be rejected by the Housing Association under its, own allocations criteria, the homelessness duty will not be discharged and they will remain eligible for a further offer.

### **Eligibility for types of dwelling**

Housing Association / Registered Provider partners will use their individual policies to determine an applicant's eligibility for a size and type of dwelling. Broadly the Housing Association will use the overcrowding standard to determine the appropriate size of property. However, in exceptional circumstances they may deviate from the overcrowding definition to advertise and allocate their housing stock.

Examples are:

- Where applicants require larger accommodation on health grounds. This will be considered on a case by case basis, taking into account the advice of a qualified medical advisor – this will be determined at the point of registration (please see section on overcrowding within the banding).
- Pregnant households (with no other children) will be recognised as a family by Home Choice Plus at 25 weeks, this will allow the applicants to apply for family sized accommodation.
- Where the applicant has been approved (or is going through the approval process) as a foster carer / to adopt by Children's Services, and so will need a larger property than normally required by the household (please see section on overcrowding within the banding).
- Where the applicant or a member of the household needs the support of a carer who will need to sleep in the home and cannot reasonably be expected to share a bedroom with another member of the household. See paragraph below for more information about including a carer in a housing application (please see section on overcrowding within the banding).
- Where the landlord or Local Authority wants to deliberately under-occupy a property and a Local Letting Plan is in place
- Where there is little or no demand for a particular vacancy and it is therefore difficult to let (at the point of advertising the property)
- Where no suitable applicants can be identified to make the best use of larger accommodation.

### **Selection process**

Applicants must note that individual Housing Associations will apply their own allocation policies and the suitability of the property will be considered by the Housing Association, in accordance with its allocation policy, at the point of allocation.

All eligible bids for each property are placed in order of housing need. Priority is decided first by band and then by date within the band and then by effective date.

A bid for a property will not be considered if the applicant's household does not meet the size, age or disability requirements for that property unless there are exceptional circumstances which need to be taken into account.

Partner landlords advertising properties will select and may interview the top applicant/s before an offer is made.

A property will not always be offered to the applicant at the top of the shortlist if there are reasons why this applicant is not eligible or would not be suitable. Please see the 'Reasons why you may not be offered a property' section below for more details.

Successful applicants may be given the opportunity to view the property prior to tenancy sign-up.

If the applicant chooses to refuse the property, the reasons for the refusal will be recorded by the partner landlord advertising the property and their banding may be reassessed.

**If an applicant is matched to a property they will not be able to bid for other properties until they have decided to either accept or refuse the offer.**

If the applicant is at the top of the shortlist the local authority or landlord will check the application to ensure the banding is correct and there aren't any other factors that would limit offers of accommodation e.g. change of circumstances.

### **Reasons why you may not be offered a property**

Housing Associations may choose not to allocate you a property due to their own allocations policy, please see the Home Choice Plus website or contact individual Housing Associations for more information.

### **Restrictions on offers through the advert**

Landlords may apply restrictions in order to identify suitable applicants in particular circumstances and these will always be specified in the advert. Where a property is advertised with certain restrictions, the letting will be made to the bidder who meets the criteria with the earliest band start date in the highest band as with usual lettings.

Some properties may be restricted for bidding as follows;

- Under agreements pursuant to Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended) imposing conditions on who is able to bid – normally a restriction to households with a local connection
- Housing Associations may adopt specific lettings criteria in relation to particular developments or areas in order to address identified problems and to create sustainable and balanced communities. In these circumstances a local lettings policy would apply.
- Partner Housing Associations will also be entitled to advertise properties with preference given to their existing tenants in order to facilitate transfers.



## Refusing Offers of Accommodation

Households 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. An application may be reassessed if an offer of a property is refused. The Local Authority or its agent will take into consideration suitability of the property and reasonableness of the offer in any reassessment undertaken.

If an applicant in a time limited band refuses an offer of accommodation the application including the banding will be reassessed and may be placed in the reduced priority band.

### Refusals by Households to whom the full homeless duty is owed

If a homeless applicant refuses an offer of suitable accommodation, the local authority or its agent may decide that its duty under the Homeless Legislation is discharged, subject to the statutory review process and their banding will be reassessed.

Homeless applicants have the right to request a review of certain decisions made by the local authority or its agent 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. The applicant has this right whether they refuse or accept the offer of accommodation. If the review finds in favour of the homeless applicant, the applicant will retain their Priority band (provided they are still homeless) and will be able to place bids on alternative properties. However, if the reasonableness and suitability of the offer is upheld, the homeless duty will be ended and the applicant's banding will be reassessed. Homeless applicants are therefore advised to accept an offer and then request a review if they believe it to be unsuitable..

## Exempt Allocations – Accommodation provided for lettings that are not covered by this Scheme.

The following exempt allocations are covered by s160, Housing Act 1996;

The following are not allocations under this Policy:

- Succession to a tenancy on a tenant's death pursuant to s89 Housing Act 1985 and s17 Housing Act 1988 (this will be dealt with by the landlord under the relevant legislation and policies)
- Assignment of a tenancy by way of mutual exchange
- Transfer of the tenancy by a court order under family law provisions or under the Civil Partnership Act 2004
- An introductory tenancy (including assured shorthold) becoming an assured / secure tenancy
- Transfers initiated by Council / Housing Associations (e.g. decant to alternative accommodation to allow for major works)
- Rehousing due to being displaced from previous accommodation by a Council or being rehoused by a Council pursuant to the Land Compensation Act 1973

The following allocations are deemed to be exempt as, although they may consider this allocation policy to some extent, they also require different decision making processes and criteria in making assessments and rehousing the applicant:

- A person being granted a family intervention tenancy
- Provision of non-secure temporary accommodation in discharge of any homelessness duty or power
- Supported accommodation
- Where a Housing Association needs to directly match a property (more details regarding this are included later in this policy)
- Some Extra Care and Very Sheltered accommodation
- Changes to joint tenancies which will include the granting of a new tenancy through changes from a sole to a joint tenancy and from a joint to a sole tenancy. The individual Housing Association will decide whether to allow a Joint Tenancy depending on the circumstances of the case.
- Households requiring a move through the Witness Protection Scheme or similar, at the formal request of the appropriate authority
- Some adapted properties may be held on a separate register specifically for people with disabilities

## Local Lettings Plans

Home Choice Plus reserves the right to apply additional criteria for example specific local connection criteria, offers of family sized accommodation to smaller households or employment- while still meeting the statutory obligations for Reasonable Preference when using Local Letting Plans. The Local Authority partners may, in the interests of promoting balanced and sustainable communities, agree with participating Housing Associations local lettings plans for specific areas, estates, or blocks. This is to ensure that lettings plans are tailored to the needs of an area, and protect the interests of existing residents and the wider community.

All local lettings plans will be published on the Home Choice Plus website.

### The principles in applying Local Lettings Plans (LLPs)

- Local Lettings Plans may be developed to meet the particular needs of a local area.
- There must be a clear reason for having LLPs (this may take the form of recurring antisocial behaviour issues, high child densities or a concentration of older residents) and will be subject to reconsideration.
- LLPs must be developed and approved in accordance with an agreed procedure that must have specific aims and will be reconsidered on a regular basis.

The decision to implement a local lettings plan will be developed and approved by the Local Authority Senior Officer responsible for the relevant Home Choice Plus area and a Senior Manager of the relevant Housing Providers. Any decision to implement a local lettings policy will always take into account the implications for equal opportunities and the need to ensure that the Council is able to meet the allocation needs of those owed a reasonable preference.

Where a property is advertised in accordance with a Local Lettings Plan (LLP), the letting will be made to the highest bidder who meets the eligibility criteria of the LLP

#### Examples of possible Local Lettings Plans:

The following are examples of local letting policies that could be employed in Home Choice Plus covering an area, estate, or block:

- Age restrictions.
- Where the property forms part of a rural housing scheme on an exception site
- Restrictions on lettings to vulnerable households where there are already a concentration of supported tenants/residents
- Lettings to childless households where there are high concentrations of children and young people living on a specific estate or scheme

#### **Direct Matching for urgent cases with reasonable preference**

Where possible all lettings should be made through Home Choice Plus to ensure fairness and transparency in the system and to give our customers confidence.

Where applicants have got reasonable preference but their circumstances mean they have an urgent housing need they may require a direct match. Examples of this would be those with critical health or social needs where an immediate move is necessary for their health and wellbeing; or those in fear of extreme incidences of domestic violence, harassment, hate crime, or extreme neighbour nuisance / antisocial behaviour where there is a genuine risk to their health and well being; and these can only be achieved through direct matching.

The direct matching might also occur because of the type of accommodation e.g. because it has adaptations and requires a specific applicant, or to support a move through witness mobility schemes or similar.

There may be direct matching that takes place for tenants within the Housing Associations which are outside of the allocations scheme, where applicants are registered on Home Choice Plus (these are often known as management moves). This would apply in circumstances such as Tenants who are required to decant from their premises due to re-designation, demolition or refurbishment or where Successors left in a property too large for their needs or where a non-successor has exceptional needs / would be deemed to be owed a duty under Part 7 Housing Act 1996 for example.

There may also be a requirement to direct match an existing social housing tenant to a larger property to facilitate their approval as a registered foster parent.

## 7. Administration of the Scheme

### Delegation of Authority

The Home Choice Plus Scheme operates alongside the separate allocation policies and activities of partner Housing Associations (please see Home Choice Plus website for further information).

The Council may delegate or contract out functions to Housing Association partner organisations and will not abrogate any of its legal duties and powers to any Housing Association partner.

The administration of the scheme is undertaken by the Local Authorities or their agents and they are also responsible for updating and improving the scheme in line with good practice and legislation, consulting with partners and customers and ensuring the scheme is followed.

Certain functions within the scheme can only be undertaken by a senior officer or manager and, where this is the case, this has been highlighted throughout the allocations policy.

### Reassessment of Bandings

Applications to the Home Choice Plus Scheme will be reassessed on a regular basis. The timescale for this is determined by their banding and is conducted by their owning Local Authority or its agent.

Bandings will be reassessed when it is apparent there has been a change of circumstances.

An applicant will be notified of the reassessment. Failure to respond to appropriate correspondence in relation to the reassessment within one month will result in the application being closed. If good reason can be shown why there was a failure to respond to the reassessment then the application may be reinstated with the original band start date.

When the date is reached for reassessing the banding, the Local Authority or its agent will contact the applicant for confirmation of their circumstances. This contact may take the form of a letter, telephone call or email. If the applicant's circumstances have changed, they will be assessed and banded accordingly.

If the Local Authority, or its agent, considers that an applicant has not been using their priority and bids appropriately, a senior officer will review the application and banding may be altered to the reduced priority band unless good reason can be shown as to why bids have not been placed.

### Reduced Priorities

#### The process for reducing priority

Any applicant whose priority is reduced will be provided with written notification of the decision that will contain the following information:

- The reasons for the decision to reduce priority
- The Band that their housing circumstances would have warranted and the Band that they have been placed in as a result of the decision (the reduced priority band).
- What they have to do before they can be considered again for any higher Band warranted by their housing needs.
- That the applicant has a right to request a review

### **Closing of Applications**

Applications will be closed if applicants:

- Request their application to be closed
- Do not respond to a request to provide updated information about their registration, or
- Do not make a bid within 1 year of applying to join the Scheme
- Circumstances have changed and they are no longer eligible under this allocations policy.
- Have not informed Home Choice Plus they have moved and given a forwarding address.

When an applicant is re-housed through Home Choice Plus, their application will be automatically closed and they will need to complete a new registration form if they want to remain on the Housing Register.

In all other circumstances where they have moved they will need to complete a change of circumstances and be reassessed.

### **Re-joining the Housing Register**

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

### **Equality and Diversity**

Our aim is to implement and maintain services which ensure that no potential or current applicant is treated less favourably on the grounds of gender, marital status, race, nationality, ethnic or national origin, disability, age or sexual orientation, nor is disadvantaged by the application of a rule, condition, or requirement, which has a discriminatory effect which cannot be justified by law. Allocations will only be made to those persons who are eligible.

This policy will be subject to periodic equality impact assessments.

### **Confidentiality**

The fact that a person is an applicant on the Allocation Scheme will not be disclosed (without their consent) to any other member of the public.

## **Data protection and information sharing**

All information held is subject to the Data Protection Act 1998 and any subsequent relevant legislation. Home Choice Plus will seek the express consent of applicants joining the Allocation Scheme to share personal information about the applicant, and any member of their household. Please be aware that the application and any information relating to it can be viewed by all key partners through the Home Choice Plus partnership. For data retention timescales please refer to the Home Choice Plus partners individual policies.

## **Information sharing without consent**

Information may be shared about the individual and their history irrespective of whether their consent has been obtained in exceptional circumstances which will include:

- In accordance with the provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 (Section 115).
- Where there is a serious threat to the other party's staff or contractors.
- Where information is relevant to the management or support duties of the proposed landlord or support organisation to ensure the health and safety of the applicant, a member of his or her household, or a member of staff.
- Any other duties enshrined in the General Data Protection Regulations or any subsequent legislation

## **False statements or withheld information**

It is a criminal offence for applicants and/or anyone providing information to this Scheme to knowingly or recklessly make false statements or knowingly withhold reasonably requested information relevant to their application (s171 Housing Act 1996). This includes but is not limited to information requested on the housing registration form, in response to correspondence at the renewal of the application, or relating to any other reassessment of the application. An offence is also committed if a third party provides false information whether or not at the instigation of the applicant. This would apply at any stage of the application process.

Where there is suspicion or an allegation that a person has either provided false information or has withheld information, the application will be placed under pending status during the investigation and will be excluded from this Allocation Scheme until an outcome is reached.

If the outcome of any investigation is that they did not provide false information or there was no withholding of information or such was not found to be withheld knowingly, then the application will be reinstated from the date of registration meaning the relevant applicant should not suffer prejudice.

However, where the investigation shows that false information was provided on the application form the application will be re-assessed. The applicant may also be liable to prosecution.

Ground 5 in Schedule 2 to the Housing Act 1985 (as amended by the 1996 Act, s.146) enables the landlord to seek possession of a property where it has been granted as a result of a false statement by either the tenant or a person acting at the tenant's instigation.

If it is determined that an applicant directly, or through a person acting on his or her behalf, has given false information or withheld required information it will result in an applicant being removed from the Scheme and deemed Ineligible.

## **Monitoring Home Choice Plus**

The full Home Choice Plus Partnership will meet regularly to monitor the outcomes being achieved (please see the Terms of Reference for the Home Choice Plus Steering Group and associated groups).

The Home Choice Plus Steering Group will complete an annual report to Registered Providers as part of regular monitoring

## 8. Reviews of decisions

### Information about decisions and reviews

The Local Authority, or its agent, makes the decision regarding the start dates and banding of every applicant.

An applicant to the Home Choice Plus scheme has a right to request a review from the owning Local Authority, or its agent, if unhappy with any decision (finding of fact) including decisions to exclude from registration, the level of priority awarded or the way in which the application has been dealt with. Applicants will be able to appoint an advocate, and once appointed, the Home Choice Plus partner will deal directly with the advocate. The applicant should request an internal review within 21 days of the date of the decision letter.

Applicants have the following further and specific rights to information about decisions and rights of review of decisions:

- the right, on request, to be informed of any decision about the facts of their case which has been, or is likely to be, taken into account in considering whether to make an allocation to them
- the right, on request, to review a decision mentioned above, or a decision to treat them as ineligible due to immigration controls or unacceptable behaviour serious enough to make them unsuitable to be a tenant
- the right to be informed of the decision on the review and grounds for it.

The applicant will be notified of the outcome of the review including the reasons if the original decision is confirmed. We will aim to determine the review within 56 days of the request or such longer period as may be agreed with the applicant. Once the review has been decided upon there is no further right of review on the same matter unless there is a material change of circumstance.

The applicant will also have the right to seek judicial review, make a formal complaint through the Local Authorities complaints procedure (please see below) or to the Local Government Ombudsman.

Reviews will be carried out by a senior member of staff within the Home Choice Plus partnership or delegated to an appropriate organisation and an officer who was not involved in the original decision.

Where the complaint concerns an issue with the letting of a property, the applicant should address their complaint directly to the relevant Registered Provider and follow that organisation's complaint procedure.

### Complaints

An applicant who is not satisfied with the service that they receive may register a complaint with the appropriate Home Choice Plus Partner by telephone, e-mail or in person. All complaints will be acknowledged and investigated. Please see the organisation's individual complaints procedure for details on how to complain and the



length of time to consider your complaint. You can ask someone else or an organisation such as Citizen's Advice Bureau to make a complaint on your behalf.

For those whose first language is not English, assistance can be made available.

## **9. Feedback on let properties**

Home Choice Plus will publish details of the number of bids for each property on the website giving details of the successful applicant's band and their band start date.

This feedback will help applicants determine their prospects of success in obtaining housing.

Lettings are monitored by property type and household to demonstrate how the Home Choice Plus partnership meet their various aims and objectives. The Home Choice Partnership will share this information with the Full Partnership on an annual basis and will ensure it is published on the Home Choice Plus website.

We will also monitor the number of lettings to Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups to ensure that we are reflecting the overall population and that all households are fairly accessing the system.

## Appendix 1 Home Choice Plus Advice and Contact Points

### Bromsgrove District

#### **Bromsgrove District Housing Trust (Bromsgrove District Council agent)**

Bromsgrove District Housing Trust, Buntsford Court, Buntsford Gate,  
Bromsgrove, 1DAWorcs B60 3DJ  
0800 0850 160 [customer\\_services@bdht.co.uk](mailto:customer_services@bdht.co.uk)  
[www.bdht.co.uk](http://www.bdht.co.uk)

### Stratford-on-Avon District

#### **Stratford-on-Avon District Council**

Elizabeth House, Church Street, Stratford-upon-Avon,  
Warks, CV37 6HX  
01789 260861/2  
[housingadviceteam@stratford-dc.gov.uk](mailto:housingadviceteam@stratford-dc.gov.uk)  
[www.stratford.gov.uk](http://www.stratford.gov.uk)

### Wyre Forest District

#### **Wyre Forest District Council Hub**

Green Street, Kidderminster, Worcs, DY10 1HA  
01562 732928  
[www.wyreforestdc.gov.uk](http://www.wyreforestdc.gov.uk)  
T: 01562 732787  
E: [HousingAdviceTeam@wyreforestdc.gov.uk](mailto:HousingAdviceTeam@wyreforestdc.gov.uk)

## Appendix 2 Home Choice Plus Partners' Contact Details

Name	Address	Phone Number	Email	Website
Anchor Trust	Milestone Place, 100 Bolton Rd, Bradford, BD1 4DH.	0845 140 2020		www.anchor.org.uk
Bourneville Housing Trust	Estate Office, Oak Tree Lane, Bourneville, Birmingham, B30 1UB.	0121 472 3831	<a href="mailto:info@bvt.org.uk">info@bvt.org.uk</a>	www.bvt.org.uk
Bromford Housing Group	1 Venture Court, Broadlands, Wolverhampton, WV10 6TB.	0330 1234 031	<a href="mailto:customerservices@bromford.co.uk">customerservices@bromford.co.uk</a>	www.bromfordgroup.co.uk
Bromsgrove District Housing Trust	Buntsford Court, Buntsford Gate, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, B60 3DJ	0800 0850 160	<a href="mailto:info@bdht.co.uk">info@bdht.co.uk</a>	www.bdht.co.uk
Community Housing Group	3 Foley Grove Foley Business Park Stourport Road Kidderminster DY11 7PT	0800 169 54 54	<a href="mailto:information@communityhousing.co.uk">information@communityhousing.co.uk</a>	www.communityhg.com
Cottsway Housing Association	Cottsway House Avenue Two	01993 890000	<a href="mailto:contact@cottsway.co.uk">contact@cottsway.co.uk</a>	www.cottsway.co.uk

	Witney OX28 4XG			
Citizen	Apex 2, Wainwright Road, Worcester, WR4 9FN	03007906555		<a href="http://www.citizenhousing.org.uk">www.citizenhousing.org.uk</a>
English Churches	2 Estuary Boulevard, Estuary Commerce Park, Liverpool, L24 8RF	0345 155 9029	<a href="mailto:info@riverside.org.uk">info@riverside.org.uk</a>	<a href="http://www.riverside.org.uk">www.riverside.org.uk</a>
Fosseway Housing	1 Venture Court, Broadlands, Wolverhampton, WV10 6TB.	0330 1234 031	<a href="mailto:customerservices@bromford.co.uk">customerservices@bromford.co.uk</a>	<a href="http://www.bromfordgroup.co.uk">www.bromfordgroup.co.uk</a>
Friendship Care & Housing	50 Newhall Hill, Birmingham, B1 3JN	0121 506 2800		<a href="http://www.fch.org.uk">www.fch.org.uk</a>
Fry Housing Trust	43 Rowley Village, Rowley Regis, West Midlands, B65 9AS	0121 559 6406	<a href="mailto:admin@fryha.org.uk">admin@fryha.org.uk</a>	<a href="http://www.fryha.uk">www.fryha.uk</a>
Gloucestershire Housing Association	2 St Michael's Court, Brunswick Road, Gloucester, GL1 1JB	0800 318522	<a href="mailto:info@gloscha.co.uk">info@gloscha.co.uk</a>	<a href="http://www.gloscha.co.uk">www.gloscha.co.uk</a>
Housing 21	The Triangle, Baring Road, Beaconsfield, HP9 2NA.	0370 192 4000	<a href="mailto:enquiries@housing21.co.uk">enquiries@housing21.co.uk</a>	<a href="http://www.housing21.co.uk">www.housing21.co.uk</a>
Marches Housing Association	Benedict Court, Southern Avenue,	01568 610100	<a href="mailto:home@marchesha.co.uk">home@marchesha.co.uk</a>	<a href="http://www.marchesha.co.uk">www.marchesha.co.uk</a>

	Leominster, Herefordshire, HR6 0QF			
Mercian Housing	Gee Business Centre, Holborn Hill, Aston, Birmingham, B7 5JR	0121 322 7373	<a href="mailto:info@mercian.org.uk">info@mercian.org.uk</a>	www.mercian.org.uk
Midland Heart Ltd	20 Bath Row, Birmingham, B15 1LZ	0345 60 20 540	<a href="mailto:customer.servicecentre@midlandheart.org.uk">customer.servicecentre@midlandheart.org.uk</a>	www.midlandheart.org.uk
Orbit Heart of England	10 Greenhill Street, Stratford upon Avon, WARMS CV37 6LG	0345 8 500 500	<a href="mailto:info@orbit.org.uk">info@orbit.org.uk</a>	www.orbitheartofengland.org.uk
Platform	1700 Solihull Parkway, Birmingham Business Park, Solihull B37 7YD	03301230700	Contact form via website.	www.platformhg.com
Rooftop Housing Group	70 High Street, Evesham, Worcestershire, WR11 4YD	0800 0421 800	<a href="mailto:info@rooftopgroup.org">info@rooftopgroup.org</a>	www.rooftopgroup.org
Sanctuary Housing	Sanctuary Midlands, 164 Birmingham Road, West Bromwich, Birmingham, B70 6QG	0800 131 3329	<a href="mailto:midlands@sanctuary-housing.co.uk">midlands@sanctuary-housing.co.uk</a>	www.sanctuary-group.co.uk
Stonewater	Jephson House 1 Stoneleigh Road Blackdown Leamington Spa CV32 6RE	08000116420	<a href="mailto:blackdown@stonewater.org">blackdown@stonewater.org</a>	www.stonewater.org

South Shropshire Housing Association Ltd	The Gateway, The Auction Yard, Craven Arms, Shropshire, SY7 9BW	01588 676200		www.sshropsha.co.uk
Stonham Housing Association	2 Gosforth Park Way, Gosforth Business Park, Gosforth, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE12 8ET	0845 155 1234		www.homegroup.org.uk
Viridian Housing	41 Poplar Road, Kings Heath, Birmingham, B14 7AA	0121 444 6666	<a href="mailto:wmids@viridianhousing.org.uk">wmids@viridianhousing.org.uk</a>	www.viridianhousing.org.uk
Warwickshire Rural Housing Association	Whitwick Business Centre, Stenson Road, Whitwick Business Park, Coalville, Leicestershire, LE67 4JP	01530 278080		www.warwickshirerha.org.uk

