

Gloucester City Council

Meeting:	Cabinet	Date:	9 February 2022
Subject:	Homeseeker Plus Policy 2022		
Report Of:	Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing Strategy		
Wards Affected:	All		
Key Decision:	Yes	Budget/Policy Framework:	No
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Appendices:	1. Homeseeker Plus Policy 2022		
	2. Current Homeseeker Plus Policy		
	3. Summary of proposed Changes to the Homeseeker Plus Policy		
	4. Public Consultation Summary of Responses		

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1.0 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek the adoption of an updated Homeseeker Plus Policy governing the Council's allocations to social housing for applicants registered on the Council's housing register.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 Cabinet is asked to **RESOLVE** that:

- (1) the updated Homeseeker Plus Policy (set out at Appendix 1) be adopted
- (2) approval be given to the Homeseeker Plus Management Board to confirm the date for implementation once all partners have gained approval through their individual governance structures.

3.0 Background and Key Issues

- 3.1 All local authorities are required to adopt an allocations policy that governs how allocations are made to social housing. Homeseeker Plus is the allocations scheme operated by all Gloucestershire local authorities along with West Oxfordshire District Council.
- 3.2 The original Gloucestershire Homeseeker partnership was established in 2009, with West Oxfordshire District Council joining the partnership in 2016 when Homeseeker Plus was formed.

- 3.3 The Homeseeker Plus partnership is governed through the Homeseeker Plus Management Board (which reports to the Strategic Housing Partnership) and in addition to administering the Homeseeker Plus policy, administers a shared IT system that delivers Homeseeker Plus across the partnership.
- 3.4 The Homeseeker Plus policy sets out eligibility and qualification requirements as well as detailing how housing register applications are assessed and banded according to housing need.
- 3.5 Homeseeker Plus is a choice-based lettings (CBL) scheme which enables housing register applicants to exercise choice by bidding on social housing properties that are advertised through the scheme.
- 3.6 The Homeseeker Plus policy was last updated in 2018, and to ensure that the policy continues to meet best practice a public consultation exercise was undertaken during 2021 proposing minor changes to the current policy.
- 3.7 The consultation was publicised to all 19,000 applicants who are registered on Homeseeker Plus, as well as housing providers. The consultation was also promoted through social media platforms and on the Homeseeker Plus website.
- 3.8 In summary, 232 consultation responses were received and were generally positive to the suggested changes with respondents expressing agreement.
- 3.9 There were two additional minor changes included following the consultation exercise:
- 3.9.1 In paragraph 4.35 – “For example, a member of the household seeking accommodation is disabled and re-housing will enable that person to overcome urgent physical barriers created by current accommodation and it has been established that the home cannot be adapted to meet needs e.g. steps and stairs.”
- The word urgent has been added in for the distinction between those with minor non housing related physical barriers to those with urgent housing related physical barriers.
- 3.9.2 In paragraph 6.13 – this has been removed. “If there is an occasion where two or more applicants have the same band start date and application date, the Social Housing Landlord will make a decision which applicant best meets the aims and objectives of Homeseekerplus.”
- This was removed as this is no longer relevant and not how the current system is designed.
- 3.10 The proposed amendments also reflect minor legislative changes since the current policy was adopted and broadens the equality and diversity section to better comply with the Equality Act 2010.
- 3.11 The proposed amended Homeseeker Plus policy is set out in Appendix 1, and the current Homeseeker Plus policy is set out at Appendix 2.
- 3.12 A summary of the proposed changes to the policy are set out at Appendix 3.

3.13 A summary of the responses to the public consultation exercise is set out at Appendix 4.

4.0 Social Value Considerations

4.1 There are no relevant social value considerations.

5.0 Environmental Implications

5.1 There are no relevant environmental implications.

6.0 Alternative Options Considered

6.1 The option not to seek to approve the amendments to the Homeseeker Plus policy was discounted.

6.2 The proposed amendments are minor in nature and will continue to ensure that the policy continues to provide a robust mechanism for allocating affordable housing to Gloucester's residents.

6.3 The Homeseeker Plus policy is currently administered through the Homeseeker Plus Management Board on behalf of the seven constituent partners (all Gloucestershire district councils and West Oxfordshire District Council). The Homeseeker Plus Management Board reports into the Gloucestershire Strategic Housing Partnership that provides governance for housing partnership interventions across the county.

6.4 If the Council decided not to adopt the proposed amendments to the policy it would result in the Council leaving the Homeseeker Plus partnership and needing to adopt a new standalone allocations policy. Given the need to undertake a public consultation on a new policy this would take an extended period to deliver. Leaving the Homeseeker Plus partnership would also result in the need to procure a new IT system to administer the allocations scheme and this would result in significant additional expenditure.

7.0 Reasons for Recommendations

7.1 The Homeseeker Plus policy was last updated in 2018 and minor amendments are now required to update the policy to accord with the latest statutory guidance and to improve the robustness of the policy.

7.2 The proposed amended policy was subject to public consultation and residents have therefore been consulted on the proposed changes.

7.3 If adoption of the proposed updated policy is agreed the implementation date for the updated policy will be co-ordinated by the Homeseeker Plus Management Board once all partners have gained agreement for the policy to be adopted.

8.0 Future Work and Conclusions

- 8.1 If the resolution to adopt the updated policy is agreed, the Homeseeker Plus Management Board will co-ordinate the implementation date for the updated policy across the partnership, once all partners have agreed to the policy being adopted.

9.0 Financial Implications

- 9.1 There are no financial implications associated with this report.

(Financial Services have been consulted in the preparation this report.)

10.0 Legal Implications

- 10.1 The Housing Act 1996, Part 6 ("the Act") sets out Local Authority responsibilities in the Allocation of Housing Accommodation. S166a of the Act states that 'Every local housing authority must have a scheme (their 'allocation scheme') for determining priorities and as to the procedure to be followed in allocating housing accommodation.'

- 10.2 The Localism Act 2011 introduced significant amendments to the Act including Section 166a, amongst others, but notably:

- i) To include assurance that certain categories of applicants are given reasonable preference.
- ii) The requirement for an allocation scheme to contain a statement of the Authority's Policy on offering a choice of accommodation or an opportunity to express preferences about their accommodation (section 166a (2))

- 10.3 The current policy meets the current statutory requirements and the minor amendments proposed to the policy will further reduce potential legal challenges associated with the operation of the policy.

(One Legal have been consulted in the preparation this report.)

11.0 Risk & Opportunity Management Implications

- 11.1 There is a risk that not all members of the Homeseeker Plus Partnership agree to adopt the proposed policy.

- 11.2 In the event that this risk is realised the current partnership will need to re-form to enable the proposed policy to be adopted by the remaining partners. It is considered that the current policy is sufficiently robust should there be any resulting delays in adopting the updated policy.

12.0 People Impact Assessment (PIA) and Safeguarding:

- 12.1 The People Impact Assessment (PIA) Screening Stage considered the potential impact of the proposed changes to the Homeseeker Plus policy.

- 12.2 The PIA Screening Stage was completed and did not identify any potential or actual negative impact; therefore a full PIA was not required.

13.0 Community Safety Implications

13.1 There are no Community Safety implications.

14.0 Staffing & Trade Union Implications

14.1 There are no staffing or Trade Union implications.

Background Documents: None