

# TORFAEN

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# Homeseeker

## Homeseeker Policy July 2022



In partnership with



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## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The demand for social rented housing accommodation in Torfaen is high and it is therefore essential that there is a robust policy in place for prioritising who should be allocated social housing. This policy sets out how the Housing Associations, who are members of the Homeseeker partnership, will prioritise applicants for the homes that they have available for rent across the county borough of Torfaen. It sets out how applications will be assessed alongside the criteria to be used as well as providing how properties will be advertised through the partnership and detailing how applicants can apply for the vacancies.
- 1.2 Homeseeker is a partnership between:
- Torfaen County Borough Council
  - Bron Afon Community Housing
  - Hafod Housing Association
  - Linc Cymru
  - Hedyn
  - Pobl
  - United Welsh Housing Association
- 1.3 The Homeseeker partners have adopted this document as a joint policy. This enables all partners to work closely together to meet housing need in the county borough and shows a collaborative approach to addressing these issues in an open and transparent manner, supporting the core principles of Section 95 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 which requires Housing Associations to co-operate with the Local Authority in tackling and alleviating homelessness. The policy enables the partnership to support this agenda alongside ensuring that other individuals, such as care leavers, those leaving hospital or those living in accommodation that is having an adverse effect on their health and wellbeing, are provided with help to find alternative accommodation. The policy covers instances where current tenants of one of the partner Housing Associations need to transfer to another property as well as the letting of new homes.
- 1.4 This policy document only covers the allocation of social rented housing and does not cover other forms of accommodation owned by Housing Association partners such as supported housing, Extra Care Housing schemes, low cost home ownership properties and other alternative affordable housing properties.

## **2. Policy Objectives**

2.1 The Homeseeker partners have agreed to work collaboratively to:

- Use the limited housing resources to best effect by meeting the greatest housing need in the county borough
- Fulfil statutory and legal requirements
- Support the Council in preventing homelessness and providing housing to applicants to whom the Council owe a duty to secure accommodation
- Provide an open, transparent and accountable system of prioritising applicants that is easy to understand
- Allow applicants to exercise choice in their accommodation where possible, appropriate and practicable
- Contribute to the creation of sustainable tenancies and communities
- Have flexibility within the policy to deal with emergencies and emerging priorities, where this will support the creation of cohesive communities and reduce anti-social behaviour and crime
- Ensure that the application process and operation of the policy is straightforward for all who want to use it so that no one is disadvantaged

2.2 The partnership will operate a needs based system where applicants will be placed into one of the bands that reflects their households needs. This system will be based upon a composite assessment of individual need and will take full account of relevant legislation and guidance issued by Welsh Government.

## **3. Administration of the Policy**

3.1 The Homeseeker partnership will administer this policy through the Homeseeker Team. This team will be hosted and managed by the Council and jointly funded by the partnership. This is covered under a separate agreement.

3.2 The day to day decisions required on individual cases and applications will be determined by the Homeseeker Team in accordance with the policy with senior staff providing support to the team in carrying out these duties. Reviews will be undertaken by an appropriate senior officer where these are submitted and this may result in a panel being convened. In these instances appropriate senior staff from each partner organisation will be required to contribute to review decisions.

3.3 Oversight of the policy, its implementation and its operation will be undertaken by the Homeseeker Steering Group. Each partner will have one representative on the Steering Group that will meet on a quarterly basis. The Steering Group will make recommendations for any changes required and necessary to ensure the smooth running of the policy. In certain instances formal approval will be required from the Council and the respective Boards of each partner organisation.

#### **4. Who can join the Homeseeker housing register?**

- 4.1 Anyone over the age of 16 is eligible to be considered to join the Homeseeker register unless an applicant falls within one of the groups of ineligible applicants set out within section 5 of this policy document.
- 4.2 Joint applications will be accepted from two people who are married, in a civil partnership, are cohabiting, are siblings, a parent and son or daughter, two people where one is a carer for the other or groups of two or more friends who wish to live together. In these instances, the Housing Association allocating the property will discuss the tenancy options available and will offer the most appropriate form of tenancy based upon the individual circumstances of each case.
- 4.3 Individuals from abroad may apply to join the Homeseeker register and will be considered for housing in line with this policy provided they:
- Have exceptional or indefinite leave to remain in the UK, or;
  - Have been granted refugee status, or are habitually resident in the UK, Channel Islands, Isle of Man or Republic of Ireland
  - Do not belong to one of the groups set out in section 5
- 4.4 Applicants will be advised that it is a criminal offence to knowingly or recklessly give false information to, or knowingly withhold information which carries a fine of up to £5,000 and will result in any application for housing through this policy being cancelled. Partners will also be able to take possession proceedings against any tenant who has been offered accommodation on the basis of providing false or misleading information.

#### **5. Who is ineligible to join Homeseeker?**

- 5.1 The law outlines that certain people who are subject to immigration control may not be provided with housing and as such will not be registered on the Homeseeker register. These include the following:
- People with restrictions or conditions on their leave to enter or remain in the UK
  - People who have entered the UK illegally or who have overstayed their leave
  - People who are not habitually resident in the UK, Channel Islands, Isle of Man or Republic of Ireland
- 5.2 The term “habitually resident” is used to describe the country where an applicant permanently lives and has connections such as a bank account, past or current employment, personal possessions, accommodation and family. Applicants who have arrived in the UK in the last two years will be asked to provide information to enable the Homeseeker Team to assess if they are habitually resident and can therefore be considered for housing.

- 5.3 Assessments will be based upon the information provided by an individual applicant and any additional information obtained from investigations made with relevant agencies and organisations.

## **6. The Application Process**

- 6.1 Homeseeker partners aim to make the application process as easy as possible with applications being able to be made:
- online
  - in person (at local drop in services)
  - by telephone

Appropriate arrangements will be made to assist and support vulnerable people wishing to apply for housing through Homeseeker to ensure they are not disadvantaged in any way.

- 6.2 Applications will only be assessed upon the receipt of the required supporting documentation. Once this is all received then the Homeseeker Team will verify the information provided, request any further supporting documentation that is required and provide the applicant with advice and information about the scheme, its operation and any other options and solutions that could be pursued.

- 6.3 When processing applications the Homeseeker Team will:
- Verify that the applicant is eligible
  - Establish whether the applicant has any immediate support needs
  - Complete a simple checklist to record basic personal and household information for service monitoring purposes
  - Offer a range of housing advice and information to help the applicant to decide whether Homeseeker is going to be helpful to them, including
    - The applicant's likely priority band
    - What the priority banding means
    - Information on waiting times for the type of accommodation they are eligible for in the areas they wish to live
    - Advice on other housing options that may be available to them and appropriate to their circumstances
    - What their responsibilities and rights will be as a social housing tenant

- 6.4 Following the submission of the application, the applicant will have 28 days to provide proof of their identity and that of anyone else applying with them as a joint applicant. Additional information will also be required to support their application in order for the Homeseeker Team to make reasonable enquiries into their circumstances and needs so that an accurate assessment can be made. Applications will be cancelled after 28 days has elapsed where information has not been provided by an applicant.

- 6.5 Applicants will be subject to checks around their suitability to be a tenant at the initial application stage and these checks are detailed in this policy document. Appropriate data sharing arrangements are in place across the Homeseeker

partners and details of the arrangements are reviewed on a regular basis to ensure compliance.

- 6.6 Upon the completion of enquiries and after all the required information has been received, the Homeseeker Team will write to the applicant advising them of the outcome of their application. Applicants will be advised of their level of priority awarded and their date of registration as well as information on how the scheme operates. Information will also be provided to applicants who have not been successful and this will outline the reasons why. In both instances, applicants will have the right to request a review of the decision made. Details of the review process are contained within this policy document and will be clearly outlined within correspondence.
- 6.7 All written information will be provided in a variety of formats including Welsh, easy read and languages where an individual's first language is not English.

## **7. Assessing Priority**

- 7.1 All eligible applications will be awarded a priority band by the Homeseeker Team following the completion of a successful registration. This will be reviewed where an applicant provides additional information that materially changes their circumstances. This may result in their level of priority moving up or conversely moving down. In either event, applicants will be provided with confirmation of this in writing.
- 7.2 If an applicant's priority increases then their effective date of registration will be from the date outlined with the prioritisation section of this policy document. If an applicant's priority band is reduced then their effective date will remain unchanged. However, an applicant's actual registration date will be awarded in the case of an applicant being placed into Bronze Band
- 7.3 Priority band decisions made by the Homeseeker Team will be based on an applicant's eligibility within the scheme and the priority band criteria set out in this policy. It is the sole responsibility of an applicant to notify the Homeseeker Team of any material change in circumstances that may affect their eligibility and the level of priority awarded under this policy.
- 7.4 Applicants (or their advocates) seeking an award of high priority must comply with the requirements of Homeseeker and complete and return relevant information requested to enable their application to be processed. Whilst not an exhaustive list, such information may include a completed medical questionnaire, an overcrowding assessment or a landlord reference. The Homeseeker Team will take into consideration supporting advice and statements from professionals where relevant and necessary.
- 7.5 When applying for higher priority, applicants must not have deliberately made their circumstances worse for any reason, for example by deliberately allowing their home to be overcrowded (except in exceptional circumstances e.g. to provide or receive care). Any case made for higher priority must be pertinent to the home they currently occupy and how this adversely affects them and/or a member of their household on their application and must evidence why they cannot reasonably continue to live there.

- 7.6 In reaching a decision, the Homeseeker Team will consider whether there are other options available to resolve or alleviate these difficulties and allow the applicant to remain in their own home. This may, for example include the provision of support, aids or adaptations or the completion of reasonable improvements required under Category 1 of the Housing Health and Safety Rating System.
- 7.7 The Homeseeker Team will have regard to an applicant's specific housing circumstances and may reasonably determine the specific type of housing they can bid for. For example, only people requiring adapted properties may be eligible to bid for them.
- 7.8 Applicants in high priority Gold Band will be expected to bid regularly for suitable advertised properties. Applicants awarded Gold Band priority will be reviewed and monitored on a regular basis and where they fail to bid for suitable properties that are advertised, they may have their level of priority reduced.
- 7.9 In the case of applicants awarded Gold Band due to being owed a Homelessness duty, their bids will also be monitored and where an applicant fails to bid for suitable properties that are advertised they may;
- Have bids placed on their behalf and or,
  - Be made a direct offer of accommodation

An offer of housing to an applicant in Gold Band due to being owed a homelessness duty will be deemed to be the Council's final offer of suitable accommodation under the Housing Wales Act 2014 to end its statutory duty.

- 7.10 Applicants awarded priority bands Gold and Silver will have their priority reduced in accordance with 7.2 of this policy if they have refused 2 or more reasonable offers of accommodation.
- 7.11 Applicants with no local connection to Torfaen will be permitted to register on Homeseeker but will not be awarded additional priority. For the purposes of this policy, an applicant will have a local connection with Torfaen if they or one of their adult household members can evidence that:
- They currently reside in Torfaen through choice and have done so for at least 12 months
  - They have previously been resident in Torfaen and that this residence was by choice and was for a protracted period of time
  - They are employed permanently in Torfaen
  - They have direct family associations in Torfaen and that the associations can evidence a protracted period of permanent residence. Direct relations are considered to be parents, children, brothers, sisters and grandparents.
  - They can provide evidence of exceptional reasons why they need to remain in Torfaen

A protracted period of residence or time is defined by where an individual has lived in the area for a significant period of time, usually in excess of 10 years, in the past or where they have grown up in the area during their formative years that would give rise to familiarity with the area and have reason to be considered to have a connection as a result.

## 8. The Priority Banding Scheme

8.1 The Homeseeker scheme is based on a priority banding system that is used to determine who will be allocated housing that is advertised through the scheme. There will be a number of properties not advertised through the Homeseeker scheme as these will be set aside for individuals moving on from short term accommodation, supported housing or households having to move for urgent reasons.

8.2 The banding scheme consists of three bands of housing need which are designed to take account of the particular pressures within the county borough. The bands are detailed below but are essentially:

- Gold (High Priority)
- Silver (Medium Priority)
- Bronze (Low Priority)

The table below provides an outline of the reasons and criteria used to determine the priority awarded to applications.

<b>Gold Band</b>
An applicant accepted as being owed a duty under Section 75 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 by Torfaen County Borough Council. <b>The effective date commences with the date of the Section 75 decision</b>
An applicant considered to have significant medical needs and issues that are severely impacted upon by their accommodation or lack of accommodation to such an extent that this could render them to be placed at risk of harm. <b>The effective date commences with the date of the decision</b>
The applicant's current accommodation is overcrowded as defined by the Housing Act 1985 or where a Category 1 hazard has been identified under the provisions of the Housing Act 2004 which cannot be removed in a reasonable time. Applicants will only be considered for this priority if they have their own tenancy or are living with parents or relatives. <b>The effective date commences with the date of the decision</b>
An applicant who is a tenant of a Homeseeker Partnership landlord, is under-occupying their current home and who wishes to move to smaller accommodation and their landlord is supportive of the move. This priority only applies to tenants currently living in Torfaen. <b>The effective date commences with the date of the Homeseeker Partnership landlord confirming they wish to award priority and it is confirmed by the Homeseeker Team that the property to be vacated would be high demand.</b>
An applicant currently occupying supported housing that is commissioned and supported by either Torfaen County Borough Council or another Local Authority who is considered to be ready to move on into more permanent accommodation.

<p><b>The effective date commences on the date that the applicant moved into the accommodation. The support provider must support the move into permanent housing and that this is agreed by the Housing Intervention Team.</b></p>
<p>An applicant who is a tenant of a Homeseeker Partnership landlord and must transfer under an approved re-designation or regeneration programme.  <b>The effective date commences with the date of the Homeseeker Partnership landlord confirming they wish to award priority</b></p>
<p>An applicant awarded a priority for urgent re-housing by the Homeseeker Team or by the appropriate Senior Manager of a Homeseeker Partnership Landlord on substantial hardship, welfare or social grounds. Assessments will be made on an individual basis.  <b>The effective date commences with the date of the decision</b></p>
<p>An applicant who is a care leaver supported by Torfaen County Borough Council who is seeking to resettle into their first tenancy. Gold Band will be awarded following written submissions from Social Services evidencing the requirement and suitability of the applicant for accommodation.  <b>The effective date commences with the date of the applicants 16<sup>th</sup> birthday</b></p>
<p>An applicant who is presently occupying a property that is in disrepair and that the property poses a significant risk to the occupants. This may be due to the type of hazards identified (e.g. category 1 hazards) or the nature and level of works required and the applicant is unable to get it repaired or made fit within a reasonable period of time.  <b>The effective date commences with the date of the decision</b></p>
<p>Two or more applicants are giving up two or more separate existing Homeseeker Partnership landlord tenancies and requesting a move to a single tenancy as joint applicants.  <b>The effective date commences with the date of the decision</b></p>
<p>Applicants living in flats or maisonettes on or above the first floor who have 3 or more children under the age of 10.  <b>The effective date commences with the date of the decision</b></p>
<p>Armed forces personnel occupying accommodation supplied by the armed forces and who are being honourably discharged from the armed forces and have no accommodation which they own or lease and are likely to be homeless.  <b>The effective date commences with the date from which they have continuously occupied the armed forces accommodation</b></p>
<p>An applicant who has been accepted as a foster or adoptive parent by Torfaen County Borough Council and requires a larger home to provide accommodation for the child/children placed in their care with the intention that the placement is permanent and/or prevents that child from entering Local Authority care placements.</p>

<p><b>The effective date commences on the date of the confirmation from Torfaen Social Services department</b></p>
<p>A requirement for urgent re-housing of a household following a recommendation to Homeseeker Partners from MARAC (Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference).</p> <p><b>The effective date commences on the date of the decision</b></p>
<p>Where, following a case conference and on the recommendation of the Council's responsible officer for child protection, there is urgent need to accommodate a household containing a child likely to be accommodated by the Local Authority for protection should suitable alternative-housing not be found.</p> <p><b>The effective date commences on the date of the recommendation made</b></p>
<p>Staff of Homeseeker Partnership members who are tied tenants who require urgent re-housing.</p> <p><b>The effective date commences on the date of the request from the Homeseeker Partnership member</b></p>
<p>An applicant who following assessment has been deemed to be in financial difficulties and there is no prospect of resolving those difficulties without moving to more affordable accommodation.</p> <p><b>The effective date commences on the date of the decision</b></p>
<p>Applicants who have two or more needs identified within Silver Band.</p> <p><b>The effective date commences on the date of the decision</b></p>
<p><b>Silver Band</b></p>
<p>Applicants who are living in accommodation with friends and non-immediate family members where individuals lack a bedroom of their own but the arrangements are considered to be settled and not due to end within the next 2 months.</p> <p><b>The effective date commences on the date of the decision to award this preference</b></p>
<p>Applicants who are considered to be key workers who has been offered a full-time job in Torfaen and need accommodation. (This will only apply if there is an agreed and recognised Key Worker scheme).</p> <p><b>The effective date commences on the date of the decision to award this preference</b></p>
<p>Applicants who evidence the need to move closer to give or receive essential support/care services to assist them or their family with day-to-day living.</p> <p><b>The effective date commences on the date of the decision to award this preference</b></p>
<p>Applicants who lack one or more bedrooms in their home but does not meet criteria for overcrowding. Applicants can only bid for properties of sufficient size to address the overcrowding issue as per the Home Size matrix. Applicants will only be considered for this priority if they have their own tenancy or are living with parents or relatives.</p>

<p><b>The effective date commences on the date of the decision to award this preference</b></p>
<p>Applicants who have a medical need for rehousing which is not considered to be urgent but is considered to adversely impacting on the applicant</p> <p><b>The effective date commences on the date of the decision to award this preference</b></p>
<p>Applicants owed a duty under section 66 or section 73 by Torfaen Council under the Housing Wales Act 2014. This priority will also apply to applicants where their section 73 duty has come to an end, they remain homeless and are not owed the full section 75 duty.</p> <p><b>The effective date of the band will reflect the date that the relevant duty was accepted</b></p>
<p>Applicants who have a significant number of Category 2 hazards identified within their current home that are deemed by the Council's Environmental Health Officer to present a risk to them or members of their household.</p> <p><b>The effective date commences on the date of the decision to award this preference</b></p>
<p>An applicant who has one or two children under 6 and lives in a flat or maisonette above ground floor level (without a lift).</p> <p><b>The effective date commences on the date of the decision to award this preference</b></p>
<p>An applicant awarded priority for re-housing by the Homeseeker Team on hardship, welfare or social grounds which is not considered to be urgent. Assessments will be made on an individual basis.</p> <p><b>The effective date commences on the date of the decision to award this preference</b></p>
<p>An applicant previously awarded higher priority but who has had their priority reduced.</p> <p><b>The effective date commences on the date of the decision made to award the higher priority.</b></p>
<p><b>Bronze Band</b></p>
<p>Applicants who are currently in accommodation that is deemed suitable for their needs and no other criteria apply from the higher bands. This includes Owner Occupiers.</p> <p><b>The effective date is to be the same as the date of registration</b></p>
<p>Applicants who meet a higher priority criteria but have had their preference/priority reduced due to their past conduct and behaviour as a tenant. This could include individuals who owe current or former rent arrears.</p> <p><b>The effective date is to be the same as the date of registration</b></p>

8.3 Assessments will be based on the information provided by applicants alongside any supporting information obtained or provided from third parties or organisations. Any assessment is reliant on information provided and as such if this is not available or

has not been disclosed then this cannot be considered. In addition, assessments will focus upon an individual's current housing circumstances and how these are potentially impacting on the applicant and any members of their household who be reasonably expected to reside with them.

## **9. Advertising properties for letting**

9.1 All homes that become available through Partnership landlords will be advertised by the Homeseeker Team other than:

- Homes that are required to assist with move on requirements from temporary and support accommodation schemes operating within the county borough.
- Homes required for housing a tenant temporarily in an emergency to enable essential repair or improvement works to be carried out to their existing home where the tenant cannot remain in occupation whilst the works are undertaken.
- Homes required for re-housing someone being harassed at their current home, which is evidenced or substantiated by a professional body/individual including the Police or other agency, and the move will protect the person(s) from danger. It may not be possible for an applicant to retain choice where that choice may impact on their safety and welfare. This may also include assistance to other Housing Association landlords operating outside of the county borough.
- Homes required for re-housing someone who needs accommodation of a particular type and size or in a particular location to protect them or other persons from danger.
- Homes required enabling the occupant(s) to secure suitable alternative accommodation where a Homeseeker Partnership landlord is seeking possession and must secure suitable alternative accommodation e.g. a successor to a tenancy whose home is too big or where a home is intended to be demolished and the tenant must be re-housed.
- Homes required to re-house a person accepted by the Council as statutory homeless and owed a full homelessness duty through section 75 Housing Wales Act 2014 who has refused to bid for a suitable property or has refused a suitable offer through the bidding process.
- Homes required to rehouse staff who are tied tenants of the partnership and employment is ending through retirement or individual choice.
- Homes required for temporary re-housing in the event of a major incident e.g. flooding or major fire.
- Homes required to re-house existing tenants of Homeseeker Partnership landlords whose existing home needs substantial adaptations but who has agreed to move to a home that is suitable for their needs.
- Homes required by the Council for use as non-secure temporary tenancies to discharge their temporary accommodation duties.
- Homes required to house a patient in a hospital who is medically fit to leave hospital but unable to move back to their original home. The Partnership will consider each case on an individual basis and will provide either temporary

or permanent housing dependent upon whether the applicant is able to secure suitable housing using their own means e.g. by selling their existing home and purchasing a more suitable property to meet their needs. The partnership will also have due regard to other applicants with similar priorities and needs.

- Homes required urgently for someone with a terminal illness who has particular housing needs, and those needs would be met by the property to be allocated - The Partnership will consider each case on an individual basis and will provide either temporary or permanent housing dependent upon whether the applicant is able to secure suitable housing using their own means.

- 9.2 Homeseeker adverts will include details of the property type, size and location together with other relevant marketing information that will help applicants to understand what is on offer so they can make informed choices about bidding. Where appropriate this will include information about adaptations and accessible housing as well as any restrictions (e.g. to point out that there is limited access to some upstairs flats in sheltered and retirement housing schemes). Adverts may also include restrictions around family sizes due to the nature and layout of accommodation.
- 9.3 Where properties have had substantial or other adaptations that make them particularly suitable for an applicant with particular needs e.g. in a wheelchair, then they may be advertised on the basis that priority will be given to people needing accommodation that has been adapted in this way and bidding may be restricted to those who have or whose family have these specific needs. The advert description will clearly identify preference.
- 9.4 Where properties are particularly suitable for older people or people with limited mobility (e.g. bungalows or identified ground floor properties) then they may be advertised on the basis that priority will be given to people needing accommodation of that type. The advert description will clearly identify preference.
- 9.5 Landlords within the Homeseeker Partnership may on occasion decide to vary the eligibility criteria for individual properties when advertising in response to particular local circumstances e.g. by allowing a difficult to let home to be under occupied.
- 9.6 Properties will be advertised weekly on the Homeseeker website at [www.torfaenhomeseeker.org.uk](http://www.torfaenhomeseeker.org.uk), in paper format at identified partner customer outlets and through other mediums should they become available and where there is evidenced need. Homeseeker will take a pro-active approach to finding out whether applicants require alternative formats. When placing adverts the Homeseeker Team will identify where preference will be given to Gold, Silver or Bronze Band applicants. At the close of each advert, an automated short list will be provided to partners for letting purposes.
- 9.7 The Homeseeker Partnership will try to reduce its carbon footprint by minimising the use of paper products. The Partnership understands however that not everyone will have access to a computer or other web based browser or be able to visit a partner customer outlet. In these cases applicants will be sent adverts by post if other arrangements cannot be put in place e.g. through an advocate. Applicants

and their authorised advocates will be able to apply for properties through the Homeseeker web site or by telephoning the Homeseeker Team.

- 9.8 Where properties have been advertised and have not been let either because of no bids being received or no suitable applicants placing a bid on 2 or more occasions, the property will be offered to the most suitable applicant through the agreed move on process. Partner Housing Associations will have the option to advertise any such properties through other media, outside of this policy should no suitable applicants be identified.
- 9.9 Special arrangements will apply when advertising new build developments by Partnership landlords. In such cases all advertising will be split equally between the bands, with a share of properties also being utilised for applicants being allocated homes via the 'Move-On' arrangements contained in section 15 of this policy.

## **10. Applying for properties**

- 10.1 Applicants or individuals acting on their behalf can apply for properties each week. The number of properties that can be selected each week will be restricted to four and the selections must be received before the close of the advert. Any late selections will not be considered.
- 10.2 The size of home that an applicant can bid for depends on household size. If the household needs an extra bedroom(s) for medical, pregnancy or other reasons, (e.g. if they have a full time carer) the decision about the size of home the applicant is eligible for will be taken by the Homeseeker Team when awarding the priority Band. Unless there are exceptional reasons agreed by the Homeseeker Team the size of property that an applicant can select and be considered for is outlined in the Home Size Matrix attached to this policy document.
- 10.3 The Homeseeker Partnership considers that with a limited supply of houses single people and couples (with no dependent children) will not be able to apply for houses and preference for houses will be advertised and let to those families with dependent children. Applicants who have no dependent children but where the applicant or a member of the household is pregnant will also be able to apply for houses (appropriate evidence of pregnancy must be provided confirming that the applicant/household member is at least 20 weeks pregnant).
- 10.4 Where a divorced or separated applicant is not the primary child carer but has evidenced joint custody of a child/children they will be eligible for an additional bedroom(s) in line with the Home Size Matrix criteria for parents with children. This will be subject to individuals being able to evidence that the rent due is affordable at the time of an offer being made.
- 10.5 Where a divorced or separated applicant is not the primary child carer and has provided evidence that they provide regular overnight care and support to their child/children, they will be eligible for 1 additional bedroom as per the Home Size Matrix. This does not apply to applicants who already have children on their application and applicants will only be eligible to bid for flats/maisonettes (not houses). This will be subject to applicants being able to evidence that the rent due is affordable at the time of an offer being made.

- 10.6 Applicants may apply for any property for which they are eligible regardless to the band the property is advertised in, however upon short listing the preference band will always be ranked ahead of other bands (i.e. if a property is Gold preference, all Gold priority holders will be considered ahead of other bands, but other bands may apply). This allows all eligible people to apply for homes that are in a location and of a size that meets their needs whilst ensuring people in the high priority bands can access suitable housing.
- 10.7 Where properties have had substantial or other adaptations that make them particularly suitable for an applicant with particular needs (e.g. in a wheelchair) they will be advertised on the basis that priority will be given to applicants needing accommodation that has been adapted in this way and they may be directly matched with individual applicants should the Housing Intervention Panel and relevant senior officer of the housing provider determine this to be appropriate.
- 10.8 An applicant can request for the system to bid automatically for them on their behalf but this will have limitations around the choices made. Applicants will be made aware of this option and the possible issues around the application process as a result.

## **11 Selection process and offers of accommodation**

- 11.1 At the close of the weekly advert, a shortlist is generated by the Homeseeker system which partners can directly access. Partnership landlords will use the short list (containing all eligible applicants) to make offers to applicants in the order they are ranked and prioritised in on the shortlist. The preference band from the advert will be given first consideration. In the event of no suitable applicants from the preference band or that applicants from the preference band have declined the property, allocations will be made in the band priority order commencing with Gold, Silver and finally Bronze.
- 11.2 Unless there are exceptional circumstances applicants who are transferring from an existing Homeseeker Partnership home will only be allowed to transfer if they have complied with the requirements of Section 12 of this policy and their landlord is satisfied their existing home meets its lettable standard. This will be determined and agreed on a case by case basis and each Homeseeker partner landlord will retain the responsibility for decision making in these cases.
- 11.3 The final decision on all allocations will remain with the appropriate Homeseeker Partnership landlord in conjunction with an appropriate officer from Torfaen County Borough Council where relevant. If Partnership landlords are unable to offer the vacancy to the highest ranked applicant they will continue to offer in rank order through the list until it is exhausted at which point the property may need to be re-advertised as outlined in 11.1 above.
- 11.4 In cases where a home is likely to be under occupied by a successful applicant when judged against the prevailing bedroom size criteria for housing benefit Homeseeker Partnership landlords will take appropriate steps to ensure that their prospective tenant is able to make an informed choice about affordability before accepting any offer of tenancy. This will help to reduce the risk of financial hardship arising and tenancies being put at risk because of debt.

- 11.5 Exceptions to this process can be agreed by the Housing Intervention Panel. Cases will be considered carefully and will only be granted in instances where there is a clear, distinct and demonstrable need for an urgent intervention to resolve the housing issues faced by an applicant.
- 11.6 The availability of 4 bed houses is extremely limited and the Homeseeker Partnership landlords may seek to make the best use of this type of accommodation by maximising occupancy. This may result in an applicant with a shorter registration date being considered above another applicant where they have a larger family and would therefore make best use of the accommodation. Decisions in cases such as this will be made by the Housing Intervention Panel.
- 11.7 Where an applicant has an association with any of the partner agencies concerned either through being an employee, a relative of an employee, an elected member or board member then any application made will be assessed in line with this policy document. However, where an offer of accommodation is to be made then a senior officer of an appropriate level within the respective organisation will verify the application prior to any offer being made. Each organisation will use its own internal processes and procedures to ensure that application has been assessed correctly and that the shortlisting process has been followed appropriately.

## **12 Suitability to be a tenant, anti-social behaviour and rent arrears**

- 12.1 Applications for housing will be assessed to determine whether an individual applicant is suitable to be a tenant. Assessments will take account of an individual's current circumstances and will focus on:
- Whether there is evidence of unacceptable behaviour that would be considered serious enough to have entitled an authority to obtain a possession order
  - Whether the behaviour was serious enough to result in the applicant or a household member to be considered unsuitable to be a tenant
  - Whether the behaviour is still considered to be unacceptable at the time of the application?
- 12.2 Assessments will consider a range of factors such as:
- The circumstances around the applicant and their household
  - The reasons for the behaviour. For example, in the case of rent arrears, why did the arrears occur
  - Whether there are support needs identified that are not being met or were not met at the time
  - What advice, assistance and support had been offered to the applicant and what action could they have taken
  - The overall nature of the behaviour

- 12.3 Consideration will need to be given to the time that has elapsed since the unacceptable behaviour occurred, whether there has been evidence of improved behaviour and whether there are any mitigating circumstances that should be taken into account in making the decision. This could include:
- Whether an individual has paid back rent arrears accrued or has commenced a repayment plan
  - Whether an applicant has successfully sustained accommodation since the unacceptable behaviour for a period of time that would demonstrate a change in behaviour
- 12.4 Ineligible applicants will be notified of the reasons for the decision in writing and informed of the right to request a review within 21 days of receiving the letter. In addition, advice will be provided on what steps could be taken by them to address the issues that have led to them being deemed ineligible. Applicants will not normally be allowed to reapply until one year has elapsed from the date of the decision. However, should an applicant's circumstances change then consideration may be given to an earlier application.
- 12.5 Applicants with current or former tenancy arrears with any of the Homeseeker Partnership landlords will not be excluded from the Homeseeker register unless they fail the eligibility test outlined above. However, where a recoverable housing related debt is owed as indicated above, applicants will be required to make a clear commitment to clear the debt owed and to have subsequently maintained payments for an agreed period of time.
- 12.6 In the event of an applicant or a member of their household owing arrears then their application will be assessed and their level of preference adjusted and placed into Bronze band. This may be completed at a later stage where the debt is not identified at the original point of the application being made. Applicants will need to demonstrate a commitment to address the debt owed either through the clearance of the arrears in full, partial clearance of the debt to an agreed level or through making regular and consistent payments for a period of time sufficient enough to evidence this commitment.
- 12.7 The period of time will vary on each individual case and will take into account the whole circumstances of each individual applicant and their household. This may take into account the urgency of an applicant's housing circumstances alongside any mitigating factors surrounding the accrual of the arrears. The table below provides a framework to be considered in assessing applications but each case will be assessed individually and take account of the whole circumstances relating to the application and not solely the debt owed.

<b>Level of Debt</b>	<b>Repayment Period/Value</b>
Up to £250	Repayment agreement made
£250 - £500	Repayment agreement made and at least 6 consecutive payments or 25% of the debt value, whichever is greater

£500 - £1000	Repayment agreement made and at least 12 consecutive payments or 25% of the debt value, whichever is greater
£1000 - £2000	Repayment agreement made and at least 18 consecutive payments or 25% of the debt value, whichever is greater
£2000+	Repayment agreement made and at least 26 consecutive payments or 25% of the debt value, whichever is greater

12.7 Applicants must also demonstrate a continued commitment to repay the debt after any agreed period of time has elapsed as failure to do so may affect their application with officers having the discretion to remove their preference and demote the application to Bronze band until a revised agreement is made and adhered to. Where sufficient payments have been made, the level of preference will be re-adjusted to the correct band that reflects an applicants housing needs in line with the provisions of this policy. The effective date will be the date on which the decision to place into the respective priority band would have taken effect.

12.8 Consideration can be given to adjusting the above repayment framework in exceptional circumstances. The decision in these instances will be made by appropriate senior officers from the Homeseeker partnership on a case by case basis.

### 13 Local lettings arrangements

13.1 In certain circumstances for a requirement for individual or a group of properties to be considered and let under a local letting policy agreement for a time limited period. This will be done for a specific identified purpose such as to promote community safety and community cohesion or improve tenancy sustainability. This will not be a regular and standard step to take and must take account of the prevailing housing conditions at the time e.g. demand for certain property types where age restrictions may be an issue. Any such policy must be approved in accordance with the current Welsh Government regulatory requirements and by partnership boards and will be subject to a full Equality Impact Assessment, prior to its implementation.

13.2 Local letting plans will be considered for properties or estates where one or more of the following situations occur:

- There are units of accommodation that are low demand
- An area is unpopular, as demonstrated by the turnover of tenancies, the number of refusals
- There is a disproportionate number of a certain age group or type of household in the area which is considered to contributing to ongoing problems or issues
- The area is subject to a major regeneration programme
- Where new developments have been introduced and there is a requirement to meet certain criteria in the locality

- Where there are blocks of flats that currently have identified issues due to the current profile of existing residents and there are issues around the sustainability of tenancies and there are wider community impacts as a result of the current tenant profile/mix

13.2 Only those applicants who qualify under the established local letting criteria may be considered for properties within the arrangement. Partnership Landlords who require the introduction of such a local lettings scheme will be required to develop a policy report to support the schemes introduction. Local letting plans will be reviewed annually by the Housing Intervention Panel and either extended or removed as a result.

13.3 In addition, there may be occasions where partner Housing Associations require individual properties to be let sensitively owing to specific issues. This will generally be for a single letting and it will be the responsibility of each individual Housing Association to ensure that properties are advertised with reference to additional criteria to be applied. Agreement will be between appropriate officers within Torfaen County Borough Council and the respective Housing Association concerned.

## **14 Lettings Plan**

14.1 The Homeseeker Partnership have an agreed lettings plan that will be regularly reviewed on a quarterly basis by the Homeseeker Steering Group. This will form part of the ongoing process of monitoring the impact and outcomes achieved through the operation of this policy against the objectives set out in section 2. Where objectives are evidently not being achieved or need to be modified it will inform recommendations for change, through the administration processes referred to in section 3.

14.2 The lettings plan will set out the property types and locations that are expected to become available over the time period of the Plan and will identify a fair and appropriate proportion of those predicted to become available for which reasonable preference will be given. Reasonable preference groups by law include:

- People who are homeless within the meaning of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014
- People who are owed a duty under Section 73 and Section 75 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 or who are occupying accommodation secured by Torfaen County Borough Council under Section 68 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014
- People occupying unsanitary or overcrowded housing or otherwise living in unsatisfactory housing conditions
- People who have a need to move on medical or welfare grounds, including grounds relating to disability
- People who need to move to a particular locality in the area, where failure to do so would cause hardship to themselves or others

## **15 Move on Accommodation**

15.1 The Homeseeker Partnership has developed a move on policy and process in conjunction with the providers of supported housing schemes across Torfaen. This

process is aimed at ensuring that individuals within supported and temporary housing are provided with the necessary support and practical help to develop the essential life skills required to sustain accommodation in the long term thereby reducing tenancy failure and homelessness. It is also an integral part of creating cohesive and well-established communities that are safe places for people to live, develop and thrive.

- 15.2 Providers of supported and temporary housing across the borough will be able to source accommodation from partner landlords. This process will be co-ordinated and administered by Torfaen County Borough Council, linking to the Homeseeker process and ensuring that individuals who are considered ready to move on into permanent accommodation are assisted to do so in a timely manner.
- 15.3 Properties will be set aside for move on purposes and individual applicants within supported and temporary housing schemes will be allocated accommodation directly based on their needs and requirements after they have been considered to be ready to move on. This will be dealt with under a separate process. This will be reviewed every year and monitored through the Homeseeker Steering Group to identify the impact of the move on process.

## **16 Older Persons Accommodation**

- 16.1 Homeseeker partnership landlords have a number of properties across the county borough that are designated for older persons. These properties are generally only allocated to individuals over the age of 55 although there may be exceptional cases whereby younger applicants could be considered should the accommodation provided within the older persons accommodation provide a reasonable and suitable housing solution.

## **17 Accessible Housing**

- 17.1 Accessible accommodation will be advertised through the Homeseeker process and information will be provided on the advert to identify the adaptations present in the accommodation. Individuals who are considered to require a form of accessible housing will be carefully assessed and permitted to apply for accommodation that is considered to be accessible. Criteria will be applied to each property and the shortlisting process will follow the requirements of section 11 of this policy document. However, consideration will be given to the adaptations present and how these meet the needs and requirements of the applicant concerned.
- 17.2 Specially adapted accommodation will not normally be advertised through the Homeseeker process. This accommodation will be allocated directly to households who have an already identified need for this type of accommodation. The process of selection will be carried out through the assessment and the available accommodation will be offered to the applicant considered to make the most extensive and full use of the adaptations present in the accommodation. Decisions will be made on an individual basis and appropriate advice from relevant professionals will be used to inform the decisions taken in these instances.

## **18 Owner Occupiers**

- 18.1 Owner occupiers will be permitted to register for accommodation and will have their accommodation needs assessed in line with the provisions of this policy. Where an owner occupier has a demonstrable need to move to alternative accommodation then they will be awarded reasonable preference under the provisions of this policy in order to assist them to seek to secure suitable alternative accommodation. However, where an owner occupier has assets in excess of £300,000, the reasonable preference will not be awarded as the assets available can be reasonably expected to be used to secure their own solution within the county borough. This may be waived in very exceptional circumstances by Homeseeker partners.
- 18.2 Owner Occupiers can be considered for accommodation that is lower demand and for those properties that are advertised and there are no households in need who have applied for the accommodation. This may be the case for some designated older persons accommodation.

## **19 Exceptions to the general process**

- 19.1 In certain circumstances, the Homeseeker partnership may use their discretion to allocate properties directly. This is in addition to the separate move on arrangements referred to within this policy document and will include but are not limited to:
- Individuals under-occupying extremely desirable properties who have specific housing needs and requirements
  - Decant accommodation for applicants who are required to vacate their home for essential major works to be carried out
  - Where there is an adapted property and the adaptations are extensive and an applicant is known to require the property concerned given the adaptations present or likely to be present
  - Where there is an identified risk of harm to or from an individual that requires a multi-agency approach to manage the risk
  - Where properties are required for use within the Housing First project
  - Where properties are required to assist the Council in meeting its corporate and statutory responsibilities
  - Where there have been exceptional difficulties in or within the immediate vicinity of the property available for letting
  - Where there has been a major incident such as a fire or a flood and the individual concerned requires housing urgently as a result
- 19.2 Decisions taken outside of the normal process will be agreed by partners either individually or collectively depending on the nature of the case. In all instances the Homeseeker Team will be provided with details of the exceptional process and any subsequent letting will be recorded on the centralised system and register.

## **20 Review of decisions**

- 20.1 Applicants will be notified in writing of decisions made surrounding their applications. Any appeal must be submitted within 21 days of receiving the written decision. The review will then be carried out by a senior officer not involved in the original decision. The officer concerned will vary depending on the decision made and reviews will generally be completed within 56 days of receipt of the review request where reasonably practicable to do so.
- 20.2 Applicants will be advised when reviews are anticipated to exceed the 56 day review period. Reviews submitted outside the timescale may be considered where this is considered reasonable to do so.

## **21 Annual Review of Applications**

- 21.1 Applications that are accepted onto the Homeseeker register will be reviewed on an annual basis by the Homeseeker Team and applicants will be asked to confirm that they wish to remain on the Homeseeker register. Applicants who fail to respond within 28 days will have their application cancelled.
- 21.2 Where an applicant re-applies to join the Homeseeker register at a later date then they will be required to complete the full registration process and will be registered from the date that they re-applied unless there are mitigating circumstances. This could include:
- Being away from home due to an admission to hospital, nursing home, residential home or other similar provision
  - Being away from home to support/care for a family member or friend
  - Other exceptional circumstances considered reasonable by the Homeseeker Team

Evidence will need to be provided in order to support a request for re-instating an application that has been cancelled and an applicant will have a right to request a review of the decision made in lien with the provisions of section 16 of this policy document.

## **22 Change of Circumstances**

- 22.1 Applicants are required to advise of any changes in their circumstances that may impact on their application status. This could include:
- A change of address
  - New household members
  - Household members leaving the household
  - Significant changes to personal, medical or social circumstances

The changes are critical in determining the status of each individual application. Failure to provide the correct information could result in applicants being considered for the wrong accommodation and potentially not being able to apply for other types of accommodation. This could result in an applicant being effectively overlooked for accommodation for failing to provide up to date information.

## **23 Cancelled Applications**

23.1 Applications can be cancelled or removed from the Homeseeker scheme at any time. The list below provides a number of scenarios that may result in an application being removed.

- The applicant requests to cancel their application
- The applicant does not respond to a review within the specified time period
- The applicant is rehoused through the Homeseeker register
- The applicant fails to provide information requested within a reasonable timescale
- The applicant has moved and has not informed the Homeseeker Team of the new address
- The applicant has knowingly and wilfully given false or misleading information, or has not disclosed relevant information, in connection with their application
- The applicant no longer has recourse to public funds and/or no longer has indefinite leave to remain in the UK and so is no longer entitled to be housed or be allowed to remain on the Homeseeker register
- The applicant or a member of their household is found to be guilty of unacceptable behaviour since their application was registered that would result in them failing the test outlined in section 12 of this policy document

23.2 Correspondence will be sent to applicants who are removed from the Homeseeker Register. This will outline the reasons why their application has been removed. Applicants will have a right to review this decision as indicated within section 17 of this policy document. Applicants who have been rehoused will not be contacted but their application will be closed as their housing needs have been met through the offer and acceptance of suitable accommodation. Application records will be retained for a period of 7 years and will then be disposed of appropriately.

## **24 Monitoring and Policy Review**

24.1 The Homeseeker policy will be monitored on a quarterly basis by the Homeseeker Steering Group through the production of a quarterly performance report that will analyse the operation of the service and feedback received from applicants around the service. This will enable partners to take appropriate and timely action to address any identified issues alongside ensuring that the policy is being operated in a fair and transparent manner.

24.2 It is the intention that this policy is reviewed every 3 years and that in doing so a wider impact assessment will be carried out. However, the policy may be reviewed earlier where there are significant changes required as a result of legislative changes.

## Home Size Matrix

Family Size	Bedsit	1 bed flat/bungalow	2 bed flat/maisonette bungalow	2 bed house	3 bed flat/maisonette	3 bed house/bungalow	4 bed house
Single Person	Yes	Yes					
Couple		Yes					
Couple/Single Person who is pregnant			Yes	Yes			
Parent/Couple with 1 child			Yes	Yes			
Parent/Couple with 2 children			Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Parent/Couple with 3 children					Yes	Yes	
Parent/Couple with 4 or more children						Yes	Yes
2 or more single adults			Yes				

## Glossary of Terms

**Accessible Housing** – This is a term used to describe accommodation that is suitable for people with mobility problems and difficulties.

**Bid** – This is the term used to describe where an individual applicant wishes to be considered for a property that has been advertised through the Homeseeker scheme. This has no monetary value.

**Dependant children** – This refers to children under the age of 18 who live with the applicant concerned on a full time basis and who are financially dependant on the applicant or applicants applying for housing.

**Housing Intervention Panel** – The panel is made up of Homeseeker partners and other professionals in order to make decisions around exceptional cases or cases where there are complex issues. Membership of the panel will be through appropriately nominated officers from each organisation.

**Homeseeker Partnership** – This term refers to the partners involved in the Homeseeker scheme and includes, Bron Afon Community Housing, Hafod, Linc Cymru, Hedyn, Pobl and Torfaen County Borough Council.

**Homeseeker Steering Group** – This term refers to the group set up to oversee the policy. The group is led by a senior officer from Torfaen County Borough Council alongside senior officers from the other partners.

**Homeseeker Team** – This team oversees the registration, assessment and general administration process of the Homeseeker policy and scheme on behalf of all Homeseeker partners.

**Housing Association** – Housing Associations are not for profit organisation who own, let and manage a range of accommodation that is generally cheaper than private rented accommodation and provides households with longer term tenancy agreements

**Housing First** – This is a project that provides accommodation to individuals who require intensive support to maintain accommodation.

**Housing, Health and Safety Rating System** – This is the system used to assess the risks and hazards to health and safety within properties. This contains a categorisation system to determine the level of risk posed to the individuals who occupy the accommodation.

**Housing (Wales) Act 2014** – This is the law that covers how local authorities should assist households and individuals faced with homelessness.

**MAPPA** – This term refers to the Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements that are in place in order to collectively manage the risk posed by certain offenders who are either within the community already or due to be released.

**MARAC** – This term refers to the Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference arrangements that are in place in order to safeguard individuals who are considered to be at significant risk of domestic abuse.

**Move on Accommodation** – This is accommodation that is set aside to enable individuals to move from short term/temporary accommodation or supported housing at a point when they are ready to move.

**Older Persons Accommodation** – This term is used to describe properties that are set aside for persons over the age of 60

**Social Housing** – This refers to the properties owned by the Housing Associations who form the Homeseeker Partnership

**Supported Accommodation** – This is accommodation where individuals are provided with accommodation with support provided by staff on site either on a permanent basis or for a significant part of each day. The accommodation can be shared or independent.

**Tenants/Tenancies** – Where this policy document refers to tenants/tenancies and in having regard to the Renting Homes Act 2016, we are referring to contract holders. The term tenant/contract holder refers to a person(s) renting a property from a landlord.

**Temporary Accommodation** – This is a broad term used to describe properties used for households who are currently homeless. The accommodation can be shared or independent.