

CHESHIRE HOMECHOICE Common Allocation Policy

VERSION 3 - 2015



Cheshire East Choice Based Lettings Partnership

"Providing housing solutions in Cheshire East through choice "

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SECTION ONE THE COMMON ALLOCATION POLICY

Background

In 2007 the Cheshire Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings Partnership was created with the aim of developing a common allocation policy, a common housing register and a choice based lettings scheme. Due to local government re-organisation this became the Cheshire East, Choice Based Lettings Partnership in 2009. The following organisations are members of the Partnership:

- Cheshire East Council
- Plus Dane Group
- Peaks & Plains Housing Trust
- The Guinness Partnership

The Cheshire East Choice Based Lettings Partnership's scheme is called "Cheshire Homechoice" and went live in 2010 using a system of advertising properties and expressions of interest (bids) alongside the Allocations Policy to determine how properties are allocated.

In addition the following organisations advertise a proportion of their available properties in Cheshire East through Cheshire Homechoice

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Riverside• Harvest• Muir• Regenda• Contour Homes• Places for People• Adactus• Aspire	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Equity• Anchor• Arcon• "Jonnie" Johnson• Great Places• Staffordshire Housing Association• One Vision Housing
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In 2011 Cheshire Homechoice began a review of the Common Allocation Policy in light of lessons learnt from the application of the policy and to update it in line with statutory changes being brought in by the Localism Act 2011.

In 2015 Cheshire Homechoice conducted a further review of the policy in light of local demands for local housing.

Version 3. is the reviewed policy from 2015

Our vision

"Providing housing solutions in Cheshire East through choice".

Key aims and objectives

The overall aim of the policy is to ensure that all social/ affordable housing is allocated fairly and objectively to those in the greatest housing need, having regard to any legislative requirements and Codes of Guidance issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government. (DCLG)

This policy has been developed with a view to meeting the following principles and key objectives:

- To provide a first class housing service
- To operate an allocations system that offers realistic, informed choice for all
- To improve mobility within Cheshire East
- To encourage balanced and sustainable communities
- To ensure that every application is dealt with fairly and consistently irrespective of race, disability, gender, sexual orientation, religion and belief, and age
- To operate a choice based lettings system which is simple, easy to understand, transparent, open and fair
- To give adequate priority to applicants who fall within the “Reasonable Preference” categories
- To give adequate priority to homeless applicants whilst maintaining a balance between the needs of the homeless and other applicants in housing need
- To empower applicants by giving them more opportunity to express choice and preferences about where they want to live whilst having regard to the availability of housing resources and the high demand for housing
- To assist those applicants who are vulnerable to access the scheme

Equality and fairness

Cheshire Homechoice will ensure its policies and practices are non-discriminatory and will promote equal opportunity by preventing and eliminating discrimination on the grounds of race, disability, gender, sexual orientation, religion and belief and age. The scheme will be accessible, responsive and sensitive to the diverse needs of individuals. The aim of Cheshire Homechoice is to create an environment where equality and diversity is at the heart of everything they do.

The impact of the policy will be monitored, to ensure that it promotes equality of opportunity to individuals and minority groups. In order to achieve this, all applicants will be asked to provide details of their ethnic origin and any other demographic information when they apply to join the Register.

Cheshire Homechoice will ensure all potential applicants have equality of information about the service and equal opportunity to apply, bid for and receive offers of accommodation. We will:

- Advertise the service widely in a variety of accessible media
- Provide practical assistance to those who may have difficulty in understanding the requirements of the system
- Provide practical assistance, where the applicant may have difficulty completing the paperwork
- Provide tailored assistance to those who may have difficulty in bidding for properties.
- Monitor the profile of those who are applying and placing bids to ensure that minority and hard to reach groups are actively engaged in the service.

SECTION TWO

THE COMMON HOUSING REGISTER

Introduction

The Common Housing Register is a single list of all the applicants across Cheshire East who have been accepted onto the scheme. It includes new applicants and existing tenants wishing to transfer. Applicants who apply to join the Register need only apply once to be considered for vacancies across the whole of the Cheshire East borough.

Who can apply?

The register is open to all apart from those who are ineligible due to immigration status or classed as non-qualifying due to unacceptable behaviour as defined in the following sections.

Eligibility

Age

Anyone age 16 or over can apply to have their housing need registered, however tenancies are usually only offered to people of 18 years of age and over.

Persons from Abroad

A person (defined by s13 (2) of the Asylum and Immigration act 1996) may not be allocated accommodation under Part 6 if he or she is a person from abroad who is ineligible for an allocation under s.160ZA of the 1996 Act. There are two categories for the purposes of s.160ZA:

(i) *a person subject to immigration control* - such a person is not eligible for an allocation of accommodation unless he or she comes within a class prescribed in regulations made by the Secretary of State (s.160ZA(2)),and,

(ii) *a person from abroad other than a person subject to immigration control* - regulations may provide for other descriptions of persons from abroad who, although not subject to immigration control, are to be treated as ineligible for an allocation of accommodation (s.160ZA(4)).

All allocations made by Cheshire Homechoice will be made in accordance with the most current legislation, taking into account any qualifying rights to reside or immigration control limitations.

Unacceptable behaviour

Under Section 160ZA of the Housing Act 1996, any applicant (or a member of their household) who is guilty of unacceptable behaviour serious enough to make him/her unsuitable to be a tenant, will be classed as non-qualifying for an allocation. In most circumstances this means anti-social behaviour or significant/persistent rent arrears.

Joint applications

In Line with s.160ZA of the Housing Act 1996, a joint application will not be accepted from two or more people if any one of them is a person from abroad who is ineligible. However, where two or more people apply and one of them is eligible an application will be accepted from the person who is eligible, as a sole applicant.

Multiple applications

Multiple applications will not be allowed. If multiple applications do exist, the application which is a most accurate reflection of the applicant's circumstances will be kept open. Any other applications will be cancelled.

Transfers

Existing tenants of the partner Registered Providers, who have been tenants for 12 months or more, can apply to move and will have their priority assessed in the same way as any other applicant. The decision to permit a transfer to a property with the same Registered Provider is at the discretion of the Registered Provider.

Mutual exchanges

Mutual exchanges are advertised through the registered providers own channels and will be dealt with outside the policy. A link to relevant websites will be provided on the Cheshire Homechoice homepage or details of the scheme can be sent to applicants on request.

Applications from Elected Members, Board Members and Employees

Applications can be accepted from employees, elected members, board members and their close relatives. Applicants must disclose any such relationship at the time of application.

How to apply

An application can be made by completing a Cheshire Homechoice application form and providing the information requested. The registration of an application may be delayed or cancelled if the information requested is not provided.

The purpose of the Cheshire Homechoice application is to correctly identify the housing priority for each applicant, which is expressed as a priority Band. Once an application has been registered applicants will receive a copy of the scheme guide and be notified of:

- The date of registration
- The priority Band assessment & effective date
- The Username and memorable date
- Application reference (for placing bids for properties)

Advice, support and information

Support will be offered to applicants needing assistance.

Home visits

Home visits may be carried out to assess some applications where appropriate.

Changes in circumstances

Applicants who move to a new address or whose circumstances change after they have been accepted onto the housing register (e.g. someone joining or leaving their household) should immediately contact the Cheshire Homechoice Team at Cheshire East to notify them of the change. A new application may be required.

Cheshire Homechoice reserves the right to reconsider an applicant's priority Band assessment on the grounds of change of circumstances at any time until an offer of accommodation has been accepted and a tenancy agreement signed.

If an applicant's circumstances have changed prior to the allocation of a property and records held by Cheshire Homechoice have not been updated the partners reserve the right to overlook an applicant's bid or to revoke an offer. It is an applicant's responsibility to keep Cheshire Homechoice updated with any circumstances relating to housing.

Housing register renewal

Cheshire Homechoice will regularly review information held on the register. Applicants must keep their application details up to date and place bids on adverts for properties that meet their requirements, on a regular basis. Cheshire Homechoice reserve the right to close inactive applications. If applicants wish to remain on the register, they must contact Cheshire Homechoice within 28 days. Providing none of the housing circumstances have changed and the previous assessment remains valid the application will be re-opened immediately and the previous priority of the application will remain unaffected.

In Bands A & B there will be more regular monitoring and reviews; Cheshire Homechoice will encourage applicants in all Bands to keep their details current and will contact applicants regularly to ensure we hold current and relevant information.

Closed applications

Applications will be closed in the following circumstances:

- A request has been received from the applicant (or their advocate in writing)
- When an applicant has been contacted by a partner Registered Provider to be considered for a tenancy to prevent further bidding during the decision process
- The applicant has accepted a tenancy as a sole or joint tenant
- The applicant has bought a property
- Notification has been received from an executor or personal representative that the applicant is deceased and s/he was the sole applicant

- It is discovered that the applicant has given false or misleading information in their application
- Information is obtained that gives reason to believe that the applicant is no longer eligible
- If a response to correspondence is not received within 10 working days (2 weeks)

Applicants can request an explanation of the reason/s for their application's closure and can request a review of the decision (see Reviews and Appeals).

If the applicant makes a request to reopen their application within 20 working days (4 weeks) of it being closed it will be reopened where eligible and receive the original assessment of Band and effective date provided no relevant circumstances have changed.

Deliberately withholding information or providing false information

Legal action could be taken against any applicant who provides false information when applying for housing (including a fine of up to £5,000). Under Section 171 of the Housing Act 1996 it is an offence to:

- Deliberately provide false information; or
- Deliberately withhold information that should have been given

Applicants, who are found to have made fraudulent applications in this way, will automatically have their application closed as above. Possession proceedings can be instigated if a tenancy was obtained by giving false information and the tenant may be classed as non qualifying for the Housing Register

Reviews

Applicants have the right to request a review against decisions made in the allocation process. These include:

- A decision to reduce preference.
- A decision to overlook a bid on a shortlist
- A decision about the priority Band assessment
- A decision about eligibility to make an application
- A decision to close an application.

The applicant's request for a review of the decision should be made in writing within 20 working days (4 weeks) of the original decision being made with supporting evidence why they require a review of the original decision.

An independent officer from Cheshire Homechoice will carry out reviews. The officer will not have been involved in the original decision. The officer will consider the evidence provided and decide whether to overturn or support the original decision. The applicant will be informed in writing of the decision within 20 working days (4 weeks) of receipt of the request for a review. The reply will contain the decision made, the reasons for the decision and the facts taken into account when making the decision.

Appeals

If the applicant is not satisfied with the decision made by a reviewing officer, they can request the Cheshire Homechoice Panel (see below), review the evidence provided and review the decision. Applicants will need to do this in writing within 20 working days (4 weeks) of the review letter being sent. The Cheshire Homechoice Panel will have 40 working days (8 weeks) in which to review the supporting evidence and respond in writing to the applicant of the decision made.

Cheshire Homechoice Panel

Cheshire Homechoice is committed to equality of opportunities and therefore will monitor all processes robustly to ensure that there is open and fair access to social/ affordable housing and to ensure allocations of accommodation are made to those in the greatest housing need. This will be done through the Cheshire Homechoice Panel. Operational managers from all Cheshire Homechoice partners will attend the panel on a regular basis to make decisions on, and monitor the following:

- Reviews of decisions
- Customer satisfaction/complaint levels
- Accessibility for vulnerable groups
- Reduced preference applicants
- Ineligible or unqualified applicants
- Allocations to ensure they have been carried out fairly and transparently and in line with this Policy
- The number of direct/management lets and the reasons they were made
- Refusal of offers
- Community, new build and local lettings to ensure that need is being met

Cheshire Homechoice Board

Future developments and alterations to this Common Allocation Policy, or the overall scheme, will be decided by the Cheshire Homechoice board, which consists of senior managers from each of the participating organisations.

Making a complaint

If an applicant wishes to make a complaint they should contact Cheshire East to be informed to which partner the complaint should be directed and advise them of the partner's complaint procedure.

All applicants who make a complaint will be treated fairly and objectively. A reply to any complaint received will be delivered within the timescales set out in each partner organisation's complaints policy. Copies of these can be obtained from the individual partners (see Appendix 1)

If the applicant has gone through the complaints procedure and remains dissatisfied, they can write to the Housing Ombudsman or the Local Government Ombudsman or apply for a judicial review.

SECTION THREE ASSESSING HOUSING NEED

Reasonable preference groups

All qualifying applications will be assessed under this policy, to ensure that those in greatest housing need are given preference for an allocation of accommodation. Cheshire Homechoice gives reasonable preference to applicants as set out in section 166A (3) of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended) and the Homelessness Act 2002. These are:

- People who are homeless including those who are intentionally homeless and those who are not in priority need.
- People who are owed a duty by a local authority under section 190(2), 193(2) or 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 s.192(3)
- People occupying unsanitary or overcrowded housing or otherwise living in unsatisfactory housing conditions
- People who need to move on medical or welfare grounds, including grounds relating to disability
- People who need to move to a particular locality in the district of the housing authority, where failure to meet that need would cause hardship (to themselves or to others)

In addition, section 166 A (3) gives local authorities the power to frame their allocation schemes to give additional preference to particular descriptions of applicants who fall within the reasonable preference categories and who have particularly urgent housing needs.

To ensure that local priorities are met, the scheme may provide for other factors, other than those set out in section (2) of the Housing Act 1996, in determining which categories of applicants are to be given preference for an allocation of accommodation within the scheme, providing they do not dominate the scheme over those listed in the statutory preference categories listed in section 166A (3)

Priority band assessment

Band A

- Households assessed as statutorily homeless by Cheshire East Council, to whom a full housing duty is owed.
- Households who are unable to occupy their current accommodation.
- Households who meet the downsizing criteria.

Band B

- Households who have been assessed as potentially homeless
- Households who do not have access to a toilet or cooking facilities (access can be to shared or communal facilities)
- Households who are required to leave their home within 28 days as a result of a Prohibition Order served in relation to the premises under the Housing Act 2004 prohibiting use of all or part of the property, a Demolition Order served in relation to the

premises under the Housing Act 2004, or a declaration of a Clearance Area affecting the premises served under the Housing Act 1985.

- Households who are leaving supported accommodation and are ready to move on (confirmed by accommodation provider).
- Households assessed with an urgent housing need
- Care Leavers – with additional housing need

Band C

- Households assessed as non statutorily homeless
- Those living in temporary accommodation awaiting a homeless decision.
- Households in supported accommodation (excluding sheltered accommodation), but not confirmed as ready to move on
- Households who are overcrowded – In alignment with the bedroom standard
- Households who under occupy a property owned by a register provider in Cheshire East
- Households with a lack of security of tenure
- Households whose housing is impacting on a medical condition
- Households whose housing is impacting on their welfare

Band D

- Households who do not meet any of the reasonable preference criteria and/or are otherwise adequately housed

Band E

- Households who have no local connection to the sub region of Cheshire East
- Households who have had preference reduced

Housing needs assessment

Housing need is not cumulative. The housing needs assessment will take account of all household circumstances. This will be a multiple housing needs assessment and the highest priority circumstance will determine the priority Band.

Statutorily homeless

The Local Authority has a legal duty under Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002) to ensure that homeless Households owed a full housing duty by Cheshire East Council under s.193 (2) are provided with suitable accommodation. Homeless Households to whom the full duty is owed will be placed in Band A.

Households awarded this priority under the scheme should receive an offer of an allocation within a short period of time, therefore the priority awarded on the grounds of homelessness will only be permitted for a limited period of time as set out on page 22.

Unable to occupy current accommodation

Households who cannot physically access their accommodation (long term) or who are in hospital or respite care and have been medically assessed as being unable to return permanently to their current home will be placed in Band A.

Households who are required to leave their homes as a result of an emergency prohibition or demolition order served in relation to the whole of the household's property under the Housing Act 2004 will be placed in Band A.

Downsizing

Current tenants who occupy larger homes belonging to one of the partner Registered Providers, whom are willing to move to smaller, more manageable accommodation may be considered for downsizing priority. Applicants will need to obtain the support of their landlord before being awarded this priority and the aim is to make their existing home available to other applicants registered with Cheshire Homechoice.

Applicants with downsizing priority will be placed in Band A.

Where more than one applicant in a short list has downsizing priority, the partner allocating the property may use discretion in conducting the allocation and may overlook the effective date of the applicants.

This assessment will not confirm eligibility to any other downsizing schemes held by the partners nor does it mean that the Registered Provider will finance a move.

Homeless prevention/ potential homelessness

Households who meet all of the following criteria will be placed into Band B:-

- At risk of becoming homeless
- Likely to lose their accommodation through no fault of their own
- Likely to meet the priority need criteria as outlined in Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002)
- Continually engage with a Cheshire East Housing Options team or Homechoice Team caseworker.

This will assist them in moving into accommodation before they become homeless. Supporting evidence and a full report from Housing Options will be required before being placed in Band B.

Engagement with services and active bidding are required for priority award on potentially homeless grounds and will be reviewed after 20 working days by Cheshire Homechoice. Should engagement or bidding lapse, this priority will be reduced to Band C.

Living in unsanitary conditions.

If Cheshire Homechoice can confirm that an applicant has no access at all to toilet, washing or cooking facilities the applicant will be placed in Band B.

For the definition of 'no access', Cheshire Homechoice will consider shared access or access to facilities outside of the home to be access. Running water will be enough for the assessment of washing facilities and a microwave is considered sufficient for cooking.

Prohibition or demolition order served within 28 days

Prohibition Orders or Demolition Orders taking effect within 28 days in relation to the whole of the Household's property will be placed in Band B.

If a clearance area has been declared, Households within this area will be placed in Band B.

Where a property is in a state of disrepair, refer to welfare.

Households in supported accommodation

Applicants from Supporting People funded supported accommodation (excluding sheltered accommodation) in Cheshire East will be placed in Band C.

However, when applicants are confirmed as ready to move on by their supporting service the priority will be increased to Band B.

Urgent housing need

Additional priority may be awarded where an applicant cannot access their washing or bathing facilities safely due to a physical disability and where adaptations cannot be done to the property to facilitate access. Subject to further assessment by the partners and or the Occupational Therapy Team (where appropriate) applicants will be placed in Band B.

Households with a requirement for equipment to manage a disability which cannot be accommodated in their current home will be placed in Band B.

Where there are pending convictions or intensive ongoing investigations that indicate a significant risk of harm to a member of a household and the police or an ASB co-ordinator (or equivalent) are in support of the fact that a move is the only resolution, applicants will be placed in Band B.

Cases meeting all of the following criteria will be placed in Band B:-

- cases referred to Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) where there is a risk outside the property, of domestic violence
- where a perpetrator of domestic violence remains a risk to a person/ family that cannot be controlled long term by the police as a matter of public protection
- a move is the only solution.

More serious issues may be considered in line with Homelessness Legislation.

Care leavers

For the purposes of assessing priority, a young person will be considered under the care leavers policy if they can prove they are or have previously been a "Cared for Child" by Cheshire East Council AND are under the age of 26.

Young people who are care leavers of Cheshire East Council under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and are already adequately housed will be placed in Band D. Where a “care leaver” (as defined above) has any additional housing need they will be placed in Band B. (For example: If an applicant is confirmed as a care leaver and is overcrowded they will be assessed as Band B). The only exception to this is if the care leaver meets any of the assessment criteria in Band A, they will be placed in Band A. Supporting documentation will be required from the appropriate Local Authority department.

Non statutorily homeless

All households who have received a section 184 notification of a decision made by Cheshire East Council or any other Local Authority, determining intentional or non priority homelessness will be placed in Band C.

Awaiting homeless decision

A household who has made a homeless application but has not yet received their section 184 decision letter will be placed in Band C. This assessment will be appropriate for applicants living in temporary accommodation provided by the Local Authority or sourced independently by the applicant.

Overcrowding

If a Household is overcrowded in excess of the bedroom standard or overcrowded as defined in Part 10 of the Housing Act 1985, they will be placed in Band C. The overcrowding priority does not increase with the number of rooms lacking.

In households where a woman is over 20 weeks pregnant and would be overcrowded when the baby is born the household will be placed in Band C

Under occupation

Tenants of Registered Providers within Cheshire East whom under occupy a property and have a need to move to a smaller property, the application will be placed in Band C.

If an applicant applies for a property of the same size or larger than as their current home their bid may be overlooked by a Cheshire Homechoice partner as this would be considered an abuse of this priority.

For the purposes of assessing overcrowding/ under occupation the following criteria will be applied:

Household	Bedroom Need
Single Applicant	Studio/One bedroom
Couple	One bedroom
Person age 21 or over	One bedroom
Single child from birth	One bedroom
Two children, both under 10 years old	One bedroom
Two children of the same sex, aged 10-20	One bedroom
Two children of opposite sex, one over 10 years old	Two bedrooms

Insecure accommodation/ lacking secure tenure

Households with a lack of security of tenure will be placed in Band C

For example:

- Households who have been asked to leave by family or friends (we will require formal confirmation of this)Households who have been served up to 2 months notice by their landlord
- Households who live in a caravan, mobile home or boat who have been served notice to leave their mooring or plot
- Households who are leaving the armed forces and have received release papers
- Households who are currently in prison with a release date within 2 months
- Households who are in 'tied' accommodation who have been given notice to leave within 2 months.

Households with a lack of security of tenure whom are likely to meet the priority need criteria will be referred for a further potentially homeless assessment.

This assessment will not include those applicants who have been served a NOSP (Notice of Seeking Possession) from a Registered Provider.

Housing impact on a medical condition

Where an applicant's current accommodation is having an adverse affect on a diagnosed medical condition of any member of the household whom intends to move, applicants will be placed in Band C.

Housing impact on a household's welfare

Where an applicant's current accommodation is having an impact on the welfare of household members, applicants will be placed in Band C.

Anti-social behaviour: Households experiencing anti-social behaviour or neighbour nuisance may be placed in Band C, if the evidence is provided to confirm the level and severity of the circumstances and the applicant is engaged with services.

Financial hardship: Households who need to move closer to education, employment or care where the travel from current accommodation is not affordable will be placed in Band C. A Band C assessment will also be made where an applicants current home is not affordable, as a result of excessive running costs/ bills/ or rent. A full financial assessment will need to be conducted by Cheshire Homechoice in order to establish affordability. This assessment does not override the local connection criteria.

Property condition: Where an applicant feels their property is in a state of disrepair, Cheshire Homechoice will require a formal assessment from Cheshire East Council's Private Sector Team. If the assessment results in a home improvement notice being served and the landlord fails to meet the requirements of this notice to the satisfaction of the private sector team the applicant will be placed in Band C under welfare.

Households with children or pregnant women

Households with children or pregnant women will be placed in Band D unless additional housing need is identified.

Reduced preference

A reduced preference assessment overrides all other priority assessments.

In certain circumstances, section 167(2A) of the Housing Act (1966) as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002 allows local authorities to take certain other factors into account when determining priorities between applicants. This can result in the applicant being awarded a lower priority than they would otherwise receive according to their housing needs alone.

Reduced preference may apply when the applicant, or member of the household, has demonstrated unacceptable behaviour which was not serious enough to justify a decision to treat the applicant as ineligible, but which can be taken into account in assessing the applicant's level of priority. Examples include:-

- Property related debts
- Current or former rent arrears
- Acts of anti-social behaviour that have caused or are likely to cause serious nuisance to neighbours
- Property damage
- Assaulting, abusing or harassing officers or elected members
- Households who have no local connection to Cheshire East
- 2 unreasonable refusals of written/verbal offers or wasting the time of partners
- Intentionally worsening housing circumstances with the intent of increasing priority
- Those applicants who wish to remain on the list but have no intention of bidding presently
- Withholding information that should have been provided
- Providing false information

This list is not exhaustive. Applicants who are given reduced preference will be placed in Band E.

A decision to reduce preference will be reviewed, where circumstances have changed, upon written request from the applicant. Each case will be considered on its own merits.

Local connection

Applicants who fulfil any of the following will be considered as having a local connection:

- Currently live, or have lived, within Cheshire East and have done for at least 6 out of the last 12 months or 3 out of the last 5 years.
- Have immediate family (mother, father, brother, sister, son, daughter, adoptive parents) who are currently living in Cheshire East and have done for at least five years or more
- Have a permanent contract of employment within Cheshire East borough
- Members of the armed forces:
 - (a) members of the Armed Forces and former Service personnel, where the application is made within five years of discharge
 - (b) bereaved spouses and civil partners of members of the Armed Forces leaving Services Family Accommodation following the death of their spouse or partner
 - (c) serving or former members of the Reserve Forces who need to move because of a serious injury, medical condition or disability sustained as a result
- Other significant reason

Applicants without a local connection will be placed in Band E.

SECTION FOUR

ADVERTISING, BIDDING, SHORT LISTING & TENANT SELECTION

Cheshire Homechoice is a Choice Based Lettings scheme that enables applicants to bid for properties they are eligible for. The successful applicant will be decided in line with this policy.

Advertising properties

Property adverts will be clearly presented to show the property features and local neighbourhood information.

Applicants will be able to view online, the properties that they are eligible for and are able to bid for. There will sometimes be other restrictions on who is eligible for a property. Any such restrictions will be made clear in the advert, for example where a property is only suitable for applicants who need adaptations such as a level entry shower or property specific age and disability restrictions.

Bids from applicants may be allowed if they cannot match the requirements in an advert, applicants make the decision to place a bid and there is an expectation that they will have read all of the advert content including the detailed description. Registered Providers are only able to overlook a bid if restrictions are disclosed in an advert. For example: overlooking applicants that do not have a local connection, there must have been a statement in the advert to advise customers that a local connection is required.

Property adverts will clearly display the maximum number of household members that a property can accommodate. Registered Providers will aim to maximise the occupancy of a property and under or over occupancy will only be considered if there are no bids from an applicant who can fully occupy all the rooms in a home. In making a decision to under occupy the Registered Provider must fully consider affordability before making an offer.

For the purposes of eligibility, suitable property size will be determined in alignment with Local Housing Allowance guidance.

Direct lets

The partner Registered Providers will advertise ALL vacant properties via Cheshire Homechoice. There will be certain occasions when a property cannot be advertised, for example, where a Registered Provider has disclosed the need to Cheshire East for a direct let. The Cheshire Homechoice Panel will monitor all lets made outside of the choice based lettings process.

Adapted properties for applicants with disabilities

Accessible properties are homes, which have been designed for or significantly adapted to meet the needs of applicants with physical or sensory disabilities. Accessible homes will be advertised as part of the scheme to ensure that applicants assessed as needing this type of accommodation are given the widest possible choice.

Applicants with an assessed need for accessible accommodation will be given priority for accessible accommodation over others in the same priority Band without that need and the property advert will make that clear. The advert will also describe the accessible features together with local neighbourhood information to help applicants choose whether to bid for a property or not.

In selecting an applicant for an accessible property from the short-list of qualifying applicants, the full circumstances of each case will be considered when deciding who will be offered the property. In some circumstances priority may be given outside of date order, if the vacancy is particularly suitable for the needs of an applicant.

Applicants in this category can also bid for properties which do not have accessible features. However if they are short listed, during the selection stage, the Registered Provider will assess whether it is reasonable and practicable for the property to be adapted. The applicant will be considered for the property on the same basis as the other applicants who have placed a bid.

Extra care housing

Properties with extra care facilities may be advertised as part of the scheme. The service providers will directly match vacant properties to qualifying applicants that meet the eligibility criteria following a detailed assessment of their housing, care and support needs. Although some extra care facilities will also operate their own waiting list and application process.

Affordable housing developments

Affordable housing will also be advertised through the scheme. When new housing developments are built within rural areas a Section 106 agreement may state that applicants who are allocated the properties must have a direct local connection to that specific rural area. When this is the case properties advertised on the Cheshire Homechoice website will make clear what the eligibility criteria are for the property.

Community connection – Rural lettings

Properties in rural areas **may be** let under the Cheshire Homechoice policy for meeting local need. Advertisements for these properties will stipulate that those with a community connection will be given preference within the terms of the policy.

The partners of Cheshire Homechoice are mindful of the concerns of residents for stability and sustainability within their communities, but also of the need to foster diversity within those communities and facilitate geographical mobility within the Cheshire East Borough.

In some rural areas we may require applicants to demonstrate a community connection to that particular settlement. Cheshire Homechoice will make any such requirement clear in the advertisement for the property. In these instances, any applicant currently registered with Cheshire Homechoice may bid; however, preference will be given to the household in the greatest housing need demonstrating the community connection. In the absence of a bid from any applicant with a community connection, the property will be let to an applicant with no community connection.

In these cases a person will be deemed to have a community connection if they fulfil one or more of the criteria below. If there is more than one applicant with a connection they will be considered in the order of their priority Banding and effective date.

- Currently live, or have lived, within the boundaries of the parish or adjoining parish and have done for at least 1 out of the last 2 years or 3 out of the last 5 years
- Have immediate family (sibling, son, daughter, parent, step-parent or adoptive parents) who are currently living within the boundaries of the parish or adjoining parish and have done for at least five years
- Have a permanent contract of employment within the parish or adjoining parish

An adjoining parish is defined by another rural parish with an adjoining boundary to the parish in which the vacant property is located. The adjoining parish must also fall within the boundaries of Cheshire East Borough.

Allocations will be conducted considering all reasons in their own merit, not comparing against people who can demonstrate a stronger connection. The connections are not tiered.

All applicants will be required to have evidence of their connection to a parish on file before the close of the bidding cycle in which a property is advertised.

New property priority - New build lettings

There will be a cascade priority for all new build developments on first let only.

A shortlist for a new property will be re-ordered to ensure that the following cascade of priority is followed:
1st priority – Applicants demonstrating a local connection to the town/ village in which the property is being built

2nd priority – Applicants currently employed/ key workers and certain voluntary workers

For the purposes of new properties –

Local connection is defined as:

- Currently live, or have lived, within the town/village and have done for at least 6 out of the last 12 months or 3 out of the last 5 years.
- Have immediate family (mother, father, brother, sister, son, daughter, adoptive parents) who are currently living in the town/ village and have done for at least five years or more
- Have a permanent contract of employment within the town/ village

Work is defined as:

- A current permanent contract of employment at the point of allocation

Keyworkers are defined as:

- Clinical National Health Service staff (except doctors and dentists)
- Teachers and nursery nurses
- Police officers, Community Support Officers and some civilian police staff
- Probation Service staff
- Educational psychologists, and therapists
- Firefighters
- Local authority employees (including ADV employees)

Work qualifies as voluntary if it meets all the below requirements:

- It is unpaid work taken up on a voluntary basis (not required as part of a community or probation order)
- It is undertaken for a minimum of 10 hours per week
- It has been sustained for a minimum of 6 months
- It continues to be sustained at the point of allocation

To qualify for a new build priority the evidence of connection or work must be on file before the close of the bidding cycle; this is the applicants' responsibility.

**Where a new property is built within the confines of one of the rural communities the community connection criteria will replace the local connection criteria.

Local lettings

Certain properties may be let in accordance with a Registered Provider's local lettings policy. When properties are advertised on the Cheshire Homechoice website they will be clearly labelled with the eligibility criteria. Any local lettings policies will be reviewed by Cheshire East before being implemented to ensure that tenant selection is fair and need is still being met.

Bidding

Available properties will be advertised weekly and applicants can bid for up to 2 properties a week. Cheshire Homechoice may restrict bidding for certain types of property, to certain types of households. For example houses may be restricted to families with dependant children.

Bids can be placed on properties via the telephone, email, the website, or a visit to any one of the Cheshire Homechoice partners (see appendix 1). Advice and support will be provided to applicants who need it; to ensure they are able to access and use the scheme.

Support for vulnerable applicants

Cheshire Homechoice places demands on applicants. It gives people an active role in the lettings process and encourages them to place bids on empty properties.

Applicants will need to:

- Receive information on the housing options available
- Have access to and ability to use the technology necessary to apply to Cheshire Homechoice and place bids for properties
- Have the capacity to make decisions on the basis of the information provided

Broadly speaking vulnerability can mean anyone who cannot be actively involved in the choice based lettings process, for example:

- Older people
- People with learning difficulties
- People with mental health issues
- People fleeing domestic violence
- People with drug or alcohol issues
- People with medical needs

Cheshire Homechoice will ensure vulnerable applicants are able to access the Cheshire Homechoice website. When a vulnerable applicant is identified every effort will be made to assist and support them through the process. Some applicants will require or request support and assistance with accessing information about available properties, placing bids and making a decision about an offered property. In all cases the level and type of support will be decided on an individual basis. However, in some cases Cheshire Homechoice may have to use specialist staff to place bids on their behalf. A number of measures will be put in place to ensure that vulnerable applicants are not disadvantaged for example through:

- Providing appropriate advice and assistance
- Providing information in other formats
- Partnership working with support agencies
- Translating documents on request
- Ensuring appropriate support is available for applicants using the system

Wherever possible Cheshire Homechoice would like applicants, whatever their background or presumed ability, to become active participants in the choice based lettings process. However we recognise in limited circumstances it may be necessary to assist certain vulnerable people outside of the choice based lettings process and to allocate properties to them.

Bidding control for homelessness & prevention

Applicants who are awarded priority on the grounds of homelessness or the prevention of homelessness will be closely monitored and reviewed by Cheshire East Housing Options and Homechoice case workers.

Bidding control for statutorily homeless households

Households accepted as homeless by the Cheshire East Housing Options Team and therefore owed a full housing duty under the provisions of the Housing Act 1996 Part 7 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002) will be automatically placed into Band A on the Housing Needs Register. They will then be able to place bids for properties, for which they are eligible, for a period of 14 days from the date of the Homelessness decision letter.

After the 14 day period has expired, bids may be made by the Housing Options Team in conjunction with Cheshire Homechoice for a suitable property on the household's behalf. Although the caseworker will take account of the applicants' preferences, bids will not be restricted by those preferences.

If a applicant is subsequently offered accommodation either verbally or in writing by the Housing Provider, and refuses it, the Housing Options Team may discharge its temporary and long term duties under the Homelessness legislation. The team may also reduce the applicant's priority on the Common Housing Register from Band A to Band C.

Bidding control for homeless prevention /potentially homeless

Applicants assessed as meeting the criteria for homeless prevention will be placed in Band B. Applicants will remain in Band B for a period of 20 working days (4 weeks); after this period they will be reviewed and if they are not bidding for suitable properties their application will be re-assessed and placed in Band C.

Short listing & tenant selection

Bids on property adverts will be placed in the order of priority e.g. Band A highest priority, then Band B, Band C, Band D and finally Band E.

If two or more applicants within the same Band have bid for the same property for which they qualify, the date they entered their current Band will be used to determine the higher priority. If the Band date is the same, the original housing register application registration date will be used to determine priority.

Where properties are targeted at specific household types, priority will be given to suitable applicants for that type of accommodation.

Examples of this include:

- accessible accommodation for applicants with disabilities
- new build properties where certain eligibility rules apply
- sheltered accommodation where eligibility is determined by age
- supported accommodation, where eligibility for the support available applies
- houses, which are prioritised for families

If an applicant is ranked first for more than one property and provided the eligibility criteria are met, they will be contacted to make a decision about which property they wish to consider and no further offers on additional properties will be made.

Once an applicant has accepted an offer of a property, they will no longer be permitted to place any bids. Equally, Registered Providers are not permitted to approach applicants whom have accepted an offer with another provider, even if historic bids have been placed.

Capital limits & income checks

In some instances Registered Providers may overlook a bid placed by an applicant if they have sufficient income, equity and/or savings to be able to afford to rent or purchase a property on the open market.

Assessments may be conducted by Registered Providers to ensure that applicants can afford to pay the rent for a property before an offer is made. If an applicant cannot afford to pay the rent, their bid for a property might be overlooked.

Where an applicant is deemed not to be able to afford a home, despite being eligible for the housing related benefits to support the rent, Registered Providers should be providing access to or referring to financial support services.

The procedure for assessments will be shared with the Local Authority and monitored to ensure that access to social/ affordable housing by vulnerable applicants is not being restricted. Registered providers will be responsible for promoting financial inclusion for all applicants.

Viewing properties and receiving offers

Registered Providers may request additional information to support the allocation process.

A formal offer of accommodation will not be made until the information and/or supporting evidence has been provided and failure to do so may lead to an application being closed.

Applicants who unreasonably refuse 2 verbal/written offers within a 12-month period will have their priority reduced to Band E for a period of 6 months. Applicants accepted as Statutorily Homeless will be assessed in line with current housing legislation that applies to refusing offers.

If an applicant does not agree with their priority being reduced, they can request a review.

Feedback on results

Lettings results will be made available to the public. Results will include:

- Lettings results for property type and neighbourhood
- The total number of bids made for the property
- The successful applicant's registration date and/or priority Band
- Properties described as a management let, where an offer was made and the property was not advertised/ or the property advert was no successful in facilitating tenant selection
- The results of customer satisfaction surveys.

Nominations

Registered Providers (not formal Cheshire Homechoice partners) operating within Cheshire East will provide at least 50% of their vacancies (excluding transfers) for nominations via the scheme. The Local Authority (or their partners) will monitor to ensure compliance with the nomination agreements in their area.

Future development of the scheme

Cheshire Homechoice is committed to continually reviewing its practices and procedures associated with this policy, to ensure a consistent and joined up approach in the delivery of a first class choice based lettings service.

Appendix 1

Contacts

Cheshire East Council

Town Hall
Macclesfield
Cheshire
SK10 1EA
www.cheshireeast.gov.uk
Tel: 0300 123 5031

The Guinness Partnership

Wulvern House
Electra Way. Crewe
Cheshire,
CW1 6GW
www.wulvernhousing.org.uk
Tel: 01270 506200

Plus Dane Group

Shepherds Mill
Worrall Street
Congleton, Cheshire
CW12 1DT
www.neighbourhoodinvestor.com
Tel:01260 281037

Peaks & Plains Housing Trust

Ropewalks
Newton Street
Macclesfield
Sk11 6QJ
www.cppht.com
Tel:0800 012 1311