

Appendix D - Summary of Key Policy Changes 2013 in Homefinder Somerset Draft Common Allocations Policy

1. Introduction

1.1 The Homefinder Somerset Monitoring Board (HFSMB) have discussed making amendments to the Homefinder Somerset Common Allocations Policy (the policy) following the revised allocation s guidance issued by the DCLG¹. Following on from that discussion SSHG agreed that the Homefinder Somerset Operational Group should look at any other aspects of the policy that needed reviewing – discussions were also held with the CBL Working Group to gather landlord views.

1.2 Set out below is a table of the main changes that have been made to the policy and the reasoning behind each change. Please note that where spelling or punctuation errors have been corrected these are not shown.

2. Proposed Policy Changes

2.1 Set out below are the main changes that have been made to the policy and the reasoning behind these changes.

Policy Reference	Proposed Change	Reasoning
1.1	Addition of information as required by DCLG allocations guidance	Policy needs to make reference to Homeless Strategy, Tenancy Strategy and Housing Strategy
1.2	Removal of text stating government policy on CBL.	CBL is now accepted as the mechanism for housing allocations –the reference to government policy is therefore out of date and unnecessary.
3.1	Addition of sentence to make clear that landlords will normally allocate properties to families to make best use of stock.	Whilst we state that all applicants will be treated equally we felt we needed to make clear to applicant that are single or married with no children that their chances of getting housed could be relatively low in order to ensure expectations are managed.
3.2	Clarification added on who an applicant can include on their application to provide for friends sharing.	As singles find it harder to obtain accommodation, sharing of properties will become more common and we wanted to make a clear reference to this in the policy to make it clear that this type of application would be welcome.
3.3	Change to wording to clarify meaning	We have changed the structure of this paragraph to make it clearer to applicants what we mean.
3.4	Addition of sentence to make clear that application must be up to date	This addition makes clear the need to always update the LA with details of any changes.

¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/5918/2171391.pdf

Policy Reference	Proposed Change	Reasoning
3.6.4	Heading added above paragraph added	We felt that adding this heading would make clear the arrangements we have in place for applicants between 16 and 18 years of age.
3.6.5 Qualifying Criteria	Applicants who do not have a local connection to one of the five local authority partners within Homefinder Somerset (as defined in section 22.4) will not qualify to join the Homefinder Somerset Housing Register.	<p>We have introduced this qualification criteria because all of the housing register schemes that surround Somerset are closing their registers. If we were to leave the Somerset register open there is a possibility that those applicants from out of the area would only be able to apply to Somerset</p> <p>We will have to review all existing application to ensure that they meet the local connection criteria but a lot of this can be done via reporting.</p>
6.6	The addition of the words property and land into the section on capital and equity.	Following on from discussions at the Somerset tenancy fraud forum it was felt we needed to add these words in to make absolutely clear that we are looking at the financial capacity of all household members in terms of savings and property/equity owned to ensure that household members other than main applicant don't own other properties that they could reasonably be expected to reside in.
6.8	Addition of an exemption to the financial assessment for applicants that are under occupying properties that are in high demand in specific areas.	This change will allow officers the flexibility to give applicants a priority even if they have high income and savings IF this releases a property that is in high demand, for example a 4 bedroom house in a high demand area.
6.11	Change to wording for clarity	We have amended the wording to make it clearer to applicants that if they were on the register and accepted an offer of housing that didn't fully meet their needs and then reapply to the register (with no other change to their circumstances) they will be banded in bronze.

Policy Reference	Proposed Change	Reasoning
Gold Harassment	Changes to gold band harassment to add in time limit on banding (subject to review and extension) and requirement for applicant to bid on properties away from location of harassment	<p>This has been added to address issues of applicants claiming this banding and then moving to properties very close to the source of the harassment – leading to future issues and also of applicants that aren't bidding despite being in this banding and properties being available. If the harassment is sufficiently problematic to be in gold band, the operational group believe that the applicant would wish to move quickly away – hence the time limit of 3 months with the option to extend if no suitable properties have been advertised.</p> <p>There are approximately 60 applicants in this band affected by this change.</p>
Gold Disrepair	Addition of sentence to make clear that in all cases the disrepair must be reported to the landlord.	<p>Our Environmental Health colleagues have told us that such hazards must be reported to the landlord and we have also had instances where applicants want to claim this banding but don't want the landlord informed – the Homefinder Somerset Operational group feel that the landlord must be made aware of the issue if this band is to be awarded.</p> <p>There are approximately 60 applicants in this band affected by this change.</p>
Gold Decants	Addition of Homefinder Somerset landlord and Homefinder somerset area	<p>These changes narrow down the pool of applicants that this band could apply to – to ensure that this only applies to tenants of a Homefinder Somerset landlord in the Homefinder Somerset area which the operational group believe is a fair approach for those landlords that operate outside of the Homefinder Somerset area.</p> <p>There are approximately 25 applicants in this band that may be affected by this change.</p>
Gold Tenancy Succession	Addition of Homefinder somerset landlord and that automatic expressions of interest will be placed if they haven't had a successful offer within 9 months.	<p>After discussion with landlords the 9 month period was chosen to give maximum time to applicant to move whilst following timescales that landlord would have to follow to remove applicant anyway.</p> <p>The addition of Homefinder Somerset landlord just tightens this band reason up to match others.</p> <p>There are less than 20 applicants in this band that may be affected by this change.</p>

Policy Reference	Proposed Change	Reasoning
Silver Other Homeless	Change of the word 'And' to 'Or' so that either stipulation will enable applicant to gain this banding.	The Homefinder Somerset Operational group felt that this was a better reflection of what actually happens in reality in terms of applicants applying who aren't accepted under part 7 as homeless or have nowhere to live. There are approximately 1900 applicants in this band and band reason.
Silver Relationship Breakdown	Removal of this banding reason	The Homefinder Somerset Operational group felt that this band reason is hard to prove or disprove and can be manipulated by couples that just want an additional bedroom. Those affected could and probably would still apply under the silver other homeless or silver shared facilities/lodger categories. There are approximately 460 applicants currently in this band and band reason that would be affected by this change.
Silver need to move for work/support	Addition of the following words (in bold) to support requirement: Also applicants who are able to demonstrate the need to move nearer local facilities or relatives, in order to receive, or give, essential and critical medical or other support or care within the Homefinder Somerset area where significant harm would result if this was not provided.	The Homefinder Somerset Operational group felt that the addition of these words would make it clearer to applicants that they had to demonstrate a high level of support need and also the specific need to move to the area to receive or provide this support.
Silver Band Shared Facilities	Amendment to the silver band so that this only applies to applicants that have dependent children. Those without dependent children will be banded in bronze band.	Because of the shortage of 1 bedroom social housing it is felt that it is appropriate to band those that are sharing facilities (either living with family or renting a room) in bronze – this then would encourage applicants to apply for social housing rather than attempting to rent a room privately. There are over 3200 applicants in this band that will need to be reassessed to ascertain if they have dependent children and need to be re-banded.

Policy Reference	Proposed Change	Reasoning
Silver Band Children in Flats	Addition of the following words: Applicant who is pregnant or has a child/children under 10 years of age and lives in a first floor flat or above and has no access to a lift.	The Homefinder Somerset Operational Group felt that this clarified the real need for applicants in flats with children to move if they do not have access to lift to help move the children.
Bronze band	Addition of following bronze band reasons: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate Financial Resources • Accepted Offer That Doesn't Meet Needs • Previous use of Under Occupation • No Housing Need • Deliberately Worsened Circumstances 	These band reasons all exist in current policy but aren't specifically set out in banding paragraphs. The Homefinder Somerset Operational Group feel that it will be clearer to applicants if these band reasons are included in the banding section.
Bronze Band Deliberately Worsening Circumstances	Addition of wording to make clear that applicants have to take actions to improve their own circumstances wherever possible.	Homefinder Somerset Operational group felt that this addition would help to make clear to applicants that they need to ensure they do not make their circumstances worse – for example by moving into a private let that was inadequate for their needs.
7.1c	Addition of wording to make clear that we would expect expression of interest to be away from area where issue are occurring.	Homefinder Somerset Operational group feel this is necessary to prevent applicants from expressing interest in properties in areas very close to original location and then reapplying within months because issues are reoccurring.
7.1d	Addition of requirement that the issue is related to their home.	Homefinder Somerset Operational group have had cases where the traumatic event happened in an area away from the applicants' house but they still claim the need to move. This addition clearly links the traumatic event to the home and its location and the need to move away.
8.1	Clarification of meaning of application date and effective date	This change makes it very clear to applicants what each of these dates is and how they are used.
8.2	Addition of paragraph making clear that armed forces personnel or ex personnel will get priority given to them via the addition of additional time being added to the effective date.	Added to comply with the DCLG guidance and in accordance with discussions had at Homefinder Somerset Monitoring Board and SSHG.

Policy Reference	Proposed Change	Reasoning
9.1 & 9.2	Addition of further clarifying statements a round changes of circumstance – also make reference to online facilities which will come in with the upgrade. Addition of statement to make clear that delay in informing us is not in applicant's best interest.	The Homefinder Somerset Operational group wanted to make very clear what an applicant needed to do and the implications of not informing us of a change in their circumstance and also what should happen if an applicant moves.

Policy Reference	Proposed Change	Reasoning
13.1	Bedroom size eligibility change to match the new welfare benefits standard in terms of ages of children that can share.	<p>The Homefinder Somerset Operational group and the CVL working group (landlords) have recommended that we change our current bedroom allowance to the an allowance that is more in line with the welfare benefit standard as follows:</p> <p>To calculate the bedroom eligibility we allow one bedroom for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A single applicant or couple (married or unmarried) <p>We allow one additional bedrooms for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any two children of the same sex under the age of 16 • Any two children under 10 irrespective of sex • Any other person aged 16 or over • Any other child, (other than a child whose main home is elsewhere) • A carer who does not live in the household but provides a household member with overnight care <p>When the bedroom calculation awards a separate bedroom for any other person over the age of sixteen, if the household has two same sex household members that wish to share a bedroom the applicant must sign a 'bedroom reduction declaration form'. This would allow applicants to express interest on properties smaller than the bedroom calculation. The applicant will be made aware that their current banding could be affected and should they need to reapply for social housing this declaration will be taken into account when calculating the bedroom requirement.</p> <p>Using these bedroom size criteria will ensure that applicants are only offered properties that they could receive housing benefit for.</p>
13.6	Addition of statement on foster carers and additional bedroom.	As required by DCLG guidance and also as discussed by Homefinder Somerset Monitoring Board and SSHG. Wording agreed reflects practical approach to helping foster carers.

Policy Reference	Proposed Change	Reasoning
17.2	Change from working days to calendar days	Homefinder Somerset Operational group agreed to base all measurements on calendar days as these meant more to applicants than working days. Even though this will cause issues over bank holiday periods such as Easter and Christmas.
23.3 & 23.3	Amendments to reflect the current working practice with regard to the way advertising cycles and expressions of interest can be made.	The Homefinder Somerset Operational group removed the option to contact the LA housing office so that staff can make expressions of interest for applicants because they do not have capacity/resource to deliver this and it is only done in extreme cases.
24.1	Text changed to reflect the way the system actually works in practice.	The original policy was written before the system was in operation and these changes now show the applicant clearly how the selection procedure works.
24.2	As above and also the addition of statement to make clear that if the landlord finds any discrepancies they will be referred back to LA	Changes needed to reflect the way the system works and to clarify to the applicant that errors in their application will be referred back to the LA for action.
24.5	Addition of statement to make clear that if applicant applies for a property in an area where issues are occurring which have led to a certain banding that the LA/landlord may choose not to make the offer.	This change brings the selection side of the policy in line with earlier comments on banding and where the applicant should be expressing an interest in properties.
24.7 & 24.8	Changes to make clear that not all applicants will be selected in accordance with the criteria we have set out as some landlords may apply their own criteria to properties that the LA does not have nomination rights for.	The Homefinder Somerset Operational group have added this in (and the statement stating that it up to the landlord to explain any skipping or rejection to the applicant) to take account of some landlords who apply their own allocation policy to a proportion of properties for which the LA does not have nomination rights.
26.1	Change of word person to applicant	Makes statement clearly refer to applicants.
26.7	Refusals – where an applicant refuses 3 offers they would be suspended from bidding for 3 months rather than just being placed in bronze band for 3 months.	The Homefinder Somerset Operational group see this as a much greater penalty to applicants. Landlords report that applicants are still refusing properties and wasting their time – some of these applicants are in bronze and the current refusal penalty is not a deterrent.

Policy Reference	Proposed Change	Reasoning
26.8	Addition of paragraph to state that applicants in gold band tenancy succession will be placed onto automatic bidding if they haven't expressed an interest for suitable accommodation	This change mirrors the addition to the wording in the gold band tenancy succession section to ensure that it is completely clear to applicants what will happen if they don't actively express an interest for suitable properties.
29.1	Addition of wording to make clear the consequences of false statements.	This was added following advice from tenancy fraud expert via the tenancy fraud forum.
29.2	Clarification to separate out deliberately worsening circumstances from false statement wording.	The wording hasn't changed but the operational group feel that by separating this out from the false statement clause that it is much clearer to applicants.
33.2	Amendment to wording and removal of options that have never really been available and making clear that vulnerabilities includes learning disabled applicants.	The Homefinder Somerset Operational group feel that this change better reflects the service that is actually on offer to applicants (given current resourcing issues) whilst maintaining an element of support for those vulnerable applicants that need help.
36.1	Addition of headings that makes clear where landlord and LA complaints should be directed.	Added only for clarification purposes.
Appendix 2	Addition of wording to make clear that medical issues could include both physical and mental health issues.	Added only for clarification purposes.
Appendix 4	Eligibility guidance statement added instead of the full eligibility guidance that the DCLG issued as part of the allocations guidance document	The Homefinder Somerset Operational group feel that the full guidance (running to over 10 pages) is too detailed and confusing for applicants and that this summary statement is much more practical.
Appendix 5	Statement added to make clear how decisions are made within each of the partners	Added to comply with DCLG allocations guidance document.