

Homefinder Somerset Monitoring Board – Allocation Policy Changes Consultation Feedback

This reports sets out the results of the two consultation questionnaires that were set up to collect feedback from applicants and stakeholders.

Summary & Task and Finish Group Comments

Two surveys were created to request feedback on the proposed changes to the Homefinder Somerset Allocations Policy: an applicant survey and a stakeholder survey.

The surveys were made available from the 15th February 2016 until the 31st March 2016 – a period of 6 ½ weeks.

All Homefinder Somerset applicants were asked to complete the survey by sending them a web message to their Homefinder Somerset account, in addition those applicants that had email addresses were sent an email. In addition a web link to the survey was placed on the Homefinder Somerset website for applicants to follow.

All landlords were sent a copy of the survey and individual LA partners were asked to share the link to the stakeholder survey with all of their relevant contacts.

The Task & Finish group reviewed the consultation feedback report (the summary above and the full results of the survey including respondent comments) at their meeting on the 7th April 2016. Their comments against each question have been inserted within the applicant survey summary of responses below. A couple of amendments to the policy wording have been suggested.

In addition the Task & Finish group have recommended that we generate some feedback for applicants that we place on the website that makes clear that we have paid attention to the individual comments made, and as part of this try to clarify those areas where applicants comments made clear that they had not understood the nature of the change and/or the reasoning behind it.

Applicant Survey

1116 responses were received to this survey representing 13.16% of all active applicants (as at 31.3.16).

96% of all responses to the applicant survey stated that they were currently applicants on the housing register. In addition 40% of those that responded to the applicant survey are currently living in private rented accommodation, with Housing Association and Council House tenants making up a further 34%. Only 4.5% were homeowners and a further 9.5% of applicants that responded are living with family/friends.

The majority of applicants that responded were in the 25-44 age range – 49%, with a further 22.7% in the 45 to 59 age range.

Summary of responses – Applicant Survey

Question	Percentage of Applicants that Strongly Agree/Agree or have No View	Comments from Task & Finish Group
Q5 We propose to change the wording in the policy to make it clearer that if a friend is included on the application form, that they are usually expected to be a joint applicant. The current and proposed wording is shown below. Do you agree with this change?	Strongly Agree/Agree - 70.7% No view – 24.1%	Q5 Agreed– however it was noted that the free form comments show lack of understanding of some of the issues therefore in feedback, we need to explain the issues more clearly.
Q6 We propose to extend the list of applicants who may be exempt from the need for a financial assessment to join the housing register. The current and proposed wording is shown below. Do you agree with this change?	Strongly Agree/Agree – 62.2% No view – 33%	Q6 AGREED- this was a policy change made in the applicant's interest.
Q7 Removal of gold band underoccupation	Strongly Agree/Agree – 73.5% No view – 16.9%	General discussion about pros and cons of taking it out or leaving as is. Again a lot of the feedback from applicants seemed to misunderstand the reasons for removing gold band status i.e. didn't understand that people weren't making use of it and that we still want to deal with under occupation where it is causing medical problems or financial hardship Agreed – however need to ensure that customers understand that we are taking it seriously and explain why we are removing it e.g. lack of bidding, wasting time, and band hasn't been effective and to speak to landlord if have concerns about under occupation. In the feedback to applicants, need to stress that MX has drastically improved and had a lot of investment. Need to explain in the feedback that if on DHP will move to silver. Otherwise move to bronze and get reassessed.
Q8 We propose to add a new sentence to the policy to make it clearer that we would support a social landlord by using gold band to move an applicant who has no legal right to succession to help the landlord make best use of their housing. Do you agree with this change?	Strongly Agree/Agree – 60.1% No view –36%	Q8 Agreed – need to explain what the issues are more clearly in the feedback because again there was some confusion about the issues in applicant feedback.

Question	Percentage of Applicants that Strongly Agree/Agree or have No View	Comments from Task & Finish Group
<p>Q9 We propose to add a new sentence to the policy to make it clear that if a Council Officer finds a hazard in the applicants home, the landlord must be notified in order for the applicant to be placed in gold band for disrepair. Do you agree with this change?</p>	<p>Strongly Agree/Agree – 81% No view –15.3%</p>	<p>Agreed- Not at all controversial</p>
<p>Q10 We propose to make it clear within the revised policy that silver band other homeless will be awarded to applicants two months in advance of the expiry date of the valid notice to quit Do you agree with this change?</p>	<p>Strongly Agree/Agree – 62.3% No view –35.7%</p>	<p>Agreed</p>
<p>Q11 Removal of Silver band - children in flats</p>	<p>Strongly Agree/Agree – 53.3% No view –27.3%</p>	<p>How do we take account of customer comments/feedback <i>and</i> deal with housing demand <i>and</i> comply with equalities legislation on age? Landlords’ concern that there is a conflict between what we build (i.e. 2 bedroom flats, supported by LA), homeless legislation (can discharge a duty into a flat), and the policy, which says a flat is not suitable for a family with children. There is also a risk that putting an age restriction of 10 on children in flats that we are in breach of equalities legislation. The group discussed whether more use could be made by landlords labeling houses eg Could we give preference sometimes to applicants with children in flats without any age restrictions? AH commented that this could be done via some form of shortlist filter and a statement on preference in marketing text..</p>

Question	Percentage of Applicants that Strongly Agree/Agree or have No View	Comments from Task & Finish Group
<p>Q12 We have added in a new Bronze Band category to make it easier to let Sheltered Housing and Extra Care properties (which can be hard to let) by encouraging applicants without a local connection to join the register for these properties. Do you agree with this change?</p>	<p>Strongly Agree/Agree – 59.2% No view –29%</p>	<p>Again a lot of misunderstanding about the rationale for this and concerns that ‘outsiders’ will take priority over local applicants.</p> <p>Agreed – however need to explain the rationale clearly in feedback e.g. the change deals with hard to let properties and local people will still have priority. This hasn't come across. Shortlist for these properties is not always long in some areas making these properties hard to let. If don't fill them, some SH/SUPP Housing may become unviable and local people will lose it anyway.</p>
<p>Q13 We propose to remove emergency banding where a surviving tenant needs to move from sheltered/adapted housing because the requirement for the specialist housing no longer exists. They will be placed within gold band for tenancy succession. Do you agree with this change?</p>	<p>Strongly Agree/Agree – 63.5% No view –31.4%</p>	<p>Agreed – however, for applicant feedback make it clear that this is a low number of cases and don't as a rule force people out, it is just not really an emergency banding situation.</p>
<p>Q14 We propose to change the wording in the policy for applicants currently serving or former members of the armed forces. The current and proposed wording is shown below. Do you agree with this change?</p>	<p>Strongly Agree/Agree – 60.4% No view –37%</p>	<p>Agree</p>
<p>Q15 We propose to change the wording of the policy to make it clear that backdating for applicants currently serving or former members of the armed forces will only be applied once. Do you agree with this change?</p>	<p>Strongly Agree/Agree – 57.2% No view –39.6%</p>	<p>Agreed</p>
<p>Q16 We have made a change to make it clear that there is a 28 day time limit for applicants to advise their Local Authority of any change of circumstances. Do you agree with this change?</p>	<p>Strongly Agree/Agree – 77.7% No view –16.7%</p>	<p>Agreed</p>

Question	Percentage of Applicants that Strongly Agree/Agree or have No View	Comments from Task & Finish Group
<p>Q17 To help prevent social housing fraud we propose to stop applicants informing their Local Authority of change of circumstances by telephone, and confirmation will need to be either online, by e-mail or by letter. Do you agree with this change?</p>	<p>Strongly Agree/Agree – 78.1% No view –13.5%</p>	<p>Agreed</p>
<p>Q18 We propose to change the wording in the policy to give applicants, who wish to keep rent costs at a minimum, the flexibility to allow more than two children to share a bedroom. Do you agree with this change?</p>	<p>Strongly Agree/Agree – 47.5% No view –29.3%</p>	<p>Agreed – however, we probably got the wording wrong. Need to be clear in the feedback that we are not encouraging overcrowding but want to help people overcrowded by 2 bedrooms to move to a property where e.g. they are only overcrowding by 1. Need to check why we wanted this expressed in terms of rental costs and be clear how we would operate it BUT need to be clear it isn't about rent.</p>
<p>Q19 We propose to change the policy to make it clear that applicants with young adults away from home in full time education during term time will be entitled to an extra bedroom for that child.. Do you agree with this change?</p>	<p>Strongly Agree/Agree – 67.9% No view –23.1%</p>	<p>Agreed- but remove reference to ‘young adults’, just “adults” away from home</p>
<p>Q20 We propose to simplify the policy to ensure that applicants with evidence of need for overnight care are given an additional bedroom without having to provide proof of a qualifying benefit. Do you agree with this change?</p>	<p>Strongly Agree/Agree – 60.7% No view –29%</p>	<p>Agreed</p>
<p>Q21 Changes to medical /welfare assessment overall approach.</p>	<p>Yes – 81.6%</p>	<p>Overwhelming support so Agreed, but need to ensure there is strong and proper assessment and banding consistency across LAs.</p>
<p>Q22 Do you agree with the approach we are taking? Regarding medical & welfare changes</p>	<p>Yes - 72.4%</p>	<p>Overwhelming support so Agreed, but need to ensure there is strong and proper assessment and banding consistency across LAs.</p>

Question	Percentage of Applicants that Strongly Agree/Agree or have No View	Comments from Task & Finish Group
Q23 Medical assessment process detail	Yes – 84.1%	Overwhelming support so Agreed, but need to ensure there is strong and proper assessment and banding consistency across LAs. Overwhelming support so Agreed, but need to ensure there is strong and proper assessment and banding consistency across LAs.
Q24 Do you agree with principles of medical/welfare assessment process?	Yes – 77%	Overwhelming support so Agreed, but need to ensure there is strong and proper assessment and banding consistency across LAs.
Q25 Welfare detailed assessment process	Yes – 84.5%	Overwhelming support so Agreed, but need to ensure there is strong and proper assessment and banding consistency across LAs.
Q26 Do you agree with the principles for assessing welfare?	Yes – 76.7%	Overwhelming support so Agreed, but need to ensure there is strong and proper assessment and banding consistency across LAs.
Q27 The Government has changed the law to allow existing tenants the freedom to move for work. Therefore we propose that where an applicant has an offer of permanent work they will be able to join the register immediately Do you agree with this change?	Strongly Agree/Agree - 73.4% No view – 19.9%	Agreed
Q28 Making clear applicants have 48 hours to view and make a decision on property	Yes – 84.1%	Agreed – however, in the feedback, we need to make it clear that we have ways of meeting special needs eg disabled applicants.
Q29 We propose to reduce the timescale from eight to four weeks for when a Local Authority can place an expression of interest on behalf of accepted homeless	Strongly Agree/Agree – 66.4% No view – 28.9%	Agreed

Question	Percentage of Applicants that Strongly Agree/Agree or have No View	Comments from Task & Finish Group
applicants who have not been proactive in seeking a permanent home. Do you agree with this change?		
Q30 When an applicant wishes to be considered for a property we ask them to make an expression of interest on that property. Previously we called this 'making a bid'. Do you prefer 'expression of interest' or 'making a bid'?	Expression of interest 54.2% Making a bid 37.4% Don't Know 8.4%	Agreed

Only question 18 regarding allowing applicants to choose to have two children share a room when the policy wouldn't allow this has a less than 50% figure for strongly agree/agree. All other questions have applicant agreement.

Stakeholder Survey

87 responses were received to this survey from a variety of organisations including landlord, local authority staff and other agencies staff (including CAB and YMCA) and councillors from both county, district and parish level (see Q2 stakeholder survey for details).

Summary of responses – Stakeholder Survey

Question	Percentage of Applicants that Strongly Agree/Agree or have No View
Q3 We propose to change the wording in the policy to make it clearer that if a friend is included on the application form, that they are usually expected to be a joint applicant. The current and proposed wording is shown below. Do you agree with this change?	Strongly Agree/Agree – 87.2% No view – 7.7%
Q4 We propose to extend the list of applicants who may be exempt from the need for a financial assessment to join the housing register. The current and proposed wording is shown below. Do you agree with this change?	Strongly Agree/Agree – 80.7% No view – 6.4%
Q5 Removal of gold band underoccupation	Strongly Agree/Agree – 59% No view – 10.3%
Q6 We propose to add a new sentence to the policy to make it clearer that we would support a social landlord by using gold band to move an applicant who has no legal right to succession to help the landlord make best use of their housing. Do you agree with this change?	Strongly Agree/Agree – 77.6% No view – 17.1%
Q7 We propose to add a new sentence to the policy to make it clear that if a Council Officer finds a hazard in the applicants home, the landlord must be notified in order for the applicant to be placed in gold band for disrepair. Do you agree with this change?	Strongly Agree/Agree – 80.6% No view – 11.7%
Q8 We propose to make it clear within the revised policy that silver band other homeless will be awarded to applicants two months in advance of the expiry date of the valid notice to quit Do you agree with this change?	Strongly Agree/Agree – 83.1% No view – 14.3%
Q9 Removal of Silver band - children in flats	Strongly Agree/Agree – 68.4% No view – 9.2%
Q10 We have added in a new Bronze Band category to make it easier to let Sheltered Housing and Extra Care properties (which can be hard to let) by encouraging applicants without a local connection to join the register for these properties. Do you agree with this change?	Strongly Agree/Agree – 55.3% No view – 22.4%
Q11 We propose to remove emergency banding where a surviving tenant needs to move from sheltered/adapted housing because the requirement for the specialist housing no longer exists. They will be placed within gold band for tenancy succession. Do you agree with this change?	Strongly Agree/Agree – 78.4% No view – 12.2%
Q12 We propose to change the wording in the policy for applicants currently serving or former members of the	Strongly Agree/Agree – 67.6% No view – 31.1%

Question	Percentage of Applicants that Strongly Agree/Agree or have No View
armed forces. The current and proposed wording is shown below. Do you agree with this change?	
Q13 We propose to change the wording of the policy to make it clear that backdating for applicants currently serving or former members of the armed forces will only be applied once. Do you agree with this change?	Strongly Agree/Agree – 81.1% No view –16.2%
Q14 We have made a change to make it clear that there is a 28 day time limit for applicants to advise their Local Authority of any change of circumstances. Do you agree with this change?	Strongly Agree/Agree – 82.4% No view –8.1%
Q15 To help prevent social housing fraud we propose to stop applicants informing their Local Authority of change of circumstances by telephone, and confirmation will need to be either online, by e-mail or by letter. Do you agree with this change?	Strongly Agree/Agree – 82.4% No view –5.4%
Q16 We propose to change the wording in the policy to give applicants, who wish to keep rent costs at a minimum, the flexibility to allow more than two children to share a bedroom. Do you agree with this change?	Strongly Agree/Agree – 54.8% No view –18.9%
Q17 We propose to change the policy to make it clear that applicants with young adults away from home in full time education during term time will be entitled to an extra bedroom for that child.. Do you agree with this change?	Strongly Agree/Agree – 75.3% No view –17.8%
Q18 We propose to simplify the policy to ensure that applicants with evidence of need for overnight care are given an additional bedroom without having to provide proof of a qualifying benefit. Do you agree with this change?	Strongly Agree/Agree – 64.4% No view –15.1%
Q19 Changes to medical /welfare assessment overall approach.	Yes – 94.4%
Q20 Do you agree with the approach we are taking? Regarding medical & welfare changes	Yes – 85.7%
Q21 Medical assessment process detail	Yes – 98.6%
Q22 Do you agree with principles of medical/welfare assessment process?	Yes – 94.3%
Q23 Welfare detailed assessment process	Yes - 93%
Q24 Do you agree with the principles for assessing welfare?	Yes – 85.7%
Q25 The Government has changed the law to allow existing tenants the freedom to move for work. Therefore we propose that where an applicant has an offer of permanent work they will be able to join the register immediately Do you agree with this change?	Strongly Agree/Agree - 87% No view – 7.2%
Q26 Making clear applicants have 48 hours to view and make a decision on property	Yes – 91.3%

Question	Percentage of Applicants that Strongly Agree/Agree or have No View
Q27 We propose to reduce the timescale from eight to four weeks for when a Local Authority can place an expression of interest on behalf of accepted homeless applicants who have not been proactive in seeking a permanent home. Do you agree with this change?	Strongly Agree/Agree – 85.5% No view – 10.1%
Q28 When an applicant wishes to be considered for a property we ask them to make an expression of interest on that property. Previously we called this ‘making a bid’. Do you prefer ‘expression of interest’ or ‘making a bid’?	Expression of interest 59.4% Making a bid 30.4% Don’t Know 10.1%

Stakeholders that responded to the survey have on all occasions agreed with the changes being put forward.