

SUBJECT: HOMESearch POLICY REVIEW
MEETING: COMMUNITIES & PLACE DMT
DATE: 13th JANUARY 2025
DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED: All

1 PURPOSE:

- 1.1 To consider proposed amendments to the Homesearch Allocations policy following a review of the current policy and processes.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 To consider the proposed changes (**see Appendix 1**) giving regard to meeting the aims of the policy and contributing to the priorities of the Council.
- 2.2 To consider the report in the context of the cost-of-living crisis and rising inflation which has impacted on the ability of residents to acquire accommodation privately.
- 2.3 To recommend that Cabinet agrees to the proposed changes.

3 KEY ISSUES:

Background

- 3.1 Under the Housing Act 1996 and Housing (Wales) Act 2014, the Council has a legal duty to run a housing register that manages the letting of social housing in Monmouthshire. Monmouthshire Housing Association (MHA) administers the register on behalf of the Council via Homesearch. Homesearch is run on a Choice Based Lettings basis, where applicants have the choice to bid on properties that they would like to live in. There is a service level agreement in place with MHA to manage this service. Melin Homes, Pobl and United Welsh are also part of the Homesearch partnership. Each housing association let their affordable housing in line with the policy and associated procedures. To ensure an effective allocation policy that continues to meet the needs and priorities of Monmouthshire, reflects current legislation and case law, periodic reviews are undertaken as per the requirements of the Housing Act 1996. The previous review was 2020.
- 3.2 Throughout 2024 a review panel consisting of representatives from Monmouthshire Housing Association, Homesearch and the Council met to look at the Allocations Policy in stages. As part of the review process the panel paid specific attention to:
 - The accessibility of the policy and whether elements could be streamlined or further clarified.
 - The economic climate which has seen the income of households in Monmouthshire stretched.
 - The partnership's obligations to the Armed Forces Covenant.

3.3 The results are the amendments in **Appendix 1** which support the Council's aim of an allocations policy which is fair, consistent, transparent and meets statutory obligations and operational requirements. Where changes have been proposed, their impact on the housing register has, where possible, been calculated and can also be seen in **Appendix 1**.

3.4 If the proposed amendments are agreed by Council the amended policy will be put to the wider Homeseach Partnership group before being formally adopted.

3.5 The main policy changes include:

- **Financial thresholds:** In light of the recent cost of living crisis, and levels of inflation, it is appropriate that the financial thresholds within the allocation policy should be increased. A household will now be considered to have sufficient financial resources if their income exceeds £50,000 per annum. Discretion will continue to be applied in cases where there is high medical need.

In recognition of the high private rents in the County, a household in a privately rented property will face suspension or demotion dependent on the number of weeks in arrears or debt, rather than a static amount, although this will be subject to their overall circumstances which need to be taken account of.

Intermediate rent thresholds have been increased to reflect the assumed income needed to afford home ownership as assessed in Monmouthshire's Local Housing Market Assessment Refresh 2024.

- **2 Children Under 5 Years Old in a Flat and no Lift:** Applicants with two or more children under the age of five living in a flat above ground floor level will retain a Band 1 status until the youngest child turns 5. This is so families are given the best chance to be rehoused as current waiting times are extensive. This also addresses safeguarding concerns around leaving young children at the top or bottom of stairs whilst pushchairs or shopping is carried.
- **Single/Couple Households with overnight access arrangements for children:** Households who would otherwise be eligible for a 1 bedroom property will be given equal preference for a two bedroom above ground floor flat where there are overnight custody arrangements for a child. This is subject to an affordability assessment on the household. This is to facilitate these arrangements whilst making best use of stock, as two bedroom above ground floor are often harder to let. Ground floor flats are often higher in demand due to their accessibility for those with mobility difficulties.
- **Armed Forces Personnel:** Changes have been made to allow greater flexibility within the local connection test when applied to UK Armed Forces personnel so they are not adversely affected by their service. UK Armed Forces personnel can now meet the Local Connection criteria through service in Monmouthshire. Discretion will now be used when awarding banding to Reservists and members of the Territorial banding where applicants have been operational.

The Homeseach Partnership Group supports the Armed Forces Covenant, which includes the provision of support to the families of those who have or are serving. For this reason spouses or partners of UK Armed Forces Personnel whether bereaved or in the process of separation will receive the same considerations as UK Armed Services Personnel with regards to Local Connection and additional preference.

- 3.6 The majority of the changes made as part of the review relate to clarifications of terminology and condensing and streamlining the content to be more accessible. The more substantial changes have been deemed to have a very limited impact on the housing register, but for those who will be impacted by changes it will benefit the household. There is one exception to this, and that is the application of the sufficient financial resources threshold to households with a homeless duty on the housing register. This would mean a demotion on the register, but at the time compiling the amendments (Summer 2024), only one household would have been affected. Further information on the impacts of the changes on the housing register can be found in **Appendix 1**.
- 3.7 Please see **Appendix 2** for the full policy.
- 3.8 In December 2023 translation software Linguaskin launched a Welsh interface to the Homeseach Choice Based Lettings Portal. This allows applicants to access the register in Welsh as well as English.

4 EQUALITY AND FUTURE GENERATIONS EVALUATION (INCLUDES SOCIAL JUSTICE, SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING)

- 4.1 There are no negative implications with this proposal. **See Appendix 3.**

5 EVALUATION CRITERIA:

- 5.1 The Homeseach Partnership Group strives to provide good quality, affordable accommodation to residents in need of settled accommodation in Monmouthshire. Due to the demand for social housing far outstripping current supply the allocations policy needs to apply prioritisation of resources. The policy also needs to be responsive to the changing socio-economic environment to ensure social housing can be accessed by those who need it.
- 5.2 Homeseach data has been used to ensure that the proposed changes above will not have any significant unintended consequences. Only a small number of households on the housing register will be impacted and where impact is experienced it is almost exclusively positive and without detriment to others on the register.
- 5.3 Data will continue to be collected and analysed to ensure that the policy changes are working as intended.

6 REASONS:

- 6.1 The Council has a duty to periodically review the Allocations Policy under the Housing Act 1996 and Housing (Wales) Act 2014.
- 6.2 The review conducted through 2024 identified some measures that would enhance the accessibility of the document and create efficiencies in the Allocations Policy given most current demand. Additionally, some measures have been amended in light of the current economic climate to ensure that affordable housing remains accessible to those who most require it.

7 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- 7.1 The proposed amendments to the Allocations Policy will enable the Homesearch Partnership to utilise stock most efficiently. The impacts on the housing register by these proposals are predicted to be minimal.
- 7.2 There is a cost implication to the continued use of Linguaskin as a bilingual interface to the public face of Homesearch. The value of the contract across 4 years is £14,000 (excl VAT), with £3000 (excl VAT) to be paid each financial year for the next two years. The Council's contribution to the Partnership is funded from the Housing & Communities existing budget.

8 CONSULTEES:

- 8.1 Cabinet Member for Rural Affairs, Housing & Tourism; Communities & Place DMT; Strategic Housing Manager; The Homesearch Partnership Group: Monmouthshire Council, Monmouthshire Housing Association, Pobl, Melin Homes and United Welsh; Armed Forces Liaison Officer;

9 BACKGROUND PAPERS:

- 9.1 Housing (Wales) Act 2014; Welsh Government, Phase 2 Homeless and Housing Support Planning Guidance, 2021; Monmouthshire's Housing Support Programme Strategy April 2022 - March 2026; Welsh Government, Ending homelessness in Wales: a high level action plan 2021 to 2026; Monmouthshire Council's Rapid Rehousing Transition 20; Monmouthshire Council, Housing Support Programme Strategy 2022; Monmouthshire Council, Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan and Action Plan, 2023; Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016; Welsh Government, White Paper on Ending Homelessness 2023.

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