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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introducing HomeChoice North Somerset

1.1.1 This document describes the HomeChoice North Somerset Scheme (“HomeChoice”) run by North Somerset Council (“the council”) in partnership with the majority of registered providers of social housing (“housing associations”) operating within North Somerset. It also sets out the procedures that the council follows in the allocation of affordable housing in its district.

1.1.2 The housing associations that are part of the scheme are known throughout this document as the scheme landlords. These are listed at Appendix A. A copy of the HomeChoice North Somerset Lettings Policy will be available free from the council or one of the scheme landlords, and is also available on the council’s website at www.n-somerset.gov.uk.

1.2 What is an allocation?

1.2.1 The allocation of housing by a housing authority is defined in s.159 of the 1996 Housing Act as:

- Selecting a person to be a secure or introductory tenant of housing accommodation held by them (i.e. by that housing authority);

- Nominating a person to be a secure or introductory tenant of housing accommodation held by another person (i.e. another housing authority);

- Nominating a person to be an assured tenant of housing accommodation held by a private registered provider (housing association).

1.3 Statement on choice

1.3.1 HomeChoice was introduced in April 2009 to introduce a Choice-Based Lettings (CBL) scheme, involving partnership of housing authorities and registered social landlords and working together with private landlords wherever possible is the best way to achieve the greatest choice and flexibility meeting applicant’s needs.

1.3.2 It is important to realise that the demand for accommodation is higher in some areas than others. In making a decision about the choices available, applicants need to consider their housing need priority against the availability of properties in any given area.
1.4 Overview of the policy and process

1.4.1 The Council assesses applications from customers who would like to rent affordable homes in order to determine:

- Whether they are eligible for an allocation;
- Whether they qualify for an allocation;
- The level of their housing need, assessed against four bands.

1.4.2 The council stores the information about eligible and qualifying applicants on an electronic data base known as its Housing Register. This information is shared with the scheme landlords.

1.4.3 Scheme landlords advertise their vacant properties in North Somerset to those on the Housing Register, including photographs and a description, on a weekly basis. Applicants may apply (“bid”) for their choice of properties as long as they meet the qualifying criteria for a particular property.

1.4.4 The successful applicant will be the person in the highest band, with the highest multiple amount of housing need and with the earliest effective date. An offer will then be made subject to a visit and subsequent acceptance by the potential landlord to confirm the details on the original application form. Incorrect information may result in the offer being withdrawn and the band re-assessed.

1.4.5 Feedback is provided to applicants on the level of demand for vacant properties previously advertised. This helps applicants to make more informed choices, including looking at the other housing options promoted through the scheme.

1.5 Tenancy Types

1.5.1 An applicant can be offered the following types of tenancies:

- Lifetime Tenancies; or
- Fixed Term Tenancies.

Both tenancies can be offered on either a Social Rent or an Affordable Rent basis. These terms are explained below.
1.5.2 **Lifetime Tenancies**
Lifetime tenancies remain available to a tenant for as long as the terms of the tenancy agreement are upheld. These are offered on an Assured Tenancy basis.

1.5.3 **Flexible Tenancies**
Flexible tenancies are offered for a fixed period of time and the tenancy ends on the last day of that period or term. The scheme landlords will decide their own typical length to offer a tenancy, but the recommendation from the council’s tenancy strategy is 5 years.

1.6 **Rent Levels**

1.6.1 Both lifetime and flexible tenancies can be offered on a Social Rent or Affordable Rent basis.

1.6.2 **Social Rent**
Social rent is based on a formula set by government. It is usually less than an affordable rent.

1.6.3 **Affordable Rent**
Affordable rents are set at 80% of the market rent in the private sector.
2 ELIGIBILITY AND QUALIFICATION

2.1 Eligibility

2.1.1 Certain people from abroad, including some who are subject to immigration control, are not eligible for an allocation of affordable housing. These regulations are set by Government and updated regularly. The Council follows these regulations, which are available on request.

2.1.2 Applicants who are eligible for allocation as per the paragraph above must be over 16 years of age, and meet one or more of the criteria defined in section 2.2, to qualify for an allocation and join the housing register.

2.1.3 There are also a number of excluded groups, defined in section 2.3, that may disqualify an applicant from joining the housing register.

2.2 Qualifying Groups

An applicant qualifies to join the housing register if they:

2.2.1 Local Connection
• Have, by choice, lived in North Somerset for the three consecutive years preceding the date the application is made or reviewed; or
• Have, by choice, previously lived in North Somerset for ten consecutive years no more than five years prior to the date the application is made or reviewed; or
• Have retained continuous employment in North Somerset, of a minimum of 16 hours per week, for at least the 12 months preceding the date the application is made or reviewed; or

2.2.2 Armed Forces personnel
• Are a member of the Armed Forces or former Service personnel, where the application is made within five years of discharge; or
• Are a bereaved spouse or civil partner of a member of the Armed Forces leaving Services Family Accommodation following the death (as a result of service) of their spouse or partner; or
• Are a serving or former member of the Reserve Forces who needs to move because of a serious injury, medical condition or disability sustained as a result of their service; or

2.2.3 Homelessness
• Have had a full homelessness duty accepted by North Somerset Council under Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996; or
• Is homeless or threatened with homelessness, not accepted by North Somerset

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Council under Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996, but would have a full duty if a homelessness application were determined (known as a “prevention duty”).

2.2.4 For the purposes of this section, residence in the district is not of a person’s choice if it is a consequence of serving in the Armed Forces or being detained under the authority of Act of Parliament or by being placed in the area to receive treatment or rehabilitation of any kind for any kind of dependency.

2.3 Excluded Groups

An applicant is excluded from the housing register in the follow circumstances:

2.3.1 Owner-Occupiers
• Applicants who are owner-occupiers will be excluded from joining the Housing Register unless they fall into one of the homelessness qualifying groups defined in paragraph 2.2.3. For the purposes of this section, owners of mobile homes are not considered to be owner-occupiers; or

2.3.2 Sufficient Financial Resources
• Single applicants with combined savings and annual income of more than £25,000; couples without dependents with combined savings and annual income of more than £30,000; or applicants with dependents with combined savings and annual income of more than £35,000 will be excluded from joining the Housing Register unless they fall into one of the homelessness qualifying groups defined in paragraph 2.2.3. These figures are subject to annual review; or

2.3.3 Intentionally Homeless
• Applicants who are adjudged to be Intentionally Homeless under Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 will be excluded from joining the Housing Register for a period of 3 years from the date of the decision, unless they fall into one of the homelessness qualifying groups defined in paragraph 2.2.3; or

2.3.4 Anti-Social Behaviour
• Applications containing an individual who has been found to be guilty of anti-social behaviour will be excluded from joining the Housing Register for a period of 3 years unless they fall into one of the homelessness qualifying groups defined in paragraph 2.2.3. The definition of anti-social behaviour is that the person is guilty of unacceptable behaviour serious enough to make them unsuitable as a prospective tenant, and/or they have a conviction for ASB or have been subject to an anti-social behaviour contract (ASC); or

2.3.5 Perpetrators of Hate Crime/Domestic Abuse
• Applications containing an individual who has been convicted of racial harassment/abuse or another hate crime will be excluded from joining the Housing Register for a period of 3 years from the date of their conviction unless
they fall into one of the homelessness qualifying groups defined in paragraph 2.2.3; or

- Applicants who are identified as perpetrators of domestic abuse by the multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) will be excluded from joining the Housing Register for a period of 3 years from the date their case is brought before the conference unless they fall into one of the homelessness qualifying groups defined in paragraph 2.2.3; or

2.3.6 Arrears/Council Debts

- Applicants who owe a scheme landlord more than £200 - in rent arrears or other rechargeable debts - will be excluded from the Housing Register until they have made twelve successive monthly repayments as part of an agreed payment plan or they have paid their outstanding balance in full, whichever is the sooner, unless the scheme landlord is working with the applicant to alleviate underoccupation, or they fall into one of the homelessness qualifying groups defined in paragraph 2.2.3; or
- Applicants who have received rent in advance from the council’s housing resource service will be prevented from bidding (“suspended”) on the Housing Register if they fail to make their agreed repayments, unless they fall into one of the homelessness qualifying groups defined in paragraph 2.2.3; or
- Applicants who, at the point of offer, are found to owe more than £200 in council tax will be prevented from bidding (“suspended”) on the Housing Register until they have made twelve successive monthly repayments as part of an agreed payment plan or they have paid their outstanding balance in full, whichever is the sooner, unless they fall into one of the homelessness qualifying groups defined in paragraph 2.2.3; or

2.3.7 Penalty Clause

- Applicants who are found to have knowingly omitted information that would disqualify them, or have given false information to gain eligibility or improve their priority on the register, will be excluded from the Housing Register for 3 years from the date they become eligible for the register, unless they fall into one of the homelessness qualifying groups defined in paragraph 2.2.3.

For example, an applicant who states that they have lived in North Somerset for three years when in fact they have only lived in the district for two, will have their application cancelled. Once they meet the local connection criteria, they will be excluded for an additional 3 years before they are able to qualify.

In order to be reassessed, applicants will be required to show how they may qualify. This will relate to the reasons for non-qualification and each applicant will be told their criteria for reassessment and possible qualification.
2.4 Processes

2.4.1 Applicants can complete an initial application form to establish if they qualify for the Housing Register. If they are assessed as qualifying, they can then complete the full Housing Register application form to have their priority assessed.

2.4.2 Where the council decides that an applicant is ineligible or does not qualify for an allocation and to join the Housing Register, it will notify the applicant of that decision and the grounds for it in writing or via the HomeChoice website.

2.4.3 A request for a review of a decision should preferably be made in writing, and can be made by an applicant or a representative on behalf of the applicant within 21 days of the decision. The appeal should include information that the applicant believes has not been taken into account already or which further supports the original application or new information.
3 ASSESSMENT OF HOUSING NEED

3.1 Policy

3.1.1 All applicants who are eligible and qualify to join the Housing Register will be assessed and placed in the appropriate priority band that represents their household's needs.

3.1.2 The law requires that reasonable preference for an allocation must be made in the following cases:

   (a) people who are homeless (within the meaning of Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996);

   (b) people who are owed a duty by any local housing 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 such authority under section 192(3);

   (c) people occupying unsanitary (unhealthy) or overcrowded housing or otherwise living in unsatisfactory housing conditions;

   (d) people who need to move on medical or welfare grounds, including grounds relating to a disability; and

   (e) people who need to move to a particular locality in the district of the authority, where failure to meet that need would cause hardship (to themselves or others).

3.1.3 Preference can also be given to other categories of applications to meet local priorities.

3.2 Assessment

3.2.1 Based on housing need, all applications will be placed into one of four bands – A, B, C or D (see paragraphs 3.3-3.6) – or in exceptional circumstances placed into Emergency Priority Band (see paragraph 3.7).

3.2.2 Where an application has more than one housing need (HN) which appear in different bands, it will always be placed in the higher band.

3.2.3 If an application attracts more than one housing need within a band, the applicant with the greatest number of higher band housing needs will have greater priority than those with less numbers of housing need.
3.2.4 If an application has the same number of housing needs as another, priority will be given to the application who has been waiting in that band for the longest period of time.

3.2.5 If an application has the same number of housing needs as another, and has been in that band for the same period of time, the date of application will be used to decide the order of the shortlist.

3.2.6 If two or more applicants are still assessed as equal on number of housing needs, period of time in that band and period of time on the shortlist, then any offer of property will be at the scheme landlord's discretion.

3.3 Band A

3.3.1 Approved Homeless and 3+ months in Temporary Accommodation (HN)
Applicants to whom North Somerset Council has accepted a full homeless duty under Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002), and who have been resident in designated temporary accommodation for 3 months or more from the date of the acceptance of the duty.

3.3.2 Urgent Medical Need (HN)
The applicants, or someone in their household, have an urgent and potentially life-threatening need to move on medical grounds, where their health is directly and adversely affected by their current accommodation, and where a move would see a clear improvement in their health (see Appendix B).

3.3.3 Urgent Welfare Need (HN)
Applicants who have an urgent need to move on welfare grounds, where their welfare is aggravated by housing conditions and would improve if other accommodation were offered (see Appendix C).

3.3.4 Lacking 3 Bedrooms (HN)
Applicants who have access to three less bedrooms than their HomeChoice entitlement UNLESS evidence proves that the overcrowding is deliberate. For the purposes of this calculation, unborn children do not count towards the entitlement.

3.3.5 Under-occupying 2+ bedrooms
Applicants who are a tenant of a scheme landlord, resident within North Somerset, who are under-occupying their property by two or more bedrooms.

3.3.6 Care Leavers
Where North Somerset Council is the corporate parent and the care leaver is ready to live independently, or with support. The social worker and housing
advice officer for care leavers must confirm in writing that the applicant is ready for such a move and has acquired reasonable skills to sustain a tenancy.

3.3.7 **Foster Carers or Adopters**
- Applicants who need to be rehoused or housed by a scheme landlord because they are either a foster carer who needs larger accommodation to foster more children, or intend promptly to become a foster carer and requires larger accommodation in order to perform this role. Applicants must have approved Foster Carer status as approved by North Somerset Council's fostering service.
- Applicants who need to be rehoused or housed by a scheme landlord because they are intend promptly to adopt a child via North Somerset Council's adoption service and require accommodation in order to perform this role.

3.4 **Band B**

3.4.1 **Approved Homeless (HN)**
Applicants to whom North Somerset Council has accepted a full homeless duty under Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002).

3.4.2 **Homelessness Prevention (HN)**
Applicants who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, not yet accepted by North Somerset Council under Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996, but would have a full duty accepted if a homelessness application were to be determined.

3.4.3 **Significant Medical Need (HN)**
The applicants, or someone in their household, have an urgent but not life-threatening need to move on medical grounds, where their health is directly and adversely affected by their current accommodation, and where a move would see a clear improvement in their health (see Appendix B).

3.4.4 **Lacking 2 Bedrooms (HN)**
Applicants who have access to two less bedrooms than their HomeChoice entitlement UNLESS evidence proves that the overcrowding is deliberate. For the purposes of this calculation, unborn children do not count towards the entitlement.

3.4.5 **Under-occupying 1 bedroom**
Applicants who are a tenant of a scheme landlord, resident within North Somerset, who are under-occupying their property by one bedroom.

3.4.6 **Rough Sleepers**
Applicants assessed as sleeping rough (street homeless, in a tent or in their car) by a HomeChoice Manager, HomeChoice Officer or Housing Advice Officer (see Appendix D).
3.4.7 **Serious Disrepair**
The applicant’s home is dangerous, a Housing Act 2004 Category 1 Hazard exists, and it is confirmed by the council's Private Rented Housing Team that it would be more appropriate to be re-housed.

3.4.8 **Supported Housing 'Move-On'**
Applicants who live within a Supported Housing project in North Somerset and are seeking to ‘move-on’ into independent accommodation. This only applies to applicants who met the local connection criteria in paragraph 2.2.1 at the time of the original referral and acceptance into the supported housing project.

The Project Manager must confirm in writing that the applicant is ready for such a move and has acquired reasonable skills to sustain a tenancy or has the necessary support in place to do so. The case will then be considered by the HomeChoice Manager as to whether the applicant meets all the criteria to move into Band B.

3.5 **Band C**

3.5.1 **Minor Medical Need (HN)**
The applicants, or someone in their household, have an clear but not urgent need to move on medical grounds, where their health is directly and adversely affected by their current accommodation, and where a move would see a clear improvement in their health (see Appendix B).

3.5.2 **Sharing Basic Facilities (HN)**
Applicants sharing basic facilities such as toilets, bathrooms and kitchens with people unrelated to everyone in their household.

3.5.3 **Lacking 1 Bedroom (HN)**
Applicants who have access to one less bedroom than their HomeChoice entitlement UNLESS evidence proves that the overcrowding is deliberate. For the purposes of this calculation, unborn children do not count towards the entitlement.

3.5.4 **Other Homeless Applicants (HN)**
Applicants who North Somerset Council has assessed as homeless under Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002) but no duty applies, and those who have no where to live (e.g. No Fixed Abode ‘NFA’).

3.5.5 **Former armed forces member (HN)**
Applicants who are either
(a) former members of the Armed Forces,
(b) serving members of the Armed Forces who need to move because of a
serious injury, medical condition or disability sustained as a result of their service,
(c) bereaved spouses and civil partners of members of the Armed Forces leaving Services Family Accommodation following the death of their spouse or partner, or
(d) 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 of their service.

3.5.6 Employed in North Somerset
Applicants who have retained continuous employment in North Somerset, of a minimum of 16 hours per week, for at least 12 months.

3.6 Band D

3.6.1 No other housing needs
Applicants who do not meet any of the criteria for Bands A to C will be placed in Band D.

3.7 Emergency Priority Band

3.7.1 Note: Awarding of Emergency Priority Band can only be made with the written/emailed agreement of two members of a group including the senior housing managers within North Somerset Council, and senior managers of the scheme landlords.

3.7.2 Emergency Priority Band will only be issued to any applicant who requires an ‘urgent’ move to ensure the applicants safety and welfare for whatever reason. Substantial evidence must exist before such a priority is awarded. This priority may be awarded where circumstances could include where the Police recommend an urgent move to escape violence or threats of violence, or where the applicant, or a member of their household, has suffered a sudden ‘traumatic event’ and living within their home will cause considerable distress (e.g. serious sexual assault, etc).

3.7.3 Emergency Priority Band is time limited and will last for 28 days. If the applicant has not applied for a property suitable for their needs (size, type, adaptations etc.) within that time their Emergency Priority Band will be reviewed by the Assessment Panel and if not renewed the applicant will be placed in the appropriate band for their needs. If no suitable vacancy has arisen within this time then the Emergency Priority Band will be renewed automatically.
3.8 Effective and Application Dates

3.8.1 All applications will be given an “Effective Date”. This will be used when allocating properties, to determine how long an applicant has been in their current banding.

3.8.2 An application’s Effective Date is determined by the date that the evidence was received for their eligibility for that banding, regardless of when that evidence was actually assessed.

3.8.3 Applications will also have an “Application Date”, which is the date the applicant first applied to join the housing register, to determine how long an applicant has been on the HomeChoice Register.

3.8.4 Where an applicant whose application has previously been closed wishes to re-join the housing register at a later date, their new Application Date will be the date they re-apply.

3.9 Notification

3.9.1 Once an application has been assessed and entered onto the HomeChoice Register, the applicant will receive a letter within 21 days confirming their application details. This notification will include:

a) The band in which the applicant has been placed (A, B, C or D),
b) The size property the applicant is eligible for (see section 4),
c) A personal reference number to allow bidding,
d) A reminder about informing us of any change in circumstances, and
e) The HomeChoice North Somerset review procedure (see paragraph 3.10).

3.9.2 Once applicants have been entered on the HomeChoice Register and notified of banding and reference number, they can start to look for a property of their choice (see section 5).

3.10 Review Procedure

3.10.1 Once an applicant has been notified in writing of the band in which they have been placed or their ineligibility, they will have a right to request a review against the assessment. The request must be submitted made in writing and sent to the council within 21 days of the date on the notification letter and include the reason why the applicant believes their banding or ineligibility is wrong together with any additional information that the applicant believes is relevant.
3.10.2 The request for a review will be acknowledged by the council within seven days. A Senior Officer who played no part in the original assessment will carry out the review and respond in writing, to the applicant within 28 days of the receipt of the review letter. Following the review, the applicant will be informed in writing of the outcome and the reasons for it.
4 BEDROOM ENTITLEMENT

4.1 Policy

4.1.1 Applicants will be able to bid for selected properties, which match the needs of their household.

4.1.2 Overleaf are some typical examples of family types together with the size of accommodation they would generally be eligible for. There may be discretion over the size of some properties where a live in carer requires a separate bedroom.

4.1.3 Children are considered to be resident where they stay with the applicant for more than four nights per week or seven nights each fortnight. This is subject to satisfactory evidence being submitted to support access/residency right.

4.1.4 Non-dependent visiting children will not be considered part of the household for bedroom entitlement calculations.

4.1.5 For applicants who are pregnant, the unborn child will be classed as a child for the purposes of property size eligibility only. Where a household already has another child (other children), the unborn child will be classed as the same sex as the youngest child. Unborn children do not count towards whether an applicant is lacking in bedrooms.

4.1.6 Houses with their own gardens will be restricted to applicants with resident children under 16, and some upper floor properties will be restricted to applicants without children under 10. This decision will be made by the landlord at the point of advertising the property.
### Assessed property size and type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household composition</th>
<th>Min Beds</th>
<th>Max Beds</th>
<th>Bedsit</th>
<th>Flat</th>
<th>Maisonette</th>
<th>Bungalow</th>
<th>House</th>
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<td>✔️</td>
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<tr>
<td>Childless siblings or friends</td>
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<tr>
<td>Household with one child 16 years of age or over</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household with 2 children all 16 years of age or over</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household with 3 children all 16 years of age or over</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<td>Household with 2 children, with one or more child under the age of 16</td>
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<td>✔️</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household with 3 children, with one or more child under the age of 16</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household with 4 children, with one or more child under the age of 16</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<tr>
<td>Household with 5 or more children, with one or more child under the age of 16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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5 ALLOCATIONS AND LETTINGS

5.1 Advertising of Properties

5.1.1 Affordable properties for rent are advertised for a seven day period from Thursday to Wednesday. Private rented properties, shared ownership properties and other housing options are advertised at all times.

5.1.2 Properties are advertised on the HomeChoice North Somerset website, in the council gateway at Town Hall, Weston-super-Mare, and via a newsletter available from council libraries and scheme landlords.

5.1.3 Vulnerable applicants who are unable to access the website will be offered a service appropriate to them to ensure that they are aware of relevant properties.

5.2 Property Descriptions

5.2.1 Property adverts carry a photograph of the property or similar and always have a full description of the property. This description usually includes the following information:

- Type (House, Flat etc)
- Number and max occupancy of bedrooms
- Location
- Level of accessibility for those with mobility issues/wheelchair users
- Services provided (sheltered housing scheme manager, caretaker etc)
- Heating type
- Age restrictions
- Whether pets are allowed
- Availability of outside space (garden etc) and parking
- Rent and service charges (split weekly/monthly)
- Special information (location of bus routes/other amenities etc)
- Whether it is for transfer applicants only
- Whether customers with a ‘local connection’ get priority.

5.3 Labelling of Properties

5.3.1 Advertisements will also give information on who will be eligible to apply for the property. An adapted property suitable for someone in a wheelchair may be labelled to say that applicants must require such a property.

5.3.2 Sheltered/Age-restricted Properties
Scheme landlords may impose restrictions on the allocation of sheltered
accommodation. Details can be obtained directly from the landlord. Advertised properties will also be labelled with information regarding the age/disability of an applicant who will be permitted to bid.

5.3.3 **Homeless Case Properties**
In order to fulfil its statutory duties towards the homeless and to create a through flow of temporary accommodation the council may label properties giving preference to households to whom the council has accepted a full homelessness duty or a homelessness prevention duty.

5.3.4 **Transfer Properties**
All the partner landlords are keen to ensure that they make the best use of their own stock. To achieve this, up to 25% of properties advertised will be labelled giving preference to existing tenants of that scheme landlord. The number of properties labelled as such will be monitored on a regular basis.

5.3.5 **Local Lettings Policies**
A property may be labelled in accordance with an agreed local lettings policy which may include rural exception sites and some new build sites which may be restricted to local residents through section 106 planning agreements.

5.3.6 **Sensitive Lets**
Sometimes landlords will request that the advertising of a vacant property is treated as a sensitive let. An example of this would be where the previous tenant has caused anti social behaviour and it is important to get the right mix of tenants in the area. The landlord and the local authority may agree that the applicant at the top of the shortlist is not suitable to be offered the property and agree to offer it to a more suitable applicant.

5.4 **Bidding for Properties**

5.4.1 Where an applicant meets the eligibility criteria, they may bid for that property within the deadline given. Applicants will be able to make three bids per weekly cycle.

5.4.2 Applicants may bid for properties using a variety of methods:

- Online at www.homechoicensomerset.org.uk
- Automated telephone bidding
- In person at Town Hall, Weston-super-Mare.

5.4.3 Applicants will not be permitted to bid for other properties if they have an outstanding offer in place.
5.4.4 At the close of the bidding cycle and where an applicant appears at the top of more than one shortlist, the applicant will be contacted by the council and will be expected to select their preferred property and their details will be made available to the appropriate landlord. The other properties will be offered to the next suitable applicant on that shortlist.

5.5 **Selection Procedure**

5.5.1 Once the advertisement deadline has passed, a report will be run from the computer system. This will list all the advertised properties and all the applicants who have applied for each of them. For each property advertised the successful applicant will be the one(s) who is in the highest band, with the most multiple amount of housing need, with the earliest effective date.

5.5.2 Prior to any offer, each successful applicant’s details will be checked to ensure they are eligible for the property. In addition, the scheme landlord may carry out an individual risk assessment which may affect an offer being made. Only those applicants who meet the stated criteria and have a satisfactory risk assessment will be offered the property.

5.5.3 The name of the successful applicant will be forwarded to the agreed officer within each scheme landlord. Each individual landlord is responsible for the verification of the successful applicant (ID and other relevant documentation). The council will be responsible for checking that the applicant is in the right band. Each applicant will be given the opportunity to view the property before making a final decision on whether to accept or refuse. Assistance with viewing will be available if required.

5.5.4 If a property is subsequently withdrawn after an applicant has successfully bid, because for example the tenant of that particular property has failed to vacate the property or the property has been incorrectly labelled, the landlord will inform the successful applicant that the property is no longer available. If the property is not ready for occupation following a successful bid and the applicant is likely to wait some considerable time before moving in, the landlord will inform the applicant and give them the option to bid for any other suitable properties.

5.6 **Refusals**

5.6.1 If an applicant decides to refuse an offer of accommodation, either at the accompanied viewing, or when an initial verbal offer is made, the property will be offered to the next eligible applicant.
5.6.2 Applicants who refuse three suitable offers of accommodation may have their housing application cancelled, and be considered ineligible for a period of 12 months.

5.6.3 If a homeless applicant refuses an offer of suitable accommodation, the council may decide to discharge its duty under current homelessness legislation.

5.6.4 Records will be maintained on the number of refusals for each property and the reason why the applicant decided to refuse.

5.7 Contrived circumstances

5.7.1 If an applicant has deliberately worsened their circumstances in order to qualify for additional priority on the register, their application will be assessed on their housing need before the change in circumstances.

5.7.2 Circumstances could include (but not limited to):

- An applicant sells a property that is affordable and suitable for the applicant’s needs;
- An applicant moves from a secure property to an insecure or overcrowded property;
- An applicant increases the number of people in their household for no good reason.

5.7.3 The HomeChoice team will also consider whether an applicant has made a fraudulent application.

5.8 Exceptional circumstances

5.8.1 The policy may be departed from where the HomeChoice and Housing Advice Team Manager considers that an individual’s exceptional circumstances warrant a departure from this policy, has recorded reasons for that decision, and has the written/emailed agreement of another senior housing managers within North Somerset Council.

5.8.2 Any agreement to depart from this policy will be subject to review at an interval of every three months.
5.9 **Feedback**

5.9.1 An important part of the scheme is giving applicants feedback on who has recently been allocated properties. Accompanying each advertisement will be a feedback section giving details of the properties allocated, including:

a) Property size and type
b) Property location
c) Number of applicants who applied for each property
d) Band of successful applicant.

5.9.2 Using this information, applicants will be able to see where properties are more likely to become available and where they may have the best chances of making a successful ‘bid’.

5.10 **Direct Lets and Excluded Properties**

5.10.1 **Homelessness Duty**
To discharge its statutory Homelessness Duty under s193(2) of the 1996 Act, the council may make a direct offer to any approved homeless applicant who has not secured accommodation under Part 6 of the Act within three months of being placed in Band A, or where such an applicant has not placed a bid in three months. The period of time may be extended where no suitable properties have become available or bids have been made but higher band cases have been successful.

5.10.2 **Dangerous or Potentially Dangerous Offenders**
Upon a referral from the Police, Probation Service or Home Office under the North Somerset Multi-Agency Protocol an offender may be made a direct offer of a property, regardless of their eligibility under chapter 2 of this policy.

Re-housing of dangerous offenders will be carried out in consultation with the relevant agencies to minimise the risk to the public and with the long term aim of influencing the successful accommodation and resettlement of the offender, thus minimising the risk of re-offending and protecting the public and victims of offenders.

5.10.3 **KeyRing Applicants**
Upon referral from the KeyRing supported housing project or similar, an applicant who requires a specific type of property in a specific area may be made a direct offer of a property, provided they are eligible under chapter 2 of this policy.
5.10.4 **Excluded Properties**

All the scheme landlords are committed to advertising as many of their vacant properties as possible through the HomeChoice system. There will be occasions, however, when certain properties will not be advertised and the reasons for these exclusions will be monitored. Some examples are:

- Properties required for existing tenants whose properties are subject to major works requiring them to vacate;
- Extra care vacancies which are allocated jointly with the council’s Adult Social Services directorate – there is a separate policy for this;
- Applicants who have succeeded to a tenancy who need to move to alternative accommodation.

However, even if the property has been excluded from the scheme, the let will be processed as a direct let and the outcome of the letting will still be advertised.
6 MONITORING AND REVIEW

6.1 Monitoring

6.1.1 A number of areas within the HomeChoice North Somerset system will be monitored on a regular basis to ensure that the system is operating in the most effective way. Areas to be monitored may include:

- Number of registrations received
- Percentage of applicants registered and notified within 21 days
- Number and percentage of applicants registered within each band
- Number of properties advertised by type, area, landlord
- Number of properties advertised with local connection label
- Number of properties with reasons excluded from the HomeChoice system, by landlord (i.e. decants)
- Number of bids and method of bidding
- Number of bids for each property by band
- Profile of those bidding (i.e. waiting list, transfer, homeless, disabled, ethnic background)
- Number of applicants bypassed for breach of tenancy conditions
- Number of accepted offers by band
- Number of tenancies refused at sign up
- Number of properties re-advertised due to difficulty in letting
- Number of review requests
- Number of applicants in short term supported housing awaiting active rehousing (following confirmation by scheme of readiness to move)
- Number of homeless applicants in Band A awaiting rehousing/(not bidding)
- Number of Band A applicants who have not bid for more than six months
- Number of Emergency Priority applicants awaiting rehousing
- Number of people housed by band

6.2 Equal Opportunities

6.2.1 All partners of HomeChoice North Somerset are committed to a fair and equitable housing policy and to providing equal opportunities for all when allocating available properties. All housing applicants will be assessed according to their housing need and in accordance with the published lettings policy.

6.2.2 All partners of HomeChoice North Somerset are opposed to direct or indirect discrimination and recognise the need for appropriate systems to actively prevent discrimination on the basis of race, colour, ethnic or national origins, gender, sexuality, marital status, religion, physical disability or mental health. Any allegations or concerns that an organisation has not acted appropriately have to be made directly to that organisation. All partner landlords are publicly...
accountable and have to have a complaints policy and an independent ombudsman.

6.2.3 Regular monitoring will also be carried out to ensure that the council complies with the Commission for Racial Equality’s code of practice for rented housing.

6.3 Social Inclusion

6.3.1 All partners of HomeChoice North Somerset believe that applicants should be given every assistance to access the housing register and search for suitable properties. For example, the provision of the HomeChoice North Somerset ‘Hotline’ number will assist those applicants who experience literacy problems or who are either blind or partially sighted and unable to read the advertisements.

6.3.2 To further assist applicants the following methods may be used:

• Applicants potentially disadvantaged by the scheme will initially be identified from the application form. Staff will contact these applicants and offer them a home visit or interview. Staff will seek to establish what the support needs are and identify ways of enabling the applicants to participate in the HomeChoice North Somerset system. This may include sending copies of the advertisements in large print to an applicant or simply providing advice.

• If the applicant agrees, staff may contact any professional or voluntary workers from health or Social Services with whom the applicant is involved to ensure they understand the procedures and that necessary support is provided. All agencies funded through Supporting People should be in a position to provide their clients with help on housing issues.

• Disadvantaged applicants are able to nominate a person (including family members, friends or professional worker) to bid on their behalf or to help them bid for suitable properties.

• An alternative is for HomeChoice North Somerset staff to automatically put the applicants forward for vacancies that would be suitable, in the small number of cases where the applicant has no support.

6.4 False Information

6.4.1 Applicants who are found to have deliberately given false information on their HomeChoice application will have their application cancelled immediately, and they will be excluded for a minimum of 3 years.
6.4.2 An immediate review of an application may also be undertaken if an applicant is found to have deliberately changed or worsened their housing situation in order to be placed into a band higher than they would normally have been awarded. If an applicant is rehoused through false information, steps may be taken to end the tenancy and court action may be taken which could result in the applicant receiving a fine up to a maximum of £5,000.

6.4.3 All landlords in this agreement are committed to taking legal action to evict any applicant found to have gained a tenancy based on false information in their application form. (Section 171 of the Housing Act 1996).

6.5 **Access to Personal Information**

6.5.1 Individuals are entitled under the Data Protection Act (1998) to request details of their personal data held by North Somerset Council. A charge may be made for providing this information.

6.5.2 The information received, in conjunction with housing applications, may be disclosed to other housing providers/RSLs but will only be retained if accommodation is to be provided. Any additional personal information obtained may also be provided to RSLs if they provide accommodation.

6.6 **Policy Review**

6.6.1 The HomeChoice North Somerset Scheme is regularly reviewed to ensure that the policy meets its stated objectives and complies with legislative changes. Any minor changes to the Lettings and Assessment Policy are implemented only after delegated authority has been received from the Executive Member and the majority agreement amongst the partner landlords.

6.7 **Complaints**

6.7.1 Any complaints about the applicants banding should be directed to the council. Complaints regarding the labelling of the property e.g. size, amenities etc should be referred to the individual landlord of the property. If a successful applicant is not offered the accommodation for any reason then any complaints regarding this should be directed to the landlord making this decision.

6.7.2 If an applicant is not satisfied with the action taken by either the council or a Registered Social Landlord and has exhausted the complaints procedure available, they can send a written complaint to the ombudsman.
6.7.3 The Housing Ombudsman Service can be contacted at:

Housing Ombudsman Service
81 Aldwych
London
WC2B 4HN

Tel: 0300 111 3000
Fax: 020 7831 1942
Email: info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk
Website: www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk
APPENDIX A – HOMECHOICE NORTH SOMERSET SCHEME LANDLORDS

Alliance Homes
Anchor Housing Association
Aster Communities
Brunel Care
Curo
Elim
English Rural Housing Association
Guinness Partnership
Hanover
Housing 21
Knightstone
Places for People
Raglan
Sanctuary
South Western Housing Society
Sovereign Housing
United HA
APPENDIX B – MEDICAL ASSESSMENTS

When ill health, disability or old age is aggravated by housing conditions and would improve if other accommodation were offered, the award for medical consideration is a range from Band A to Band C.

**Band A:** Urgent and potentially life-threatening problems  
**Band B:** Urgent, but not life-threatening problems  
**Band C:** Clear, but not urgent problems

When awarding additional priority on medical grounds, there are three questions that have to be considered:

1. Is there a direct link between the identified medical complaint and the current housing accommodation/situation?  
2. Is there a realistic expectation that the identified medical condition would improve if alternative, more suitable accommodation was made available?  
3. Are there properties available within the HomeChoice North Somerset system that would be more suitable for the applicant?

The HomeChoice Team will carefully consider any representation received and check the circumstances outlined with any banding award that may have previously been made. Where there is a need, a change to banding will be made.

To achieve this consistency in the allocation of banding under this heading a descending schedule is detailed below:

**Band A:** Urgent and potentially life-threatening problems  
This top category will be reserved for *exceptional* cases where an applicant's or tenant's life can in some way be said to be at risk because of associated medical and housing difficulties which are inherent in the existing accommodation.

**Band B:** Urgent, but not life-threatening problems  
This again is a high banding category and should only be used to reflect urgent medical difficulties that have a clear relationship to existing housing circumstances. It is distinguished from the previous banding (i.e. high / life threatening problems) because in this instance the person's life cannot be considered to be at risk.

**Band C:** Clear, but not urgent problems  
The degree of the problem is clearly less severe but must still have a clear relationship to existing housing conditions.
Procedure
The HomeChoice Team will carry out the majority of medical priority assessments. When an applicant indicates on their application that they have a medical need, they will be contacted by a Housing Options Assistant who will conduct a brief interview to discover if there is a medical condition that warrants assessment.

If the Housing Options Assistant assesses that there may be some medical priority due, they will send a self-assessment medical form to the applicant for them to complete so that the full medical details of the applicant can be gathered on a single form.

The HomeChoice Team does not usually request an applicant or tenant to submit medical certificates or to obtain letters from their GP. The belief is held that this is a purely voluntary matter for the GP and patient. The Housing Team has no wish to create further work for doctors by insisting that medical certificates are produced before any application or transfer request is considered.

However, there will be occasions when the advice of North Somerset Primary Care Trust will need to be sought. For example, where an applicant’s housing circumstances are affecting their mental health, or where a GP considers a patient requires High Priority as a result of a medical problem.

When determining what banding to award, staff should approach the matter from the standpoint of assessing what degree of need exists and, secondly, what adverse effect this has on the lifestyle of the household as a whole?

The important aspect is to make a decision on what banding should be awarded, and then record the rationale as to why bandings have been awarded at that particular level within the HomeChoice customer records management system.

The following list covers some of the main factors, which can be reflected in a banding award under Medical Considerations:

- An applicant’s inability to manage stairs, control temperature, etc
- Applicants more or less confined to their existing accommodation
- Where present accommodation is causing an applicant’s mental or physical disability.
- An applicant’s restricted ability to fend for him/herself
- The need for adapted housing and/or extra facilities
- The need for sheltered or supported housing
- The for housing as part of a care plan
APPENDIX C – WELFARE ASSESSMENTS

When an applicant's welfare is severely and detrimentally affected by their housing conditions and a move to alternative accommodation is urgently required, the award of a Band A welfare priority can be made. Please also note that welfare priority will only be awarded to a household, not to individual members of the family/household.

This again is a high banding award and should only be used to reflect urgent welfare difficulties that have a clear and urgent relationship to existing housing. Some of the areas that can be considered for a welfare award are as follows:

- The need to give or receive support;
- The need to recover from the physical effects of violence, threats, physical, emotional, sexual abuse etc;
- Young people at risk.

Any professional, for example a Social Worker, Support Worker or Housing Advice Officer, working with a person or their household can ask for a welfare award to be considered for a client.

The representative will need to provide a written report, with additional evidence to support any reasons to move that are beyond their scope (i.e. Police records), which will then be carefully considered by the HomeChoice Manager.
APPENDIX D – ROUGH SLEEPER ASSESSMENTS

When an applicant claims to be rough sleeping, street homeless or sleeping in a vehicle then the award of a Band B rough sleeper can be made where it is assessed that the applicant finds themselves in this position through no fault of their own.

Before awarding additional priority for rough sleeping, a HomeChoice Manager, HomeChoice Officer or Housing Advice Officer must carry out an investigation considering the following questions:

1. What are the applicant’s current housing circumstances (street homeless, in a tent, in a car, etc)?
2. Where has the applicant slept for the previous seven nights?
3. Where does the applicant intend to sleep for the next seven nights?
4. What toilet and washing facilities has the applicant been using?
5. Where was the applicant’s last settled address?
6. Why can they no longer occupy that address?
7. Does the applicant have any other friends or family that could accommodate them?

The officer may also carry out an unannounced visit to the location the applicant states they may be sleeping to verify the information provided.

If, following this investigation, the officer believes that the applicant is sleeping rough with no fault of their own, then Band B rough sleeper can be awarded.