

# Northumberland Homefinder

## Scheme Guide and Banding Policy Consultation



Find out about the new way of allocating homes then let us know your views on our questionnaire.





## WEB ADDRESSES

[www.blythvalley.gov.uk](http://www.blythvalley.gov.uk)

[www.wansbeck.gov.uk](http://www.wansbeck.gov.uk)

[www.tynedale.gov.uk](http://www.tynedale.gov.uk)

[www.castlemorpeth.gov.uk](http://www.castlemorpeth.gov.uk)

[www.alnwick.gov.uk](http://www.alnwick.gov.uk)

[www.milecastlehousing.co.uk](http://www.milecastlehousing.co.uk)

[www.castlemorpethhousing.co.uk](http://www.castlemorpethhousing.co.uk)

[www.wansbeckhomes.co.uk](http://www.wansbeckhomes.co.uk)

[www.blythvalleyhousing.com](http://www.blythvalleyhousing.com)

[www.berwick-upon-tweed.gov.uk](http://www.berwick-upon-tweed.gov.uk)

## CONTENTS

Introduction	4
The Northumberland Homefinder Partnership	4
Objectives of the scheme	4
Applying to register on the new scheme	5
Information and Guidance	5
Assessment of applications	5
Applicable date	5
Advertising properties	5
Making an offer of accommodation	6
Cumulative need	6
Local connection	6
Housing options	8
Support for vulnerable people	8
Direct offers	8
Feedback	8
Reviews and complaints	8
Equal opportunities	8
FAQ's	10



## Northumberland Homefinder Common Allocation Policy

### Summary

#### 1. Introduction

The review of the existing allocation scheme will involve some changes to our policy of allocating or letting available properties. To help you understand the new allocation scheme, we have listed some of these changes below. We have also included a list of frequently asked questions (FAQ'S) to help you understand how the Northumberland Homefinder scheme will work and what it will mean for you.

The policy has been written to take into account existing legislation, statutory and regulatory guidance.

#### 2. The Northumberland Homefinder Partnership

The Northumberland Homefinder partnership was formed in 2007 after successfully receiving funding from the Government to develop and implement a Sub regional CBL scheme which spans the whole of the region of Northumberland. The following local authorities and their partner landlords make up the partnership and have agreed to let their vacant properties in accordance with this policy.

- Blyth Valley Housing
- Blyth Valley Council
- Tynedale Council
- Milecastle Housing
- Castle Morpeth Council
- Castle Morpeth Housing
- Wansbeck Council
- Wansbeck Homes
- Alnwick District Council
- Berwick-upon-Tweed Borough Council

#### 3. Objectives of the Scheme

- To create a single point of access to all social housing, including accredited private sector tenancies and low cost home ownership options in Northumberland
- Operate a common housing register
- Provide an open, fair and transparent housing allocations system that is easily understood, accessible and easy to use.

- Increase housing choice and housing need
- Provide easy access to the scheme for vulnerable customers and advice and support to those requiring assistance with the process
- Improve understanding and confidence in the lettings scheme
- Provide applicants access to straightforward and realistic information on supply and demand, and the prospect of rehousing at every stage of the process as this is crucial to the applicants' confidence in this scheme as being open, fair and accessible.
- Facilitate sub-regional mobility regardless of tenure
- Develop effective partnerships within all sectors and agencies of Northumberland
- Supporting delivery of sustainable communities
- Ensure more effective and efficient use of housing stock across Northumberland
- Provide accurate housing need information to inform the future housing strategies and investment decisions
- Generate efficiencies in the allocation process including reduced 'void' turnaround times, reduce property offer refusals
- To meet the legal requirements for the allocation of social housing as set out in the Housing Act (1996) as amended by the Homelessness Act (2002).
- Preventing homelessness by providing more housing choices and acknowledging the needs of vulnerable people to support them.
- We will continue to ensure equality of opportunity with regard to access to and allocation of accommodation. We will regularly monitor ethnic origin and disability of applicants to ensure that they have the support available to enable them to bid for property and not be unfairly disadvantaged in any way. We can arrange translation services for those whose first language is not English and access to services to support people with hearing and/or visual impairment; physical or mental disabilities.

#### 4. Applying to Register on the new Scheme

The Northumberland Homefinder Common Housing Register is open to anyone aged 16 or over, unless they are specifically ineligible (see section 2.2 Ineligibility & appendix 2 of the full policy). However there may be limitations on ability to rehouse applicants under the age of 18 with some Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) due to their internal policies on minimum age of tenants. These limitations will be clearly labeled on featured property adverts.

To apply for a property applicants must be registered on the Northumberland Homefinder Register and a housing application must be completed.

Application forms will be made available in a variety of convenient and accessible locations, from the offices of all partners within the scheme and will include details of how the scheme works and how to find and 'bid' for a property.

In order to verify your details, we may ask you to provide supporting evidence to help us to assess your housing need and place you in the appropriate band.

#### 5. Information and Guidance

When your details are registered on the Common Housing Register, we will send you a user guide, which will provide a summary of the scheme. This information will include:

- How to find out about available properties
- How applicants will be banded
- How to bid for advertised properties
- How the selection process works
- Who to contact for advice and information
- What checks will be made before an offer is confirmed
- The right to request a review of a decision

#### 6. Assessment of Applications

The majority of applicants will see a change from the old system of assessing applications in line with points to bands. This is because the band system is easier to understand for applicants. The law states that we must give priority or 'reasonable preference' to certain categories of people who have a more urgent housing need

than others. The bands that reflect 'reasonable preference' within the Northumberland Homefinder scheme are Band 1, Band 2, Band 3, and Band 4. If your assessed housing falls into a certain category, you will be placed in the band that reflects that need.

Currently Blyth Valley Housing use a Band system for assessing applications registered on their allocation schemes. With the introduction of the Northumberland Homefinder scheme applicants currently registered with Blyth Valley Housing will be reassessed to ensure they are placed in the correct band.

#### 7. Applicable Date

The date you registered your application is important to us. This is because it will be used as a tie breaker if there is more than one person qualifying for the same property. If you are in Band 1 the date you entered the band will be used as the tie breaker. In bands 2, 3, 4 it is the applicant on the housing register the longest.

#### 8. Advertising Properties

One of the main differences you will see is that available properties across Northumberland will be advertised on a weekly cycle. Choice Based Letting works by allowing applicants to express an interest or 'bid' in available properties which are advertised in the local press and other convenient and accessible locations such as public buildings, on the website, telephone recorded message services, council offices and Housing Association offices

The partner landlords will provide information on the vacant homes which will include property details, rent charges, location, any special criteria and features. The information may include details about household types and sizes for which housing applicants may be considered for the vacancy in line with the priority scheme set out in this policy.

The vacant properties will be advertised during the previous tenants 4 weeks notice period and they may be withdrawn if the tenant changes their mind about moving.

Applicants interested in advertised vacancies who are registered on the scheme, can apply within the specified time limit. A range of convenient methods will be made available for



## Northumberland Homefinder Common Allocation Policy

applicants to express their interest in a vacant home. Feedback will be published anonymously showing how properties have been let.

### 9. How to 'Bid' or express an interest

You can express an interest or bid yourself if you have access to the internet or you can contact your local housing office where staff will do this for you. This means rather than waiting for someone to contact you, you have the opportunity to check on the availability of properties each week and place bids. You can also get an advocate to place bids on your behalf e.g. a family member, friend or support worker.

Placing a bid on a property does not involve the use of money, it simply means to 'express an interest' in a property.

A bid can be made via a number of methods, including:

- Internet
- Telephone
- In person at a housing office
- Through an advocate or support worker
- Through automated means in cases requiring a high level of support

You can place up to 3 bids on each weekly cycle. We will ensure that help is available to guide you through the new system.

### 10. Making an offer of accommodation

At the end of the advertising period, applicants who have bid for an advertised home will be short listed in accordance with the Allocations Policy and the qualifying criteria for that property. The successful applicant for each property will be the one who qualifies for the property, in the highest band and with the earliest registration date.

If there is more than one applicant within each band, the property will be offered to:

For Band 1 – the applicant who has been awarded the priority status for the longer period (i.e. the earliest date). If more than one applicant shares the same date, further priority will be given to the applicant who has been on the housing register the longest (i.e. with the earliest date of registration)

For Bands 2, 3, and 4 – the applicant who has been on the housing register the longest (i.e. with the earliest date of registration)

In order to be as objective as possible, the scheme uses date of registration of the application as the selection criteria. The date of registration will be the date that the application is accepted onto the scheme.

If an applicant is ranked first for more than one property and all criteria are met the applicant should be contacted to make a decision about which property they wish to accept.

### 11. Cumulative Need

This scheme will allow for greater priority to be given to those applicants in the reasonable preference categories who have been assessed as having 'cumulative' or 'multiple' needs.

### 12. Local Connection

Applicants will be counted as having a local connection to Northumberland if they fit one or more of the following categories;

- the applicant or a person who might reasonably be expected to reside with the applicant is, normally resident in Northumberland and have lived there. for 6 out of the past 12 months or 3 out of the past 5 years.
- The applicant previously lived in Northumberland and lived there for 5 years or longer.
- The applicant or a person who might reasonably be expected to reside with the applicant is at present employed in Northumberland. The local authority should obtain confirmation from the employer that the person is in employment and that the employment is not of a casual nature. Applicants will only be considered to have a local connection in these circumstances, if it is unreasonable to expect them to commute to their place of work from their existing home.
- The applicant or a person who might reasonably be expected to reside with the applicant has close family connection to Northumberland. A close family connection is defined as parent, child, grandparent, grandchild or sibling who has lived in

Northumberland for 6 out of the past 12 months or 3 out of the past 5 years.

- Only in exceptional circumstances would the residence of relatives other than those listed above be taken to establish a local connection. The residence of dependent children in a different district from their parents would not be residence of their own choice and therefore would not establish a local connection with Northumberland.
- There are special circumstances which the authority may consider to establish a local connection with Northumberland. This may be particularly relevant where the applicant has been in prison or hospital and his or her circumstances do not conform to the criteria in (i) – (iii) above. Where, for example, an applicant seeks to return to Northumberland where he or she was brought up or lived for a considerable length of time in the past, there may be grounds for considering that the applicant has a local connection with Northumberland because of special circumstances. The Northumberland Homefinder will need to exercise its discretion when considering whether special circumstances apply.
- The applicant is leaving HM armed forces and have a local connection under any of the above criteria.
- The scheme will take into account an applicant's local connection within Northumberland when determining relative priorities within the reasonable preference categories (bands 1, 2 and 3).
- This means that an applicant who falls within one of reasonable preference categories, but who does not have a local connection with Northumberland, will be given less priority than an applicant that falls within one of the reasonable preference categories but who does have a local connection with Northumberland.
- However, the former (i.e. the applicant who will be given reasonable preference but has no local connection with Northumberland) will be given greater priority under the scheme than an applicant who does have a local connection but who is not required to be given reasonable preference.

- An applicant who has no local connection and no identified housing need at all will be given no priority under the scheme.
- As there is a recognised high demand for social housing in Northumberland, the scheme will not be able to assist everyone with fulfilling their housing requirements and therefore offers advice to applicants to discuss housing need in detail. This will include advice on the range of housing options that may be available. See section 4.1 housing advice and support.

## Rural Lettings Policy

Northumberland Council and the local housing associations have a number of homes available to rent in rural areas. This policy is due to the lack of affordable homes in rural locations. This policy is in place to try and keep rural village communities together by giving more preference to families with a strong local connection. This policy will be used to re-let vacant homes in rural areas outside the main towns where the landlord indicates it will be subject to the rural allocations policy.

The Council and partner landlords will allocate half of their vacancies to applicants with a local connection, for the remaining vacant properties, applicants wishing to live in the rural areas will be considered, whether or not they have a parish local connection.

## Criteria for a Rural Allocations Policy

In the Rural Allocations policy, we say you have a local connection with a parish if either you or another adult member of your household have

- Lived in the parish for 10 years or more up to the age of 16
- Been living in the parish continually for at least 5 years prior to the date of selection for an offer
- Been in continuous full, or part-time work (excluding seasonal work) in the parish for at least the last 5 years prior to the date of selection for an offer (part-time work means a minimum of 16 hours per week)
- Lived continuously in the parish for at least 5 years prior to being accepted as homeless but have been placed in temporary accommodation outside of the parish for up to five years.



## Northumberland Homefinder Common Allocation Policy

Please remember just because you have family living in a particular parish, or your children attend a school there, it does not mean you have a local connection. Your household must have been living or working there, as described above.

### 13. Housing Options

The Northumberland Homefinder partnership recognises that they can offer more housing options to people through Choice Based Lettings. This means that there is advice and information throughout Northumberland that will assist you to consider other solutions regarding your housing. Initiatives such as mutual exchanges, part rent/part buy products, low cost home ownership will be advertised on behalf of private landlords, and other registered social landlords to assist you in maximising your choice of tenure and improve your chances of being housed.

### 14. Support for Vulnerable People

We will provide additional help to support those people who have difficulty in accessing this new system. This could be due to age, infirmity, disability, literacy problems, sight or hearing impairment, language barriers etc. In these circumstances we will have an assisted persons list so that bids can be automatically placed on their behalf or by people acting as their advocates. We will also work closely with the relevant statutory and voluntary agencies to ensure that vulnerable applicants are given assistance in accessing the scheme and supporting them when possible in their tenancies once they have qualified for an offer of accommodation.

### 15. Direct Offers

The majority of offers will be advertised on the scheme. However there will be times when properties will not be advertised due to specific circumstances these will be known as Direct Offers and will be used in the event of an emergency situation such as fire/flood or where a particular sensitive allocation has to be made. When a direct offer is made the result will be made available to the public to ensure a fair, open and transparent service

### 16. Feedback

Details of advertised properties that have been let will be provided on the website; in the press; on the property advertisement page; in the next bidding cycle; or by contacting the scheme for advice from an Officer. This information may enable applicants to assess the likelihood of their bid being successful in the future, or how long it may take for them to receive an offer.

### 17. Reviews and Complaints

Applicants will be notified of their right to ask for a review of certain decisions made about their application. Reviews and complaints will be investigated by the Council in accordance with formal complaints and appeals procedures.

### 18. Equal Opportunities

The policy will aim to promote equal opportunity by preventing and eliminating discrimination on the grounds of gender, colour, race, religion, nationality, ethnic origin, disability, age, HIV status, sexual orientation or marital status. The impact of this policy will be monitored to ensure that it does not discriminate against any individual or particular groups, either directly or indirectly on race or equality grounds. In order to achieve this, all applicants will be asked to provide details of their ethnic origin and any other relevant information will be collected when they apply to join the Common Housing Register.

The following table outlines the categories included in each band.

BAND	CATEGORIES
BAND 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Homeless Priority/threatened with homelessness demolition and regeneration cases (decants)</li> <li>• Compulsory Purchase Order</li> <li>• High medical need</li> <li>• Supported housing Move On</li> <li>• Statutory overcrowded</li> <li>• Accommodation unfit</li> </ul>
BAND 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Homeless not in priority need</li> <li>• Medium medical need</li> <li>• Overcrowding</li> <li>• Under occupation (if applicant looking to move to a smaller more suitable property)</li> <li>• Serious disrepair but not unfit</li> <li>• Non statutory overcrowded</li> <li>• Welfare grounds</li> <li>• Local connection <b>with</b> housing need</li> </ul>
BAND 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Homeless, threatened with homeless but not owed a duty to secure accommodation</li> <li>• Intentionally homeless, other medical need</li> <li>• Housing need but <b>no</b> local connection</li> </ul>
BAND 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adequately housed, low or no housing need and no local connection</li> </ul>



## Northumberland Homefinder Common Allocation Policy

### FAQ's

#### 1. Will there be any consultation on the new policy?

- Consultation will take place with all tenants, residents, elected members, partners, key stake holders and staff throughout 2008/09.

#### 2. Will there be any consultation on the Northumberland Homefinder scheme?

- Consultation will take place with all tenants, residents, elected members, partners, key stake holders and staff throughout 2008/09.

#### 3. Will it be a points system?

- It is proposed that the Northumberland Homefinder scheme will have four bands that indicate the level of housing need and priority.

#### 4. Will medical problems be considered under the new scheme?

- Yes, all aspects of medical circumstances will be considered when assessing priority.

#### 5. How will I find out what homes are available?

- Under Northumberland Homefinder scheme available homes will be advertised widely and in many formats, which will include local press, web site, magazine, libraries/mobile libraries, community centres.

#### 6. What is a bid and how can I place one?

- 'Placing a 'bid' does not involve the use of money. It simply means to express an interest. Customers will be able to place bids in a number of ways, e.g. by sms text, internet, automated phone etc.

#### 7. Will the number of properties available increase under Northumberland Homefinder?

- No, Northumberland Homefinder does not produce any new or additional properties. In Northumberland there is a shortage of affordable housing. However customers will be able to see clearly how many are on the Housing Register and how successful they are likely to be.

#### 8. Will Northumberland Homefinder help me find a home in other ways?

- Yes, as Northumberland Homefinder develops it will be used to promote and inform about other housing options, which may include

mutual exchanges, low cost home ownership, accredited private landlords, links and signposting to other housing advice and other information services.

#### 9. What happens between now and 2009 when phase one of Northumberland Homefinder goes online?

- A number of things will happen. We will be consulting with members of the new council and existing district councils and our partner agencies in Northumberland. Briefing sessions for staff are also being held to advise how the system will work. A new IT system will be put in place to run Northumberland Homefinder. Existing Housing register applicants will transfer on to the new system

#### 10. Can other people have a say in how the new scheme will operate?

- Yes, they certainly can. Public consultation begins August/September on the draft allocations policy and the Northumberland Homefinder scheme framework. We will be arranging to contact and visit tenants group, Parish councils, Voluntary groups ( particularly those who represent those that may be vulnerable), other agencies and professionals to explain about Northumberland Homefinder more fully.

#### 11. Can I contribute in any way before the Northumberland Homefinder scheme starts?

- Yes please. If you represent advice agencies, voluntary groups, statutory agencies, community groups, housing association groups, or disability groups, if you offer support and advice to black and ethnic minority groups, homeless people and you think that Northumberland Homefinder may have a particular impact on the people you support, or they might be effected differently to other members of the community we would like to hear from you. We would particularly welcome comments on how the scheme can be made more user friendly for people bidding for homes. Perhaps you would like to take part in consultations about the Northumberland Homefinder scheme. If so please email or [lgrear@blythvalley.gov.uk](mailto:lgrear@blythvalley.gov.uk)



