

**Equality Impact Assessment Report of Homesearch Policy,  
Procedures and Practices.  
Date: November 2008**

**Co-ordinator of Policy:**

**Persons carrying out Equality Impact Assessment:**

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**1. Introduction**

The Homesearch Team launched their new and improved Choice Based Lettings Scheme in October 2007. Homesearch Policy and Procedures were revised in line with the main changes which were:

- **The marketing of all available properties**  
We advertise all vacant properties using a dedicated website, in local press and via vacancy bulletins which are distributed to key local access points.
- **A simplified and more transparent Choice Based Lettings Policy**  
This included replacing the complex points based system with a Grouping only system and other important changes aimed at simplifying the system.
- **Operational Team Changes**  
The roles of staff and our internal procedures were changed to reduce non-value adding work and free up resources to ensure we assist the most vulnerable applicants through the process.
- **Investing in New Automated IT System**  
This system aims to give users the ability to bid for properties in “real-time” through a number of access routes. It also enables our Housing Association partners to upload void property details directly.

Our aim, to provide our customers with an improved service by giving them the information to make more informed choices.

The majority of feedback we have received regarding the new system has been positive. Most customers find the system user friendly and accessible.

Now that the Homesearch policy has been in place for 12 months we are carrying out a policy review. As part of this process we have conducted an Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) to ensure that our policy does not disadvantage any groups and to ensure that we are providing an equitable and inclusive service for all.

## **2. General problems and issues already identified that might affect the policy from meeting its aims**

An area we would like to focus on during the EIA concerns the changes regarding advertising. Discontinuing bulletins and encouraging applicants to be more proactive by viewing available properties could potentially exclude some of the more vulnerable people on the register. Therefore, we propose analysing our policy, procedures, feedback and monitoring to find out if we need to put special measures in place (if we haven't already done so) to make sure that all applicants can access our service.

We will also look at numbers on the register and housed figures by age, gender, disability, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation and compare with Census and Equalities Data. This should help us determine if we are reaching all groups in our area.

Consultation regarding the revised Homesearch Policy will also be included along with a review of our Homesearch Procedures regarding supporting specific need applicants.

## **3. What data was analysed as part of this Equality Impact Assessment process and what did it tell us?**

Consultation undertaken and data considered (e.g. Staff Survey, Consultation meetings, other data).

- Report of numbers on register by age, gender, disability, ethnicity, religion/belief and sexual orientation (compare with Census data and Equalities data).
- Reports of numbers housed by age, gender, disability, ethnicity, religion/belief and sexual orientation (compare with Census data and Equalities data).

(Data attached, analysed with team and no discrepancies found).

## **4. Assessment of impact on equality groups**

A detailed explanation and assessment of the policy's impact on equality target groups. Include potential impact as well as actual impact identified.

- The Homesearch Team dedicated time during team meetings to analyse the impact that the Homesearch Policy, Procedures and Practices may have on equalities target groups. The main areas we focused on were applying to join the housing register and searching/bidding for properties.

## Applications

- Gender

No impact for joining the register.

However, in regard to bedroom eligibility, applicants who have children of the same gender aged 8 or over are eligible for both 2 and 3 bedrooms. Under the old system they were only eligible for 3 bedrooms which restricted their choice.

- Disability

There is potential for discrimination. However, this has been mitigated by the role of the Homesearch Advisor to support vulnerable applicants through the process. If an applicant's disability makes it difficult for them to apply for re-housing we aim to provide assistance.

The Homesearch Team has Vulnerable Applicants procedures which have been reviewed as part of the EIA. The aim of these procedures are to identify if an applicant has a specific need which may prevent them from being able to access the register. Also, to find out if the applicant has a specific need which may entitle them to priority.

We also inform applicants via the Homesearch website that they can contact us if they require assistance to complete the application form. Our Homesearch Marketing Officers can provide face to face or over the telephone assistance. Our Homesearch Advisors will carry out a home visit if required.

- Age

Applicants aged 16 or over can apply to join the register. This is in line with tenancy agreement terms and conditions. We ask for a guarantor form for under 18s in the interests of helping them to maintain the tenancy. The application is suspended until we receive the guarantor form but the applicant is still able to accrue time during suspension.

We appreciate that not all of our elderly applicants have access to or are able to use the internet to complete an online application form therefore we can provide a paper application form. We also offer face to face assistance with completing the form. This can be carried out in the office or at the applicant's home.

- Ethnicity

Applicants who are subject to immigration control may not join the register. This includes asylum seekers, people with restrictions or conditions on their leave to enter or remain in the UK, people who have entered the UK illegally

or who have overstayed their leave, and people who are not habitually resident in the UK, Channel Islands, Isle of Man or Republic of Ireland. This is government legislation and cannot be influenced by Homesearch Policy.

The Homesearch Team aim to provide the Homesearch application in a range of languages. We can also provide Interpreter and Translator service. These services are advertised in range of languages both on the Homesearch website and on a poster in reception to assist applicants whose first language is not English.

Applicants on the register whose first language is not English can nominate a friend or helper to bid on their behalf. We also provide a face to face service which can be helpful if the applicant and their friend/helper wish to come into the office to discuss their application with us.

- Sexual orientation

Joint applications can be made by opposite-sex and same-sex couples

- Religion/Belief

No impact

#### Registering their interest (bidding)

- Gender

No impact

- Disability

Priority for fully adapted properties are given to applicants who require these adaptations. Applicants who are vulnerable due to disability can be placed on our Vulnerable Applicant list, this means that they can ring us on a weekly basis to discuss available properties and help them to bid.

We have also pre-nominated a disabled applicant to a new build property (will be fully adapted) which is currently in the planning stage to ensure that the property fully meets the needs of the applicant.

Following statement included in Homesearch Policy: "If the information you give on your application form indicates that you need help to register an interest in properties then, if you would like us to, we will arrange for a member of the Homesearch team to help you. Or you can nominate a helper to bid on your behalf. This helper can be a friend, relative or support or agency worker."

- Age

Applicants under 60 are only eligible to bid for general needs housing. Applicants over the age of 60 are eligible to bid for both sheltered and general needs housing. Applicants between 50 and 60 qualify for sheltered if they are in receipt of middle or high rate DLA (care or mobility). Sheltered criteria are decided by Supporting People and the individual RSLs and therefore cannot be influenced by Homesearch Policy.

We have written to applicants aged 60 or over on two occasions since going live with our new system explaining how the system works and asking applicants to contact us if they need assistance using the system. A small number have requested help. We have contacted these applicants and this has resulted in some of their details being placed on our Vulnerable Applicant list, they can ring us on a weekly basis to discuss available properties and help them to bid.

Following statement included in Homesearch Policy: “If the information you give on your application form indicates that you need help to register an interest in properties then, if you would like us to, we will arrange for a member of the Homesearch team to help you. Or you can nominate a helper to bid on your behalf. This helper can be a friend, relative or support or agency worker.”

- Ethnicity

Unfortunately, we cannot currently produce the newspaper advert, newsletter or web advert in a range of languages. However, we do try to make use of symbols in our ads. The bidding line is also only available in English. Applicants on the register whose first language is not English can nominate a friend or helper to bid on their behalf. We also provide a face to face service which can be helpful if the applicant and their friend/helper wish to come into the office to discuss how the system works. We can also provide an Interpretor service.

- Sexual orientation

No impact

- Religion/Belief

No impact

### Other Findings and Solutions

We found that the policy was potentially discriminatory towards military personnel and their families who are suspended on the register until 1 month prior to discharge. As a result we have updated our policy so they will not be suspended, allowing them to bid at any time. A Homesearch Advisor will write to them and explain that should they come top of a shortlist prior to release

they will need to pay the rent until they are able to occupy the property. Plus the final decision to accept them will be made by the RSL. We have also expanded Group C relaxing the local connection criteria to accommodate military personnel and their families who have lived in the area prior to employment or have relatives in this area.

We also found that the policy was potentially discriminatory against applicants who have a joint care of children arrangement by not considering them for larger accommodation. We have now updated the policy so they can be considered for larger accommodation.

There is also potential for discrimination if the applicant who is top of the shortlist is not selected. We request that RSLs notify us if they have skipped/refused an applicant and have incorporated this into our policy. We have also introduced an appeals policy for applicants who have been skipped/refused.

## **5. Monitoring arrangements**

What systems will be put in place to monitor for adverse impact in the future and how the results will be used to inform and develop our policy/procedures in the future.

Regular reports to look at numbers, bids and housed on register by age, gender, disability, ethnicity, religion/belief and sexual orientation. Monthly report looking at the results of the Customer Satisfaction Survey.

## **6. Conclusions and action plan**

What conclusions have been drawn from the EIA? Action recommended and timescales. Include the Action Plan as an appendix as well.  
(please see Other Findings and Solutions (above))

### Future consideration

-We would like to consider how we can work better with others to support vulnerable applicants.

-Continue to review and update our procedures to support vulnerable applicants

- Ensure that RSLs are notifying the team when they have skipped/refused an applicant by sending us a copy of the refusal letter.

-Request RSL Equalities Policy

-Request RSL Sheltered Criteria Policy

-Share Equalities Impact Assessment with RSLs

**Signed off by** Janet Rowse, Deputy CEO, NHS Bath & North East Somerset  
**Date** 27 July 2009