

## **Introduction**

Gateway to Homechoice is a sub-regional Choice Based Lettings scheme which operates across the following eight local authorities:

1. Babergh
2. Braintree
3. Colchester
4. Ipswich
5. Maldon
6. Mid Suffolk
7. Suffolk Coastal
8. Waveney

The scheme works with 35 Registered Providers which use the Gateway website to advertise and let their properties across these areas.

The local authorities share a common allocations policy and therefore, this response is submitted on behalf of the local authorities listed above.

**Question 1: Do you agree with the proposal to use statutory guidance to strongly encourage the exemption from local connection requirements of divorced or separated spouses or civil partners of Service personnel who are required to move out of accommodation that has been provided by the Ministry of Defence?**

We do not apply residency criteria; someone living in our districts in Ministry of Defence accommodation can apply and we would accept them onto our housing registers. We would not give them the same priority as serving/former serving members of the armed forces and they are unlikely to be housed in time for moving out.

To produce this statutory guidance would further erode the flexibility given to local authorities in the Localism Act 2011 regarding allocations policies and whilst we appreciate the point made about divorced or separated spouses experiencing domestic abuse this is already covered in other legislation. As such, we do not support this proposal.

**Question 2: Do you agree with the proposal to use statutory guidance to make clear the circumstances in which we would expect local authorities to apply the 'medical and welfare' reasonable preference category and the additional preference requirements to ensure members of the Armed Forces and Veterans suffering from mental ill health are given appropriate priority for social housing? Views are sought on the advantages and disadvantages of this proposal.**

If, as we do, Councils give the appropriate additional preference to members of the armed forces, they would automatically give a higher priority to armed forces applicants with a medical or welfare need than someone with similar issues who had no history of service.

Under our scheme, an applicant with mental ill health may be given either a medical or welfare band, depending on their specific needs and upon which award gives them the highest band on the housing register.

**Question 3: Local authorities are invited to provide details of how their current allocation policies ensure that members of the Regular and Reserve Armed Forces, and Veterans, who are suffering from mental ill health are given appropriate priority.**

The following extracts are taken from the Gateway to Homechoice Allocations policy, and specify that those who are current or former members of the armed forces will be considered for reasonable preference and additional preference under this policy:

**2.1 Reasonable Preference**

*The Housing Act 1996 section 167 (2) sets out the five groups of applicants for whom reasonable preference must be considered. These groups are:*

- *Applicants who need to move on medical or welfare grounds (including grounds relating to disability)...*

**2.2 Additional Preference**

*Under section 167 (2) of the Housing Act 1996, the following groups of people are given additional preference if they meet the statutory reasonable preference categories (above) and have an urgent housing need:*

**2.3 Armed forces, reserve forces personnel and bereaved spouses or civil partners of armed forces personnel, under the following circumstances:**

- (i) former members of the armed forces;*
- (ii) serving members of the armed forces who need to move because of serious injury, medical condition or disability sustained as a result of their service;*
- (iii) bereaved spouses, partners and civil partners of members of the armed forces, leaving services family accommodation following the death of their spouse or partner; or*
- (iv) 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'*

**2.4** *Main or joint applicants who meet the reasonable preference criteria and any of the criteria listed in points (i) – (iv) above, will be awarded additional preference by being prioritised within their band when they apply for eligible properties.*

Those who apply to join the Gateway scheme and who are suffering from mental ill health and are current or former members of the armed forces, will usually be assessed under our medical criteria, where we consider the impact that an applicant’s housing has on their medical need and use the following matrix to assess an applicant’s needs:

Effect on housing	Medical problem			
	Very serious	Serious	Moderate	Low
Very serious	Band A	Band B	Band C	No award
Serious	Band B	Band B	Band C	No award
Moderate	Band C	Band C	Band C	No award
Low	No award	No award	No award	No award

Those who are given a medical Band due to their physical or mental health, will also then be given additional preference under our scheme. This means that when a household bids for a property, the household with a service history automatically comes above all the people in the same Band. This means they are more likely to be housed than someone who has the same circumstances but has no history of service.

**Question 4: Local authorities are invited to provide details of how they are using their existing powers under the allocation legislation to support serving and former members of the Armed Forces and their families.**

We automatically apply a higher priority to serving and former members of the armed forces by giving them additional preference when they bid on properties.

**Question 5: Do you agree with the proposal to bring together in one standalone document guidance on the allocation of social housing to the Armed Forces community?**

Yes. We would welcome this guidance.

**Question 6: Do you currently include a question on your application form that asks whether the applicant is a current member of the Armed Forces, a Veteran or another member of the Armed Forces community?**

Yes. The applicant will then be asked for evidence of their service in the armed forces during the verification process so that the applicant will be given the additional preference on their housing register application.

We also monitor on a quarterly and annual basis the number of applications that we receive from current or former members of the armed forces and the number of properties which are let to those with the additional armed forces preference.

We monitor the length of time that households wait to be housed through the Gateway to Homechoice scheme – the data below is taken from our annual report for 2017-18 and shows that those who have additional preference are, on average, housed more quickly than those who don't.

Priority Type	Overall Average Waiting Time to be housed through Gateway in 2017/18
Households housed with Armed Forces Priority	9.6 months
Households housed with no Armed Forces Priority	12.3 months

**Question 7: Would you support the proposal to use statutory guidance to encourage local authorities to include such a question?**

The requirement of Statutory Instrument 2012 No.2989 is that additional preference is given to current and former members of the armed forces. We implemented this in 2013. If the Government feels that this was not implemented by local authorities then we would support this proposal.

**Question 8: Local authorities are invited to provide details of how they are training their housing staff to deal with applications from serving or former members of the Armed Forces or other members of the Armed Forces community.**

Staff in Gateway local authorities in Essex completed the following e-learning module for frontline staff last year:

<https://www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/localauthorities/learning-training-resources/>

Housing staff have also attended workshops on the following topics:

- What is the Armed Forces Covenant
- Why people join the Armed Forces
- Impact of Service Life
- Leaving the Armed Forces / Transition Issues
- What support is available

**Question 9: Would you support the proposal to use statutory guidance to encourage local authorities to provide appropriate training for staff and managers to deal with applications from serving or former members of the Armed Forces or other members of the Armed Forces community?**

Yes

Final