

# ***Your Choice***

## ***What is “Your Choice”?***

“Your Choice” has been designed to improve access to affordable rented properties in the Lichfield District, owned by housing associations. The system works by advertising available homes and allowing customers to express interest in them via our web-site or by telephone. The scheme aims to simplify the way in which you can rent a home and takes into account the date on which you registered onto the scheme. Customers are assessed for housing need and personal links to the district, and advised which of our four priority bands they are in. Details of the bandings can be found under ‘banding information’.

## ***Who can apply to join the scheme?***

Anyone over the age of 18 can apply to register onto the Your Choice scheme. If you are a 16 or 17 year old, you will be required to provide us with a suitable guarantor for the tenancy. A guarantor needs to be in employment and willing to be responsible for the tenancy until you reach the age of 18.

All we ask is that you complete a simple on-line registration form.

## ***Are there any restrictions?***

When you apply, HomeZone will require your permission to obtain a reference for any tenancy or mortgage held in the last 5 years. If you have a mortgage, a copy of your most recent mortgage statement is an acceptable alternative to a reference. You will not be able to express interest on properties until we have received a satisfactory reference. Where an unsatisfactory reference is received we will undertake an investigation and you will be required to attend an interview. You will be advised if you are allowed onto “Your Choice” on completion of the investigation. If you are already a HomeZone tenant, a check will be made to see if you have a clear rent account or if you owe us any other debts. An offer will not be made until all debts have been cleared. Any Landlord participating in “Your Choice” may wish to obtain updated references before offering a property.

If you are an existing HomeZone tenant and are offered a move, we will need to carry out an inspection of your current property to ensure that it has been kept in an acceptable condition, in accordance with your tenancy agreement. Should the inspection not be satisfactory you will be suspended from receiving offers until any works identified have been rectified by you. Other Landlords will wish to do similar inspections.

## ***What are priority bands and how do I know which one applies to me?***

Priority bands help us to target assistance to those with a local connection with the greatest need, while allowing other applicants some access to re-housing. Those

with no connection to the district are placed in the lowest priority band. Customers are assessed and put into one of four bands. Bands 1-3 apply to applicants with a local connection. Band 1 covers those in greatest need, Band 2 those with some need for re-housing and Band 3 those with no housing need according to "Your Choice" criteria, but with a local connection. Band 4 covers applicants with no connections with the District.

The answers given on the registration form will enable us to see which band you fall into and how many bedrooms you need. You will be informed of the decision in writing. If you disagree with the assessment, details of how to appeal against a decision can be found below.

### ***Is there provision for exceptional circumstances?***

If there are exceptional circumstances that you feel are due special consideration, you can request a review by a **special cases panel** consisting of the Lettings Manager, Care Manager and Housing Manager, plus a Lichfield District Council representative where appropriate. The panel will usually only consider cases supported by evidence of the exceptional circumstances from a professional body e.g. medical professionals, police, social services.

### ***Do I have a time limit within my priority band?***

Applicants awarded band 1 priority will be reviewed on a regular basis to see if they are expressing interest in suitable properties advertised, as this group should be the applicants in most severe housing need. If they have not expressed interest and suitable properties have been advertised, they may have their priority reassessed and may lose their priority status.

If there have been no suitable properties advertised, the band 1 status will continue. If anyone disagrees with the decision made to reduce the priority status, details of how to appeal can be found below.

### ***Homelessness***

If you are homeless or threatened with homelessness, you should contact Lichfield District Council (telephone 01543 308709 or 01543 308711 before 10.00 am or after 4.00 pm.) If you are accepted for housing on the grounds of homelessness, you will be placed in Band 1 and will have to bid for properties in the normal way. The Council will monitor your bids every month, to ensure that you are bidding for appropriate properties and if you have not bid for properties the Council thinks would be suitable, they may bid on your behalf. If you refuse to accept a property the Council has selected for you, or any other reasonable offer, they may decide that their statutory duty has ended and your banding would then be reviewed. However, you can appeal to the Council if you think the property is not suitable.

### ***If I have no housing need, will I be able to express interest?***

Yes. We acknowledge that people who are considered adequately housed would like an opportunity to move and therefore we will allocate 10% of advertised

properties to band 3 customers and 10% to band 4 customers every year. The advert will say which band of customer can apply for a particular property.

***Can I access all vacant properties in this way?***

All vacant HomeZone properties will be advertised through "Your Choice". Other participating Housing Associations will advertise a proportion of their housing stock in the district through "Your Choice". The Local Authority can also nominate "Your Choice" applicants to other Landlords with properties in the district. It is therefore possible you will receive offers of suitable accommodation that have not been advertised through "Your Choice". Occasionally HomeZone may need to delay advertising a property to accommodate tenants who need to be temporarily rehoused while major works are being carried out in their own property, or for other emergency use. In exceptional circumstances a property may not be advertised but used to move an existing tenant to a new location. This is called a "management move".

***How will I know which properties are available?***

Properties due to become vacant will be advertised in the Lichfield Mercury and Tamworth Herald, and on our web site "[www.yourchoicehomes.org.uk](http://www.yourchoicehomes.org.uk)". Public access to the Internet is available free at local libraries. The adverts will advise you of each property's Landlord, location, rent, size, special features etc and will clearly state which customers are eligible to express an interest. The advert will state the appropriate bedroom need, the preferred banding and any age restrictions, e.g. bungalows may be advertised as over 60 only. If you do not have access to the newspapers mentioned or the Internet, we will send you a list of properties advertised.

***How do I let you know I am interested in a property?***

If you see a property advertised and you meet the criteria, you can express interest via our web-site, by telephoning the bid line 01543 420905 or by visiting our offices. The closing date for bids will be clearly stated in the advert.

***Can I express interest in properties not advertised for applicants in my priority band?***

Yes, if you match the other criteria in the advert but preference will be given to applicants in the advertised priority band.

***Can I express interest in more than one property at a time?***

Yes, but do not bid for properties when you do not match the advertised criteria (unless the only difference is the priority band), e.g. we will not consider bids for 3 bedroom properties from applicants with a 2 bedroom need. Multiple bidding will not increase your chances of receiving an offer.

***How do you decide who is offered a property?***

Once the closing date has lapsed, all expressions of interest are compiled as a short list, prioritized according to the advertised criteria. An offer will then be made by the relevant Landlord to the person who meets the criteria and has been on the register the longest (subject to any pre-offer checks).

***How will I know if I have not been successful?***

The successful customer will be informed that they are to be made an offer within five days after the closing date. If you have not heard by then you can assume that you were not successful and you will be able to continue expressing interest in properties included in later advertisements.

***Will I know what has happened to the properties advertised?***

Information about properties that have been let will be published. We will provide the number of interested customers who met the required criteria and the date the successful applicant registered. This information will give you a better idea of how popular a particular area is and how long you would typically wait. You may then decide to look for other property types or less popular areas where you may not have to wait so long.

***What will happen if I am made an offer?***

The Landlord will make a formal offer in writing and arrange for you to attend an accompanied viewing of the property before you make a final decision about whether you want to take the tenancy. You will not be allowed to express interest in another property while you are considering an offer.

***What if I do not like the property following the viewing?***

If you do not like the property you will remain on the register and will be free to express further interest in other properties in future adverts. However if you are a Statutory Homeless case, you may lose your band 1 priority if you refuse a reasonable offer.

***How do I make an appeal?***

If you simply feel that all the relevant circumstances have not been fully taken into account in assessing your banding or bedroom need, you can write to the Lettings Manager asking for a **review** of your case. If you disagree with any decision you can **appeal** to the Assistant Director of Housing Services. Write to the Lettings Manager at HomeZone, 5 Stowe Road, Lichfield, Staffordshire, WS13 6WA, stating you wish to appeal to the Assistant Director and giving your reasons. The Lettings Manager will pass all the relevant information to the Assistant Director who will make a decision. If the matter is still not resolved, there are further stages of appeal to the Director of Housing Services and to a panel of Board members. Phone the Lettings Team for more information about appeals.

***What if I need further advice or assistance?***

Our Customer Services Team will be pleased to assist – you can contact them on 01543 420800, between 08:45 and 17:15 Monday to Friday.

***What does Charitable Status mean to me?***

Please note some of the participating partners in “Your Choice” are charitable organisations. This means that before they grant any tenancy they will need to check whether you are a *charitable beneficiary*.

You may therefore be asked for further information about your circumstances if the property you are bidding for is owned by a charitable Landlord. You may also be refused a tenancy by a charitable Landlord if you are not a *charitable beneficiary*.

A *charitable beneficiary* means someone in receipt of welfare benefits or a low income, older people, people with disabilities, those who have a long term physical or mental illness or people in other recognised charitable need.