



West Lancs HomeFinder Scheme Guide

Contents

Section	page
1. Introducing HomeFinder	3
2. How do I apply to rent a home from the Council?	3
3. Can anyone apply?	4
4. How do I find a home?	4
5. What should I do if I am interested in a property?	4
6. How will I know if I can bid for a property?	5
7. What size and type of property can I bid for?	5
8. Local connection	5
9. Is every property advertised?	5
10. The band scheme and how it works	6
11. How we offer homes	7
12. What if I need help?	7
13. What if I am homeless?	7
14. Sheltered housing	8
15. Furnished tenancies	9
16. Housing association properties	9
17. Shared ownership	9
18. Appeals	9
More Details	
Appendix A. Who can join the housing register.	10
Appendix B. What size of property can I bid for?	12
Appendix C. Local connection	13
Further information	14

1. Introducing HomeFinder

West Lancs HomeFinder is the new way to find and rent a home from West Lancashire Borough Council.

Visit the website - www.westlancs.gov.uk/homefinder

Anyone who wants to rent a home from the Council can use the HomeFinder system to find out what's available and to bid for a new home. HomeFinder is for existing tenants who want to move to a different council property as well as for people who haven't rented from the council before.

This booklet will explain the system and help you through the application process.

2. How do I apply to rent a home from the Council?

If you want to apply to rent a home from the Council, you need to be on the housing register.

If you are already on the Council's housing register you will automatically be registered for HomeFinder. You don't need to do anything.

If you are not on the housing register, you need to apply by completing an application form. You can -

- complete the form online at www.westlancs.gov.uk/homefinder
- request a form by calling customer services on 01695 577177 or the housing options team on 01695 585267
- collect a housing application from one of the customer service points

Once you have completed your form, you can return it to one of the customer service points or the housing options team. We will then write to you within 10 working days to tell you if your application has been registered. If you do not hear from us in 10 working days, you will need to contact the housing options team on 01695 585267.

All the contact details are given on the back page of this leaflet.

You can only use HomeFinder if you are on the Council's housing register. So it's important to put in an application.

3. Can anyone apply?

Anyone aged 16 or over can apply to join the housing register. You do not need to live in the West Lancashire area.

But there are some restrictions as to who can be accepted on the housing register. More information is given in Appendix A on page 10 of this booklet.

4. How do I find a home?

Properties that are available for rent, or will be available soon, are advertised on the West Lancs HomeFinder website:

www.westlancs.gov.uk/homefinder and in the free HomeFinder newsletter.

The newsletter is available at the Council's Customer Service Points in Skelmersdale and Ormskirk and also at libraries and on Parish Council notice boards.

Properties will be advertised on the website and in the newsletter on a weekly cycle from 00:01 on Thursday until 23:59 the following Tuesday.

5. What should I do if I am interested in a property?

If you are interested in a property you need to make a bid. This doesn't mean you have to offer to pay - it just means telling us you are interested. You can make a bid in a number of ways:

- Through the West Lancs HomeFinder website www.westlancs.gov.uk/homefinder
- By telephone: 0300 777 1370
- In person - at drop-in sessions at the Council's Customer Service Points (Please contact the Voids & Allocations team on 01695 585297 for details)
- By text message: 447537402598

You can make up to three bids each advertising cycle. Your bid(s) must be submitted before 23:59 on Tuesday. If you don't bid for any properties you cannot be re-housed.

Anyone who has already accepted an offer of a property cannot bid for another property.

Please do not bid on any properties that you do not want.

6. How will I know if I can bid for a property?

The property adverts explain who can bid and will give other relevant information, for example

- Size and type of household that the property is suitable for
- Any restrictions on age e.g. over 40s only
- Whether it is sheltered accommodation
- If pets are allowed
- If preference is given to applicants with a local connection to the village

7. What size and type of property can I bid for?

When we accept your application to join the housing register we will tell you what size and types of properties you are eligible to bid for.

Property Type	Qualifying Groups
Bedsits	Single people & couples without children
Flats/Maisonettes	Single people, couples, families where the youngest child is aged over 16. Households with children aged under 16 if requested
Houses	Households with children where the youngest is aged 16 or under.
Bungalows	Households with a disability & those over 60.
Sheltered housing	Reserved for single people or couples who are aged 60+.

More information about the size and type of property you can bid for is given in Appendix B on page 12 of this booklet.

8. Local connection

In some parts of West Lancashire there are only a small number of council homes. This means that people who live in those areas, or have a local connection, find it difficult to get council housing. We want to make sure that communities can stay together so we give a reasonable preference to people who have a local connection with that area.

More information about local connections is given in Appendix C on page 13 of this booklet

9. Is every property advertised?

Whilst the council aims to allocate all its empty properties via the HomeFinder scheme it reserves the right to direct-match applicants to properties in exceptional circumstances. These might include

- Public protection cases
- Successor tenants or those left in possession of a council property who are failing to make bids
- Where a council tenant needs to be moved whilst major repairs are being carried out to their home.
- Properties that have been significantly adapted
- Temporary accommodation
- Extra care sheltered accommodation

To ensure the scheme is as open and transparent as possible the council will still advertise direct let properties on HomeFinder, but no bids will be accepted.

10. The band scheme and how it works

We receive hundreds of applications each year from people who want to rent a home from the Council. Because it is not possible to offer everyone the home they want, we must have a way of deciding who should be offered a home.

To help us make that decision, we use a banding system. There are four bands: A, B, C and D. Each is made up of a set of conditions. If your circumstances meet at least one of a band's conditions, that is the band we will put your application in.

Band A is the highest priority and band D is the lowest. Within the bands, highest priority goes to those who have been in the band the longest.

The scheme is designed to be as fair as possible and to make sure we take into account all your circumstances. The information you provide on your application form will help us assess your housing need and decide which band to put your application into.

More information about bands is given in the booklet 'A guide to the banding scheme'.

11. How we offer homes

At the end of the weekly advertising cycle, we consider everybody who has put in a bid. We offer each property to the bidder with the highest priority - that is the bidder with the highest band and the earliest priority date in that band.

However, if the bidder with highest priority has rent arrears, or there is another good reason, the property may be offered to the person on the list with the next highest priority.

If we offer you a property, you will have two days to tell us if you would like to view the property. Once you have viewed the property you will be asked to make a decision.

There is no limit on how many offers we can make to you. However, if your application has been placed in band A or B and you refuse three offers, your application will be placed in band C.

12. What if I need help?

When you complete the application form to go on the housing register, you will be asked if you need help to find information or make a bid. If so, we will contact you to discuss how we can help. Help might include:

- Advice or training to help you use the Homefinder website
- Posting the HomeFinder newsletter to you
- Providing information in a different format e.g. large print, translations etc.
- Nominating someone to bid on your behalf- this could be a family member or worker from a support agency. In exceptional circumstances, if an applicant is unable to bid themselves and has no one to do this for them, a system of automated bidding can be used.

13. What if I am homeless?

If you are homeless or due to become homeless in the next 28 days, you can contact the Homelessness Advice & Prevention Team. An officer will make an appointment for you to have a homeless assessment. The outcome of that assessment will determine what the council can do to help you. The Homelessness Advice & Prevention Team can be contacted on 01695 585222.

If you have been accepted as unintentionally homeless and in priority need you are expected to actively make bids against suitable properties.

If you have been assessed as being unintentionally homeless and in priority need, you will be made **one** offer of accommodation. If you refuse the offer, your homeless case will close and your application will be placed in band C.

Bidding patterns will be monitored for an initial period of 8 weeks. If you do not bid, or just bid on unobtainable properties, the Homelessness Officer will offer further advice. If this bidding pattern continues the officer will bid on your behalf and discharge duty on the first successful bid.

Where a homeless person has been bidding on reasonable properties but have not been successful the homeless officer in conjunction with the manager will consider whether to extend the period beyond 8 weeks.

14. Sheltered housing

Some of our properties are designed for elderly people. These are known as sheltered housing. Sheltered housing can be flats or bungalows. There are different types of sheltered accommodation:

Group Scheme - a group of properties linked to a mobile warden
Category I - schemes with use of a communal lounge and linked to a mobile or site based Scheme Manager
Category II - schemes with various communal facilities and an on site Scheme Manager
Extra Care - schemes with various communal facilities, an on site Scheme Manager and care provider. NB allocations are usually made to cases referred by Social Services

All types of sheltered accommodation have the support of a mobile or site-based Scheme Manager. By applying for accommodation of this type you are agreeing to accept this support and co-operate with the service.

To qualify for sheltered housing you have to be over 60 years old. However, applicants who are disabled or have other significant

support needs may be eligible for sheltered accommodation in exceptional circumstances. Only applicants who have been accepted as having a need for sheltered housing will be able to bid for sheltered vacancies.

15. Furnished tenancies

Moving into your first home can be difficult as well as exciting. To help people who may not have basic items such as a bed, sofa, fridge and so on, we have a furnished tenancies scheme. If you require a furniture package, you must tell the officer when you view the property. There is an additional weekly charge on top of the rent for a furniture package.

16. Housing association properties

We have nomination agreements with most of the housing associations in the area. This means that when they have properties available, they will ask us to nominate a suitable person from our register.

If you want to be considered for a housing association property you must tick the appropriate box on the housing application form. In the future, it is hoped that the HomeFinder scheme will be extended to include adverts for Housing Association vacancies.

17. Shared ownership

Shared ownership properties are homes that you part own and part rent. A housing association will own a percentage of the property which you rent off them; you then get a mortgage for the remaining share which you will own.

You have to be able to get a mortgage for the amount of the property you buy and the housing association must approve you to rent the remaining share.

Shared ownership properties are not included in HomeFinder. If you are interested in shared ownership, you can request a special application form from the Housing Strategy Team on 01695 585371

18. Appeals

You have the right to appeal against any decision we make regarding your housing application. For example you can appeal against not being accepted onto the housing register, the band we have put you in, and so on.

If you want to appeal against a decision we have made about your application, you must **write** to the Housing Needs and Allocations Manager within 21 days of receiving the decision.

Housing Needs and Allocations Manager
Housing Services Division
P.O. Box 16
52 Derby Street
Ormskirk
L39 2DF

Your letter should explain why you think our decision is unfair and against Council policy. You should include any evidence you have to support your appeal.

Within 10 working days, the Housing Needs and Allocations Manager will reply to your letter to confirm it has been received. You will then have 20 working days to send us more supporting information. If you do not want to provide any more supporting information, you can write to the Housing Needs and Allocations Manager and ask for the review to start immediately.

A final decision will be issued within 8 weeks from the date your request for appeal is received.

There is no further right of appeal if you are unhappy with the decision. Any further appeal would be to the courts using a procedure called Judicial Review. If you wish to apply for Judicial Review, you will need the help of a solicitor or specialist housing advice service.

Appendix A

Who can join the housing register.

Anyone aged 16 or over can apply to join the housing register. You don't have to live in West Lancashire. However, there are some restrictions and these are explained below.

If you are under 18

Anyone aged 16 or over can apply to join the housing register. If you are 16 or 17 years old, and you are given a property, you will be referred to a support service to help you when you first move

into your home. This will help you work out how best to manage your money and make sure you understand the responsibilities of being a tenant. If you refuse to co-operate with the service, we may refuse to offer you a tenancy until you are 18.

What if I am from abroad?

If you are not a UK citizen, you may not be eligible to apply for a Council property. There are different rules depending on which country you are from. Once you have applied to join the register, we will assess your application and tell you if your application can be accepted.

Unacceptable behaviour

We can also refuse to accept you onto the register if you or a member of your household has been responsible for unacceptable behaviour.

If your behaviour is not serious enough to exclude you from the register but we think you are not suitable to be a tenant, we may reduce the priority awarded to you on the housing register.

Rent arrears

If you have rent arrears of more than £1,000 your application will not be accepted.

If the amount owed is less than £1,000 but more than £100, your application will be placed in band D until you have kept to a payment plan.

The table below shows how the payment plan works.

Amount owed	Length of time you must pay for
£0- £100	Application will be accepted and placed in the most relevant band based on your circumstances
£101 - £250	Application will not be approved and placed in band D until payments have been made for 2 months
£251 - £500	Application will not be approved and placed in band D until payments have been made for 3 months

£501 - £1,000	Application will not be approved and placed in band D until the amount owed has been reduced to £500 and then additional payments made for 3 months
£1001+	Applications will not be accepted where more than £1000 is owed. Once the arrears have been reduced to under £1000 an application can be made which will be left unapproved and placed in band D until the debt has been reduced to under £500 and additional payments have been made for 3 months

Once you have kept to the agreed payment plan, your application will be approved and placed in the most appropriate band. You must continue with the payment plan until all the arrears have been cleared. If you stop paying at any time, your application will be cancelled.

Appendix B

What size of property can I bid for?

We must make the best use of our housing by allocating properties to people who make the best use of the space. When we accept your application for housing we will tell you what size and types of properties you are eligible to bid for. This decision is based on the following criteria.

Married or cohabiting couples (including same sex couples)	One bedroom
Adults aged 21 years or more	A bedroom each
A pair of same sex children aged between 10 & 20 years	One bedroom
A pair of children where both are aged under 10 regardless of sex	One bedroom
Any unpaired person aged 10-20 years will be paired if possible with a child under 10 of the same sex. Where this is not possible separate bedrooms will be allocated.	

Can I be allocated a property that is bigger than I need?

If we have a property available and there are only a few applicants on the housing register who need that size of property in that area, we may consider extending the eligibility criteria.

For example, if a 3 bedroom house becomes available and there is little demand, we will advertise the property as being open to bids from those applicants on the 2 bed house as well as the 3 bed house lists. If no bids are received from applicants needing 3 bedrooms we will offer the property to the person at the top of the shortlist for a 2 bedroom house.

Appendix C

Local connection

To be considered as having a local connection to an area, you must show that you meet one of the following conditions:

- you have lived in that area for 3 out of the last 5 years;
- you have close family who have lived in that area for at least 2 years prior to the date of your application and you are moving to be near them (you must currently live at least 3 or more miles away)
- you need to move to or stay in that area to receive support from organisations that would not be able to support you if you moved;
- you have been permanently employed in that area for at least 12 months

If you initially satisfy one of the local connection criteria but stop qualifying before you are housed, the local connection preference will be removed from your application.

Which areas have the local connection criteria?

We have identified certain areas where we will give preference to people who have a local connection with the area. The following list shows the percentage of allocations that will go to people with a local connection to that area.

100%: Altcar, Appley Bridge, Banks, Bickerstaffe, Halsall, Haskayne, Hesketh Bank, Newburgh, Parbold, Rufford, Scarisbrick, Tarleton, Westhead, Wrightington

50%: Aughton, Burscough, Ormskirk, Up Holland/Roby Mill, Old Skelmersdale

Properties in these areas will be advertised as “preference given to local applicants”. If we do not receive any bids from applicants with

a local connection we will offer the property to the highest placed applicant.

Further Information

If you need to know more about Homefinder:

Visit the website: www.westlancs.gov.uk/homefinder

Contact the Housing Options Team on 01695 585271 or the Voids & Allocations Team on 01695 585297

We can provide this information on audiotape, CD, large print, Braille, and in other languages as appropriate on request. Visit our website www.westlancs.gov.uk/access or telephone 01695 585297

Wszystkie te informacje możemy przekazać na życzenie w formie audio, na płycie CD, w wersji zapisanej dużym drukiem lub alfabetem Braille'a, bądź też przetłumaczonej na wymagany język. Zapraszamy na stronę www.westlancs.gov.uk/access lub prosimy o kontakt telefoniczny pod nr 01695 585297

Podemos prestar esta informação em gravação áudio, em CD, em letra grande, em Braille e noutras línguas, conforme apropriado e a pedido. Visite o nosso Website www.westlancs.gov.uk/access ou telefone para o 01695 585297