



Moving home with the Council

Tenants Handbook
HOUSING SERVICES



Most people move home a number of times in their lives – a growing family is a common reason for wanting to move. Property in the Epping Forest district is expensive to buy or rent, so hundreds of people apply to join the Council's Housing Register every year.

We must follow rules when letting properties, and unfortunately there are never enough properties available to let. We group all those seeking accommodation into 'priority' bands based on their current situation. The banding scheme is set out on pages 5 to 9.

What is the Housing Register?

The Housing Register is a list of 'Homeseekers' who are waiting to be offered a council or housing association property. Homeseekers include new applicants who have applied to the Council for housing, and existing tenants who wish to transfer to alternative accommodation.

Who can join the Housing Register?

If you are 18 years of age or over you can usually apply to join the Housing Register. You may be able to join if you are 16 or 17 and have been accepted by the Council as homeless and in priority need.

You can also join the Housing Register if you are already a council or housing association tenant and you want to move home. Mutual exchanges are another way to move if you are a council or housing association tenant. See page 13.

Who is not eligible to join the Register?

Generally, you cannot join the Housing Register if any of the following apply to you or your joint applicant:

- a) You are subject to immigration control (except in special cases).
- b) You have been guilty of unacceptable behaviour serious enough to make you unsuitable as a tenant of the Council.

c) You have a history of persistent rent arrears.

If your application is refused, you have a legal right to ask for a review of the decision. To find out more, see “Appeals and access to information” on page 11, or get in touch with the Housing Options Team on 01992 564107.

Joining the Register

You must fill in an application form to join the Housing Register. This is in our application pack. When we receive your application we will send you a letter.

It is important to keep this because it includes your registration number. You will need it to take part in the HomeOption choice based lettings scheme, and we will ask you for the number if you phone or write to us about your application.

We will also ask you for some official documents to confirm your identity and your current place of residence – and for every other person named on your application.

These are the documents we will ask for:

Original birth certificate and current passport or current driving licence; a current passport style photograph of yourself; and copies of two further documents, examples of which are as follows:

- a current tenancy agreement or current medical card; or
- a utility bill or bank statement, or a document or letter from a Government department (such as HM Revenue and Customs, Benefits Agency or the Employment service) which has been sent to you within the last three months.

Once you have registered you will need to start expressing your interest in vacant properties. Your HomeOption information pack will explain how to do this.

Make sure you tell us about any change in your circumstances that could affect your application, such as a change of address or an addition to your family. If you fail to keep us up to date, your application may be cancelled.

Choice Based Lettings

The Council operates a choice based lettings scheme called HomeOption. The scheme enables Homeseekers to express an interest in available properties which are advertised in a fortnightly publication and on a website. All new Homeseekers are sent an information pack which explains how to find a property and express an interest in it.

More information on HomeOption is available at www.homeoption.org. If you want assistance with participating in the scheme please contact our Housing Options Team on 01992 564107.

What happens when a property becomes available to let?

After we have received all the expressions of interest for a vacant property we must offer it according to our own rules. Homeseekers will be placed in priority order taking into account the following:

- a) their 'bandings' on the Housing Register
- b) the length of time they have been waiting for a move

When all the expressions of interest have been received, the Homeseeker with the highest priority will be made an offer. We decide on your banding when we have looked at the current situation of your household and other things you have told us, such as the size of property you need. We also take into account any special features of the accommodation. Some properties are designated as homes for older people, or they have adaptations for people with disabilities.

Penalties for Refusals

Any homeseeker who refuses two suitable offers of accommodation for which they have expressed an interest, within any three-month period, will be demoted to Band 6 for six months. Following expiry of the six-month period, the homeseeker will be re-instated to their original Band on the register.

The banding scheme

Everyone on the Housing Register is put into one of these 'priority' bands:

Band 1

- (a) Homeseekers with Council or housing association tenancies in the District wanting to move to accommodation with fewer bedrooms.
- (b) Homeseekers living in the District for more than a year immediately prior to application, needing to move on strong medical or welfare grounds or for reasons of disability. Homeseekers with mobility problems will be given priority for ground floor flats and bungalows above others in this Band, regardless of their waiting time, on recommendation of the Council's Medical Advisor.
- (c) Homeseekers accepted by the Council as homeless, eligible for housing assistance, in priority need and not intentionally homeless, who are living in:
 - bed and breakfast accommodation secured by the Council, but excluding those referred to another local housing authority *
 - the Council's Homeless Persons Hostel (Norway House or Hemnall House) or Women's Refuge for three months after the date of their homelessness decision *
 - properties under the Council's "Fresh Start" scheme for six months after the date of their occupation, where the Council has accepted a duty
 - "Brook Haven" for six months, and having been served with a Section 21 Notice (giving notice of ending the assured tenancy) where the Manager of Brook Haven has notified the Council that the tenant is ready to move on.

Homeseekers in the four categories in (c) above will be able to participate in the HomeOption Scheme for a period of

eight weeks (four cycles of two weeks). If no successful expressions of interest are made, the Council will express an interest in a maximum of three suitable properties for a further four weeks (two cycles) on behalf of the homeseeker.

If the homeseeker is still unsuccessful, the Council will make one offer of suitable secure accommodation. If the offer is refused, the Council's homelessness duty to provide accommodation will be discharged (no further offers will be made).

- (d) Homeseekers living in the District for more than a year, immediately prior to application, who have living conditions that are considered under law to be insanitary, overcrowded or unsatisfactory.**
- (e) Homeseekers living on the SAFE project (Single Accommodation for Epping Forest) or Railway Meadow (Young Parents Scheme) for at least nine months, who are ready to move on and the Council has been notified of this by the multi-agency referral panel.
- (f) Successor tenants (but not including spouses nor civil partners) who are under-occupying a Council property and are required, in accordance with the legislation or the Council's discretionary policy, to move to smaller more suitable accommodation.

Band 2

- (a) Homeseekers having to live apart from other members of their household, due to lack of accommodation, where the applicant (or their partner) has lived in the District for more than a year immediately prior to application. This excludes any household members living apart for personal reasons (family disputes for example).
- (b) Homeseekers in the Council's non-secure*** accommodation that have been accepted by the Council as

homeless, eligible for housing assistance, in priority need and not intentionally homeless. This excludes applicants referred to another local housing authority*.

Band 3

Homeseekers living in the District for more than a year immediately prior to application and meeting two of the criteria of Band 4, one of which must be (a) or (b).

Band 4

Homeseekers living in the District for more than a year immediately prior to application; and

- (a) needing one or more additional bedrooms
- (b) needing to move on moderate medical or welfare grounds or for reasons of disability; or needing to move to a particular locality in the District, where failure to do so will result in them or others suffering hardship
- (c) needing to move to or be nearer to their place of work; or to take up an offer of permanent employment, or a long term (full time) training opportunity which will lead to employment
- (d) sharing accommodation with another household
- (e) being a household that includes a child under the age of 11 and has no access to a garden
- (f) being a household that includes a child under the age of 5 and lives in a flat or maisonette above ground floor

Homeseekers living in the District immediately prior to becoming homeless and accepted by the Council as homeless and eligible for housing assistance, but not in priority need.

Band 5

- (a) Homeseekers living in the District for less than a year, or living outside the District, who live in overcrowded, insanitary or unsatisfactory conditions.
- (b) Homeseekers living in the District for less than a year, or outside the District, needing to move on medical, welfare or hardship grounds or for reasons of disability.
- (c) Homeless people over 60 years of age living in non-secure accommodation prior to receiving a decision **.
- (d) All homeless people (as classified by the Housing Act 1996) who are not eligible for Bands 1 to 4.
- (e) Single homeless people accommodated in bed and breakfast hotels who, in the view of the Director of Housing, would benefit from the SAFE Project or the Floating Support Scheme.
- (f) Homeseekers accepted by the Council as homeless, eligible for assistance and in priority need, but found to have become homeless intentionally.
- (g) Homeseekers accepted by another local housing authority as homeless and eligible for assistance, including those in temporary accommodation secured by another authority.
- (h) Homeseekers living in the District for less than a year (or outside the District) sharing accommodation with another household, or needing one or more additional bedrooms.
- (i) A Homeseeker with a child under 11, living in the District for less than a year (or living outside the District), with no access to a garden.
- (j) A Homeseeker with a child under 5, living in the District for less than a year (or living outside the District), occupying a flat or maisonette above ground floor.

(k) Homeseekers who, in the opinion of the Council, have sufficient income or assets to enable them to purchase accommodation as set out in paragraph 8.5 of the Council's Allocation Scheme.

Band 6

All other Homeseekers

* under Section 184 of the Housing Act 1996

** under Section 198 of the Housing Act 1996

*** under Schedule 1 of the Housing Act

Please note that for the purposes of this leaflet "the Council" refers to Epping Forest District Council. "The District" means Epping Forest District.

Your income and assets

Homeseekers will generally be placed in Band 5 if, in the Council's opinion, they have sufficient income or assets to enable them to purchase accommodation. Please ask the Housing Options Team if you want more information.

Incentive Scheme

Incentives are available if you are an existing tenant living in one of our larger properties and you want to move to one of our smaller properties. Please ask the Housing Options Team if you want more information.



What size property are we likely to be offered?

The sizes of properties allocated to people on the Housing Register will normally be based on the size of the household, and how it is made up. The table below shows how we work this out:

Property size	Property will be offered to
Studio	Single people
1 bedroom	Single people or 2 people without children
2 bedrooms	Homeseekers with 1 child Homeseekers with 2 children of the same sex
3 bedrooms	Homeseekers with 2 children of opposite sex Homeseekers with 3 or 4 children
4 bedrooms*	Homeseekers with 4 or more children
5 bedrooms*	Homeseekers with 5 or more children

Note: Where residence of children is shared and one parent has accommodation with at least 2 bedrooms, the other parent will generally only be considered for a 1 bedroom property.

In exceptional circumstances, homeseekers may be allocated a property which is one bedroom above the need of their household (where the Council's Medical Advisor agrees that there are strong medical reasons for doing so).

* The Council has very few 4 and 5 bedroom properties in its housing stock.

Under the HomeOption Scheme, homeseekers will be able to express an interest in properties which are one bedroom less than their need, provided it is within the permitted number of occupants allowed under the Housing Act 1985.

Homelessness

If you are homeless, or likely to become homeless, you should read our leaflet on 'Homelessness' and seek advice from our Housing Options Team.

Appeals and access to information

You can appeal if you are unhappy about a housing decision that we have made about you. You should appeal in writing to the Assistant Director of Housing (Operations) at the Civic Offices, High Street, Epping, Essex CM16 4BZ. If you are still not satisfied with the decision, on certain matters you can appeal to the Housing Appeals and Review Panel, which is made up of elected Councillors. On other issues, following the conclusion of your appeal to the Assistant Director of Housing (Operations) you can proceed to the Local Government Ombudsman. Our leaflet 'Housing appeals, homelessness reviews and complaints' gives more details. You can phone us on 01992 564107 to ask for a copy. You are entitled to see your file and to have copies of some documents free of charge or a copy of your whole file for a fee of £10.

Equal opportunities and personal data

We will treat you equally in accordance with the Equality Bill 2009 which targets unlawful discrimination in relation to these characteristics: age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex, and sexual orientation. If you join the Housing Register we will ask you some questions about yourself. Any answers that relate to your housing needs will be added to your personal record (such as a disability or certain medical conditions). Other details (your race or belief for example) are used for our statistical purposes only.

Epping Forest District Council is a Data Controller under the Data Protection Act. We hold information for the purposes specified in our notification made to the Information Commissioner. Our Housing Application Form gives further details.

Joint Tenants

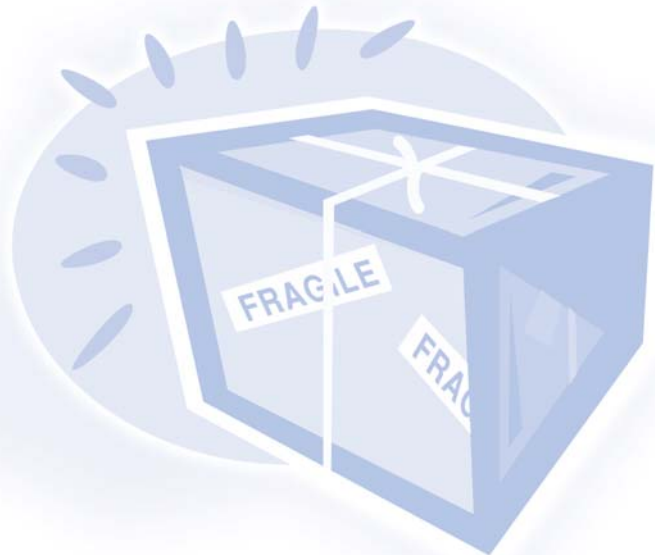
When you apply to the Council for housing you are allowed to register for a 'joint tenancy' with another person. This could be your husband, wife, partner, civil partner or in some circumstances a live-in carer.

The advantage is that you both have equal rights and security, providing you meet the conditions of the tenancy. But equal rights also mean equal responsibility so you should be sure, before you apply for a joint tenancy, that it will be the right thing for you in the long term. It is very important that you both read the Council's leaflet 'Joint tenancies'.

Don't break the law

If you knowingly or recklessly make a false statement, or withhold information that the Council has reasonably required you to provide, your housing application may be cancelled.

We may take legal action if we find out later that you were given a tenancy on the basis of false or misleading information. You could lose your home and be fined.



Mutual exchange

A mutual exchange is a 'swap' between two or more tenants who have long-term tenancies. You could move to another council or housing association property anywhere in the country. The exchange is arranged by the tenants, but you must get the permission of your landlord, and ensure that your exchange partners have done the same.

We have a partnership with the HomeSwapper service to help tenants find exchange partners. HomeSwapper is one of the UK's largest mutual exchange services. It offers a local and national service using an internet based search facility. You can receive email or text alerts of properties that match the type you are searching for.

To advertise your property for mutual exchange you should log on to www.HomeSwapper.co.uk. After you have registered you simply need to supply your property details, and a photo if you wish. There is no charge to our tenants because the Council has subscribed on their behalf.

If you have no access to the internet you can ask our Housing Options Team to register your property. Computers are available in reception at our offices in Epping, Loughton (The Broadway) and Limes Farm. You can use them to access the HomeSwapper website. We keep a HomeSwapper exchange list which you can see at:

- Housing Options Desk, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping, CM16 4BZ
- Area Housing Office (South), 63 The Broadway, Loughton, IG10 3SP
- Information Centre, Traps Hill, Loughton. IG10 1HD
- Town Hall, Highbridge Street, Waltham Abbey, EN9 1DE
- Limes Farm Housing Office, 661a Copperfield, Chigwell, IG7 5LA

The list is for reference only. You cannot copy it or take it home.

Mutual exchanges are governed by the following rules:

- 1.** Exchanges are subject to the approval of all landlords involved. No property may be exchanged without the written consent of each landlord.
- 2.** Tenants must view the property they intend to move into.
- 3.** Exchanges are allowed on the understanding that no expense will fall on the Council. This means that you must accept the property as it stands and bear the cost of all tenant obligations in respect of repairs and redecoration.
- 4.** All tenants involved in the exchange must move into, and continue to live in, their new homes once the exchange has been approved.
- 5.** Exchange approval is conditional on a clear rent account. The Council will not give consent for a mutual exchange if there is an order, or suspended order, in force (such as a possession order). Approval will not be given if an application has been made before any court for a relevant order against anti social behaviour. This includes an injunction or anti social behaviour order (ASBO) and applies to any member of the household.
- 6.** Exchanges causing over-crowding or under-occupation of two or more bedrooms are not allowed - even if the tenants wish to exchange two properties of the same size.
- 7.** Applications must be in writing using forms available from the Housing Options Section.
- 8.** You may only include a council garage in the exchange if it is within the boundaries of the property. Any other garage tenancy must be given up.

As the in-going tenant, you will become responsible for the upkeep of any alterations and adaptations carried out by previous tenants. It is very important that you check the following items in the property to which you are moving before you agree to an exchange:

- Kitchen cabinets and work surfaces

- Sanitary ware (including sink units, wash basins, toilets, baths, showers etc)
- Fitted wardrobes and cupboards
- Light fittings
- Heating appliances
- Outbuildings and garden sheds
- Paths and patios

If any of these were installed by a previous tenant, and are not standard council fittings, you must make sure that the works were done with the Council's written consent.

Sometimes tenants have had to remove garages, lean-tos and porches because they were erected without permission from the Council.

You must check that any items installed by the exchange partner are in good order, and agree that they will be left for you. You will be responsible for their future maintenance and replacement.

In addition, you should check that there are current gas and electrical safety certificates for your property and the one to which you are preparing to move.

Please refer to Tenants Handbook Leaflet 3 'Repairs and improvements to your home', for further information about maintenance of Mutual Exchange properties.

Further information

This leaflet is for guidance only. For more detailed information on the Council's policies please ask for a free copy of the full Housing Allocations Scheme which is available from:

The Housing Options team, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping Area Housing Office (South), 63 The Broadway, Loughton
Limes Farm Housing Office, 661a Copperfield, Chigwell

You can download a copy of the Housing Allocations Scheme from the Council's website www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/housing - you will find it in the A-Z of Housing.

To contact the Housing Options Team:

Phone: 01992 564107

Email: housingoptions@eppingforestdc.gov.uk

Write to: Housing Options Team,
Epping Forest District Council,
Civic Offices, High Street,
Epping, Essex CM16 4BZ

Please phone 01992 564292 if you would like this information provided in any other way, as a large print version for example.

The information given in this leaflet was correct at December 2010. Please be aware that there may have been changes since that time, such as new laws or Council policies.

Epping Forest District Council
Housing Directorate, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping, Essex CM16 4BZ
Telephone: Epping (01992) 564000 www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/housing

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The Government Standard

