

12. New tenancies - allocating housing, bidding, viewings and moves

12.1. Q: Who are you prioritising housing for and allocating new tenancies to, in the interim?

A: As part of our City for All strategy, residents and families of Westminster will have access to the best support at every key stage of life. We are focused on designing and delivering services for those most vulnerable.

In these exceptional circumstances, as a result of Covid-19, we will still do everything we can to support the vulnerable and help people into a safe place to live sooner, all in accordance with government guidance.

People that need to move for urgent health and welfare reasons are always our top priority and so we have decided on an interim approach to our allocations policy.

We have also changed the way we set up new tenancies and move people, to ultimately help safeguard those most at risk during this time and offer housing where most appropriate. We will not move anyone on the governments vulnerable or shielding list or with Covid-19 symptoms.

Read the full details of these changes including how people are allocated homes and move, at www.westminster.gov.uk/housing-strategies#allocations-scheme.

The government's guidance we are following at www.gov.uk/guidance/government-advice-on-home-moving-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak#social-landlords.

12.2. Q: How are you offering or allowing bidding on housing, and minimising risks during the moving process?

A: First, we are contacting approved applicants to let them know about these changes and encourage them to check our email alerts and the website regularly for updates. If applicants have any questions, they should call 0207 641 1000 or email hsscuserservices@wchss.org.uk. We are then making direct offers to people that need to move urgently, due to the impact of Covid-19, in line with our interim priority list which prioritises essential moves for eligible applicants who are:

1. fleeing domestic abuse/violence
2. living with a medical condition that means they need to move, or where their moving frees up housing for others with a medical need to move
3. living in a property that requires urgent repairs that cannot be carried out with the restrictions in place and therefore classed as uninhabitable
4. living in severely overcrowded housing

Bidding options as part of Choice-Based Lettings (CBL) will be gradually offered from May so certain groups of applicants, and willing to move during Covid-19, can bid for preferred properties online at <https://westminster.homeconnections.org.uk>. As part of this we will make choices available to homeless families first because they are most in need of housing. By offering this group the opportunity to bid and move first will free up more temporary accommodation for others that need it.

The way we offer viewings, sign-up tenancies and assist moving has been transformed. Viewings will now be done digitally through photographs or video instead of in person, tenancy agreements will be signed electronically wherever possible and our relocation company follow strict safety measures based on Covid-19 risk assessments.

We have decided to offer bidding to groups gradually to ensure we can manage these new ways of working to keep people safe. We will only move those willing and not move anyone on the governments vulnerable or shielding list or with Covid-19 symptoms.

Read the full details of these changes including how people are allocated homes and move, at www.westminster.gov.uk/housing-strategies#allocations-scheme.

12.3. Q: I'm an applicant waiting for more suitable housing – how will you keep me updated?

A: We have written to and sent emails and texts (where we have these contacts) to all applicants eligible and waiting for housing, to explain the options and how we will keep them updated about changes moving forward. We have also set up an electronic mailing list, so people can receive alerts from us about our housing allocations and moves, as we respond to government guidelines.

We understand some applicants may have been waiting longer or have more points to bid with - but if they have secure housing for now, they may not need to move as urgently as others.

We are doing everything we can to ensure applicants are not disadvantaged as a result of these interim changes and thank everyone for their patience and understanding. Points and positions on waiting lists are unaffected by these changes which are detailed online at www.westminster.gov.uk/housing-strategies#allocations-scheme.

If you are an applicant and have updated your email address or telephone numbers, please call us on 0207 641 1000 or email hsscuserservices@wchss.org.uk.

For further information on how the Council's housing services are operating during Covid-19 please visit www.westminster.gov.uk/coronavirus-housing.