

Lettings Service Standard

Our promise to you

We are committed to providing excellent customer service, so that every time you contact us you have a good experience. Our lettings standard sets out what you can expect from us when you apply for a home from Homes Plus.

We will:

- ◆ Aim to process your housing application within five working days, which is the maximum time it will take from you making an application and hearing back from us*.
- ◆ Offer a tailored service to customers who need extra support to make a housing application*. Further details can be found in our Access to Services policy, which is available in the customer documents area of our website – www.homesplus.co.uk
- ◆ Allocate homes in line with our lettings policies.
- ◆ Give you the chance to look around the home we offer to you and tell you what you need to know to decide if the home is right for you.
- ◆ Complete reference and affordability checks with you to make sure that the property is right for you.
- ◆ Arrange a sign-up appointment with all customers named on the tenancy agreement at the home to explain the tenancy conditions and conduct a final viewing before giving you the keys to your new home.
- ◆ Make sure that your new home is ready to move into and that all required safety checks have been completed.

****Please note: These points do not relate to customers applying for homes in Shropshire, as housing applications are made through Shropshire HomePoint.***

Policy	Lettings policy
Date adopted	November 2022
Date of next review	November 2025
Version	1
Responsible board	Homes board
Responsible officer	Head of lettings

1. Policy statement and purpose

This Policy sets out our approach to identifying, reviewing and approving applicants for available social or affordable rented homes. This policy is aligned with our Quality Strategy to ensure that it meets our customer standards, achieves value for money and delivers customer satisfaction.

This policy is also aligned with the Regulatory Standards set by the Regulator of Social Housing, specifically the Tenancy Standard:

Homes Plus will let their homes in a fair, transparent and efficient way. We will take into account the housing needs and aspirations of our existing customers and potential customers.

We shall demonstrate how our lettings:

- ◆ Make best use of available housing.
- ◆ Are consistent with the purpose of the housing.
- ◆ Contribute to local authorities' strategic housing function and sustainable communities, including assistance with local authorities' homelessness duties by meeting obligations in nomination agreements and other agreements linked to specific homes.
- ◆ Deliver services to address under-occupation and overcrowding in our homes.
- ◆ Clearly set out the criteria we use for excluding existing and potential customers from being considered for property allocations
- ◆ Are set and developed to deliver allocation processes in a way that helps customers with support needs, those who do not speak English as a first language and others who have difficulties with written English.
- ◆ Have clear application, decision-making and appeals processes.

2. What the policy covers

Homes Plus manages a diverse housing stock predominantly within Staffordshire and Shropshire, working with a range of local councils.

This policy covers all of our social and affordable rented homes, including supported and specialist housing and that we are regulated by the Regulator of Social Housing.

This policy also describes how we allocate Extra Care homes within Staffordshire and Shropshire.

Allocations to homes in certain rural areas (known as Rural Exception sites) are out of scope of this policy. Further information about these homes can be found in our Rural Exception Site Allocations Policy and definition below.

Allocations to specialist supported accommodation for people of working age and market rent properties are also not part of this policy.

Exceptional moves are not part of this policy.

3. Definitions contained in the policy

Affordability Assessment - customers are asked to complete an affordability assessment which enables Homes Plus to assess their personal circumstances to ensure they are able to afford the home and have the opportunity to maintain a successful tenancy.

Applicant – this is the customer who has applied to Homes Plus for a home.

Direct Offer – this is a home offer made directly to an existing customer without the need to advertise. A Direct Offer is only made in exceptional circumstances in line with our Transfer and Exceptional Move Policy.

Housing Register – this is the list of customers who have applied for housing with Homes Plus.

Local Authority – This term is used to refer to the relevant local authority. Homes Plus work with the following local authorities:

- ◆ Cannock Chase District Council
- ◆ Shropshire Council
- ◆ South Staffordshire Council
- ◆ Stafford Borough Council
- ◆ Telford and Wrekin Council

Rural Exception Site - small sites used for affordable housing that would not normally be approved for housing development.

Shortlist – this is the list of customers in priority and date of application order which is put together after a home has been advertised and the advertising cycle has closed.

Verification Process – this is when we check that the details the customer gave on their application form is correct. We also request references from their existing or previous landlord and ask customers to provide identification documents, such as passports, driving licences and proof of benefit entitlement, if necessary.

4. Applying for housing with Homes Plus

To apply for a home with Homes Plus, you must firstly meet the following eligibility criteria:

- ◆ Applicants must be aged 18 years and over to register for housing. However we will consider housing applicants aged 16 – 17 years where applications are received from the relevant local authority.

You may be excluded from housing with Homes Plus if:

- ◆ You own your own home.
- ◆ Any of the criteria described in the 'Decision not to offer a home to an applicant' section of this policy, applies to you or a member of your family.

5. Allocating homes

Applications for housing can be made on-line and support will be provided to applicant's who are unable to complete the application form independently on-line. If applicants are unable to speak English or have other needs that impact their ability to apply for housing with us, we have systems in place to support those customers, which can be tailored to meet their particular need*.

Housing Application

Homes Plus advertises all properties on our website on a weekly advert cycle. Once a housing application has been received, applicants are placed into a priority band according to the answers provided on their housing application form*.

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An application date is set from the date we receive a housing application, or additional supporting evidence. If an applicant is moved into a higher priority banding, the application date will commence from when the higher banding was awarded. If an applicant's priority banding moves to a lower priority, the original application date will remain*.

Applicants are then able to express an interest in homes advertised on our website. Once the advert cycle has closed, a shortlist will be created, and the home will be allocated to the applicant in the highest banding and longest date of application*.

When an applicant has been shortlisted for a home, we will complete a verification process with them. This is to confirm proof of income, housing need and priority on the shortlist before a formal offer of the homes is made.

Internal Transfers

Internal transfers are when existing customers, who have lived in their current home for more than 2 years, need to transfer to another Homes Plus home. Further information can be found in our Internal Transfer and Exceptional Move Policy.

Local Lettings Plans and Sensitive Lets

Occasionally, we may need to introduce a local lettings plan or sensitive let criteria where special circumstances require the specific allocation of a property. When a local letting plan or sensitive let criteria is in place, the successful applicant would need to meet this specific criteria which will be clearly outlined in the property advert.

Exceptional moves

In exceptional circumstances we may make a direct offer of a home to an existing customer outside of the Lettings policy.

More information can be found in our Internal Transfer and Exceptional Move Policy.

Extra Care allocations for people aged over 55

Homes that are allocated by our Care Plus team are called Extra Care homes. These homes are not allocated using this Lettings policy. They are let through an application review panel, which includes the property's Retirement living officer, Social Services and a member of the Care Plus team.

Care Plus reserves the right to allocate Extra Care properties to applicants under the age of 55 years who have a care and support need that can be met within the scheme.

Nominations

We have nomination agreements with all local authorities where we have to accept nominations in compliance with statutory requirements. A 'nomination agreement' sets out how many homes we have to offer to the relevant local authority for them to nominate potential customers.

Section 106 Restrictions

A section 106 (S106) agreement is a planning obligation of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 which outlines restrictions laid down in the planning permission for the current and future use of the affordable homes. For example, a restriction can be put in place to ensure that the affordable homes can only be allocated to people who have an existing or past connection to the local area, where the homes have been built. All S106 restrictions are clearly set out in the property advert.

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6. Making best use of our homes and property eligibility

Bedroom eligibility

When assessing your housing application, we will let you know what type and size of home you will be eligible for.

When we advertise our homes, we will clearly set out any property eligibility restrictions.

The rules below are used by the Department of Work and Pensions when calculating what size home a household is eligible for - this is known as the 'social size criteria'

The social size criteria allows for one bedroom for each of the following:

- ◆ Every adult/couple
- ◆ Any other person aged 16 or over
- ◆ Any two children of the same gender aged under 16
- ◆ Any two children of opposite gender aged under 10
- ◆ Any other child

Please note that unborn babies are not included in this criteria.

In some cases, applicants may require an additional bedroom over and above what they would normally be eligible for under the social size criteria described above. Where this is the case, applicants will be asked to provide further evidence to support their application. Detailed below are the types of evidence that we can accept. Please note that this list is not exhaustive.

Reason for Additional Room	Evidence Accepted
Overnight carer - Where the applicant has a carer who must stay overnight in order to provide the relevant care for no less than three nights a week	Evidence of carers allowance in payment and the requirement of overnight care. We will look at each case based on individual circumstances.
Medical reasons for an adult or child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Occupational Health report ◆ Medical supporting evidence ◆ Evidence of medium/high Personal Independence Payment in place for applicants specifically needing an additional bedroom
Applicant is pregnant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ We undertake an affordability assessment when an expectant mother is over 24 weeks pregnant, to ensure that the customer can afford the larger home prior to the baby being born. ◆ Evidence required would be a copy of the MATB1.
Children residing in the home for 50% of the week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Evidence that child benefit is paid directly to the applicant. ◆ Evidence of a child arrangement order for shared resident parental responsibility

Applicant with children of opposite gender who reach the age of 10 years, which alters the bedroom eligibility.	♦ 3 months before the child reaches their tenth birthday.
Applicant with children of the same gender who reach the age of 16 years, which alters the bedroom eligibility.	♦ 3 months before the child reaches their sixteenth birthday.

Adapted homes

We aim to make the best use of our homes that are adapted to meet mobility needs. We may do this by advertising the property and giving priority to applicants who require the existing adaptations. We may also seek professional advice from the applicant's occupational therapist in order to assess the suitability of a home.

Sometimes adapted homes will be re-classified as specialist supported housing and are therefore, not allocated using this Lettings policy.

Bungalows

Bungalows are allocated to applicants who are 55 years and over. However, if an applicant aged under 55 has identified they need a level access property and provided evidence to support this, they will be considered for this property type.

Sometimes we may under-occupy two-bedroom bungalows where there is no demand from anyone in need of two bedrooms. We will check with the successful applicant that they are able to afford the additional bedroom before a formal offer is made.

Low demand homes

Sometimes, we may not find a suitable applicant for a particular home using our usual methods of advertising. When this happens, we may use other ways such as Moving Soon or social media and these properties are referred to as 'homes available now.'

When this occurs, we will offer the vacant home to the first eligible applicant who has expressed an interest. Sometimes we may under-occupy two-bedroom homes where there is no demand from anyone in need of two bedrooms. We will check with the successful applicant that they are able to afford the additional bedroom before a formal offer is made.

Please view the Making best use of homes and property eligibility section in this policy for further information.

Homes Plus employees and their relatives

Applications from Homes Plus employees or their relatives are entitled to apply for housing and will be assessed in line with this policy and given no preferential treatment. Our Head of Lettings must review all such allocations in accordance with this policy and give their authority for the letting to go ahead.

7. Decision not to offer a home to an applicant

We aim to support customers into housing. However, there will be occasions where we decide we are unable to offer a home to a direct applicant or nomination applicant, either because the property is not suitable or because the applicant is not suitable at that time.

We will consider each applicant's individual circumstances and endeavour to find solutions to barriers to housing, however sometimes we will not be able to offer a home to an applicant. When this

decision has been made, we will let the applicant know and give a full explanation of the reasons behind the decision and what the applicant could do to resolve these issues. The applicant will be given this decision in writing.

This is referred to as being 'ineligible for housing' with us and the applicant will not be considered again for two years from the decision date.

The list below is not exhaustive but provides you with the criteria we will use to help in the decision-making process:

Immigration Status

We are required by law to ensure that all adults 18 years and over have the right to rent and to live in one of our properties. We will verify this either at application stage or at verification stage, prior to formally offering the property to the applicant.

If an applicant has no recourse to public funds (as classified by the Secretary of State), then they will not be able to apply for housing as social housing is classed as a public recourse. If two people are applying as joint applicants and one of those customers has access to public recourse and has the right to rent, then that application will be considered.

Anti-social behaviour

Applications from applicants, members of their household or visitors to their household, who are known perpetrators of unacceptable anti-social behaviour, linked to housing or neighbourhood issues will not be accepted. We will gather evidence and information from all available sources in order to make this decision including, but not limited to, Probation services, social/support workers, Police and previous landlords.

Unspent convictions/sex offenders

Applicants must declare all unspent convictions at the time of application. We will work with the applicant and their probation worker to obtain a risk assessment linked to any unspent convictions.

The applicants housing application will not normally be accepted if:

- ◆ Applicant is considered high risk within the risk assessment
- ◆ Applicant poses a high risk in a certain geographical area of housing
- ◆ Convictions are drug related
- ◆ Convictions are linked to hate crime
- ◆ Offence was committed in a specific locality and there is still an actual or potential threat to the victim and/or community

However, all applications will be considered on an individual basis and the above is not an exhaustive list.

We may, as part of our statutory duty to assist local authorities, consider housing sex offenders.

We will work with relevant agencies to make a full assessment and carefully consider any risks before deciding whether to accept the housing application or offer a home, subject to Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA).

Following a full risk assessment, Homes Plus may either:

- ◆ Allocate the property
- ◆ Allocate the property with controls in place following guidance on the risk assessment
- ◆ Not accept the housing application onto our housing register

Availability of appropriate support

We will work with agencies to ensure our customers have the appropriate support in order for them to sustain their tenancy. We will not offer a home to an applicant who refuses to or has demonstrated that they are unlikely to engage with any support that is put in place.

Each case will be assessed on its individual circumstances.

Home ownership

We would not normally accept an applicant onto our waiting list who own their own home, either in the UK or abroad, including properties owned but rented out.

If a homeowner needs to move as they cannot afford their existing property or have a change in medical circumstances, they will be asked to provide evidence that the proceeds from the sale of their property would be insufficient to purchase alternative suitable accommodation within Homes Plus's areas of operation.

Affordability

As part of our verification process, and before an applicant being offered a property, we will complete an income and expenditure form with them to ensure they are able to sustain the tenancy rent and any relevant service charge payments and still have enough money left to live on.

Applicants will also be asked to pay two weeks rent in advance before the tenancy starts.

We may refuse an offer of a home or reject a nomination if the applicant would have insufficient money to live on after housing costs are paid.

We may withdraw an offer of a home or reject a nomination if the applicant has agreed to pay rent in advance, then fails to do so without exceptional circumstances.

We will offer support and advice to customers with regards to the payment of rent in advance on an individual basis as part of our verification process.

Housing related debt

If an applicant, joint applicants or household members have a housing related debt, which could be rent arrears, re-chargeable repair costs, court costs or any other costs owed to us or another landlord, we will not normally accept their housing application.

We will consider their application if there has been a payment plan in place for no less than 3 months. Individual circumstances of the housing related debt will also be taken into consideration, for example, if the debt was due to financial abuse.

We will not normally re-house an applicant who has a history of sporadic payments to their landlord or when there has been no payment plan in place

Removal of application

Homes Plus reserves the right to refuse or exclude applicants in the following circumstances*:

- ◆ The applicant has provided false, incomplete or misleading information. This includes omitting relevant information, such as a criminal conviction, from their application.
- ◆ Further information about the applicant becomes known, for example anti-social behaviour, which materially affects their application.
- ◆ The applicant has not replied to an annual application review.
- ◆ The applicant has not expressed an interest on a range of properties that it is reasonable to expect the applicant to bid on over a two-year period.

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Appeals

Applicants may appeal our decision:

- ◆ Not to allow them to register with us
- ◆ Not to offer them a home if they feel that all the information they have provided has not been taken into consideration
- ◆ On the banding priority they have been given
- ◆ If they feel they have been unfairly treated.

You must let us know the reasons why you are appealing, within ten working days from the date of notification of the decision not to accept an application or decision not to make an offer of a home.

You can make an appeal either in writing, by calling our customer service centre on **0800 048 8955** or emailing housingappeals@homesplus.co.uk

The Lettings Manager will consider all appeals and will respond in writing within ten working days.

We will not hold homes empty when an appeal is taking place. If the appeal is successful, we will work with the applicant to find an alternative property.

Priority banding

We will award applicants one of four priority bands based on the information provided to us at the time of application, including information provided within the application form and supporting evidence. All applications are assessed on housing and medical need and the four priority bands are outlined in the table below:

Gold Priority / Band A	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Applicants who have been accepted by the Local Authority as unintentionally homeless and are owed a Main Housing Duty under Homeless Legislation e.g., applicants who the council has confirmed are homeless through no fault of their own and in need of priority to secure a home.◆ Where an existing Homes Plus customer is occupying specialist, adapted accommodation and it is no longer required.◆ Where an applicant is awarded urgent medical need, are waiting to be discharged from hospital and their current home is no longer suitable for them to return to.◆ Serving members of the British Armed Forces who will be discharged within three months - or ex members who have been discharged within the previous five years - who have not already secured accommodation.◆ The bereaved spouse or civil partner of those serving in the regular forces has recently ceased or will cease to be entitled to reside in Ministry of Defence accommodation following the death of their spouse or civil partner, and the death was partly or wholly attributable to their service.◆ Existing or former members of the reserve forces who are suffering from a serious injury, illness or disability which is wholly or partly attributable to their service and have a medical need.
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<p>Gold / Band B – The applicant needs to move urgently and can no longer live in their current home</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Where the property is subject to a Prohibition Order from the Local Authority Environmental Health department. ◆ Where an applicant has been awarded high medical priority, defined as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Extreme physical disability requiring care assistance which restricts the customers independence or impedes their ability to live safely making their current property not suitable for their needs. ◆ Instances of mobility support within the customers current home making facilities above ground floor inaccessible. ◆ Where the Local Authority has determined statutory overcrowding in the applicant's current home. ◆ Applicants who need to move due to the threat of domestic abuse as determined by an appropriate agency such as the Police, New Era or Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference. ◆ Victims of crime, in fear or experiencing harassment or threats of violence from outside the home which prevents the individual(s) from remaining in their current property. Supporting evidence will be required.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Applicants who are considered vulnerable by Social Services or any other appropriate support agency supporting a move due to the customers current housing circumstances being unsuitable which is having a detrimental effect on their way of life. Supporting evidence will be required. ◆ Customers who already live in a Homes Plus property who are over-crowded by one or more bedrooms (details of this can be found in the eligibility section of this policy). ◆ Customers who already live in a Homes Plus property who are under-occupying their current property by one or more bedrooms.
<p>Silver / Band C – The applicant's current home is not suitable for their needs, but they are able to stay there whilst they find another home</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Homeless households who have no priority need. ◆ Medium medical priority awarded where the applicant suffers from incapacity or mobility problems, chronic illness or long-term health condition which either prevents them accessing all facilities within the home, or only reaching them with severe difficulty. For example, but not limited to, disabling arthritis, severe asthma or angina preventing them from climbing the stairs inside the home, or steps outside the home. ◆ Where the applicant has to share a kitchen, living room, WC and bathroom with other occupants who are not family members. ◆ Applicants who are not existing Homes Plus customers, who live in properties where there is evidence of overcrowding (details of this can be found in the eligibility section of this policy). ◆ Customers who already live in a Homes Plus property who currently reside in a 2-bed flat above ground floor with no lift access and two children occupying the second bedroom. ◆ Where the applicant needs to receive support from or give support to a close family member. Supporting evidence will be required.

Bronze /

Band D – The applicants current home meets their needs, but they want to move

- ◆ No need to move – None of the priorities above have been identified within the applicant’s housing application.
- ◆ The Local Authority has found the applicant Intentionally homeless and are not owed a full homeless duty, further details can be found in the relevant Local Authority Allocations Policy.



POL001 - v1Nov22