

Allocations and Lettings Policy

Policy ref:	Allocations & Lettings
Policy holder:	Director of Neighbourhoods
Approved by:	Board
Date approved:	November 2018
Effective date:	12 November 2018
Date of next review	November 2021

1. Purpose and anticipated outcomes

We own and manage over 36,000 homes across the South West of England. We know that far more people are in housing need in our region than we have homes available. Our ability to offer housing to people is limited by the number of vacancies that become available, and the size, type and location of these homes. This policy sets out how we will take into account the housing needs of our residents and potential residents, and, how we will work in partnership with Local Authorities to allocate our available homes in a fair and transparent way.

Through this policy we aim to:

- Provide access to affordable, good quality housing for those in housing need who are unable to meet their reasonable housing expectations in the open market,
- Allocate our homes in a fair and transparent way which is easy for our customers to access and understand,
- Provide opportunities for our residents who need more suitable housing to move home,
- Make the best use of our available housing,
- Let tenancies which are sustainable in the long term and contribute to stable and balanced communities,
- Be efficient to minimise the amount of time our homes are empty,
- Assist local authorities with their strategic housing responsibilities and to meet local housing needs,

- Meet our legislative, regulatory and contractual requirements (Including nominations agreements),
- Let homes in line with our charitable objects and the purpose of our housing

2. Scope and definitions

Scope:

This policy explains how we allocate our social and affordable rented homes, including our rented housing for older people. We have other policies which apply to our Supported Housing, Extra Care Schemes, Market and Intermediate Rented Housing, and Home Ownership homes (including leasehold, retirement leasehold and Shared Ownership).

Definitions:

We have included definitions of some of the key terms used in this policy in Appendix A.

3. Routes to a LiveWest home

We currently allocate the majority of our homes through choice-based lettings (CBL) schemes. We believe that a CBL approach is transparent, fair, understood by our customers, and enables those applying for housing with us to best select a home which meets their needs for the long term.

We allocate a proportion of homes to applicants who are nominated by their Local Authority in accordance with the nominations agreements we have, this is usually but not necessarily through a local CBL scheme.

Where we are members of a local CBL partnership, we generally choose to advertise and allocate our homes which are not subject to nominations agreements through the CBL scheme.

A small proportion of homes available for re-letting may be allocated through alternative routes. These include direct matches of existing residents to vacancies to meet their emergency or priority housing needs that cannot be met or met quickly enough through the CBL route. Moves for LiveWest customers in this way are approved by a senior manager.

We will not normally keep separate waiting lists, but we may maintain records of our customers needing emergency or priority moves as described above or records of people seeking housing in areas of where we have low demand.

We may at times have referral agreements with other agencies to support a short or long term need outside of CBL for example Housing First which is a scheme where we provide homes for rough sleepers.

For some homes we have specific referral arrangements with external agencies, for example our “seaside and country homes” are available to older people who are relocating or other specialist schemes available to ex-military personnel.

Very occasionally where there is a lower level of demand for our homes we use alternative methods of advertising such as an estate agent, signboard or marketing on external property websites.

Whichever route you use to apply for a LiveWest home, including making an application through an approved CBL scheme, you will always need to demonstrate that you meet our eligibility criteria.

Local authority nominations:

Local authorities have nomination rights over a large number of our homes in accordance with historic stock transfer agreements or grant funding for new developments.

We ensure that the relevant proportion of our vacant homes are let to households nominated by local authorities under the agreed nomination arrangements.

Where agreed with the local authority, lettings advertised and completed through CBL, are regarded as equivalent to local authority nominations.

Employees, Board Members and their relatives:

All applicants are asked to declare if they have a significant personal relationship with, are related to, or are a LiveWest Board member or employee.

We may provide accommodation to you if you have a significant personal relationship with, are related to or, are a LiveWest Board member or employee, where;

- you are in housing need and meet the allocations criteria,
- you applied for housing through your local authority (we are unable to consider direct applications),
- you receive exactly the same consideration as any other applicant,
- you have no involvement or influence over the allocation decision.

Close scrutiny will apply to all potential allocations and any allocations will require impartial review and Executive Director level approval.

4. Eligibility

If you apply for a LiveWest home you will need to demonstrate to us that you meet our eligibility criteria.

To be eligible for our homes you will need to-

- Be in housing need and find it difficult to access privately rented housing or to buy a home because, for example, because of your low income, or other personal circumstances.
- Demonstrate that you are ready and willing to fulfil the obligations of the tenancy, including those to pay the rent on time and respect the property and neighbourhood.
- Show us that you can afford the rent, taking account of your income, benefit entitlements and financial commitments.
- Be willing to accept and engage with support if it is considered necessary to enable you to sustain the tenancy and pay for it.
- Be suitable for the vacancy in terms of your age, household composition, past tenancy history and any vulnerabilities.
- Usually be at least 18 years old. In exceptional circumstances we will let homes to people aged 16 or 17 who have a trustee and where possible, a guarantor.
- Have the mental capacity to enter into a tenancy agreement and if not, have someone with the relevant Power of Attorney who can support you in making this decision.
- Be habitually resident and have the “right to rent” in the UK.
- Not be excluded from holding a tenancy due to your immigration status. We may reject your application where you have an immigration restriction alternatively we may offer you a shorthold tenancy if your claim to residence is still under investigation.

Home owners:

If you own a home either by yourself or jointly with others, you will only be eligible for our rented housing where you can demonstrate that you can no longer sustain home ownership for financial or health reasons or where your age or disability means that you require a particular type of housing or support which is not available in the private sector. If this applies, you will be expected to be actively selling your existing home.

5. Assessment and allocation

We want all of our customers to have a long and successful tenancy with us. When you apply for a home we will assess your eligibility and whether there is any risk that you will not be able to sustain your tenancy or pay your rent. Our assessment will include reviewing your previous tenancy history and we will normally ask you to provide a reference to support your application. We will also ask you to complete an affordability assessment. You will need to demonstrate to us that you can afford to make regular rent and service charge payments and will be expected to provide information to support your assessment.

If you need care and support to sustain your tenancy we will check that this is available to you. If you need support but do not have this in place we will try and help you get this. You will need to show us that you are willing to engage with the care and support offered.

We will provide support and guidance as part of the assessment where necessary.

Unsuccessful applications:

There are some reasons why we may not be able to offer you a home. If we are not satisfied that you have a reasonable chance of sustaining the tenancy, with or without appropriate support, we will decline your application. We will only do so after fully considering your individual circumstances. We will explain our reasons for our decision and provide advice on what you can do to bid successfully for our homes in the future. You can find out more about the reasons why we might decline your application in the additional guidance which accompanies this policy.

If your application is unsuccessful we will give you advice on how you can ask us to change our decision. We are generally unable to hold homes vacant during the appeals process. If we change our decision but the original home is no longer available we will offer you the next available suitable home.

6. Making best use of our housing

The type of home we offer you:

We will generally offer you a home which meets the size needs of your household.

If you are applying through CBL you will have your property size determined by the Local Authority. In general, we will make offers of accommodation based on the local authority assessment and under-occupation room rate (“bedroom tax”) criteria. If you are expecting another child we will take this into account.

Except in the circumstances set out below we will not normally offer you a home bigger or smaller than you need and/or where you will be affected by the housing benefit under-occupation deduction (“the bedroom tax”).

Some of the circumstances where we may offer you a home which is outside of the current size and type guidelines include:

- You are downsizing from a larger home,
- You are an existing tenant and need a larger family home of a type which is currently available and you have asked us to consider an offer that improves your current living circumstances e.g. you are in a 2-bedroom home and have a 5 bedroom need and you have asked us to consider you for an available 4-bedroom home.
- It is standard practice for the property type concerned, for example schemes of two bedroom bungalows that are designated for people over 60, or
- There is a local lettings plan in place, or where our own residents need to move and there are either serious health, social or disability issues and/or the liability for the under-occupation room rate will end within a short period -for example because you are approaching pension credit age or you have a child nearing age of 10 or
- To rebalance and stabilise a community with high turnover we may offer some homes to families with mixed sex children who would, or ordinarily look for larger housing within 3 years of the tenancy starting.
- There is low/no demand for the home from other households who would meet the occupation size and type criteria.
- There is low demand for the home and you are a separated parent who has regular care responsibilities and this is having a significant impact on the health and well-being of your child(ren).

Our adapted homes:

Where one of our homes has been significantly adapted for the needs of a disabled person, we will try to let the property to a person or household that requires the aids and adaptations. However we recognise that the specific nature of many adaptations and individual customer needs may mean that re-use is not always possible.

We will offer homes that may require new or further adaptations before your household moves in. You will need to demonstrate that the tenancy will be sustainable for you through an Occupational Health Officers assessment and that the adaptations funding will be available. We expect the tenancy to be taken up from the offer date and are unable to hold offers open pending the completion of the adaptations.

Creating sustainable and balanced communities:

Some of our homes, particularly those that are newly built or those in rural areas, have planning, legal or funding restrictions, known as Section 106 agreements that give priority to local people. We let these homes in line with the agreements that are in place.

In some circumstances we will also agree a local lettings plan for a neighbourhood. Our local lettings plans may give preference to particular customer groups depending on the needs of that locality. Our local lettings plans are time-limited and help to ensure our neighbourhoods are great places to live.

We may apply specific criteria to the allocation of an individual home to avoid concentrations of similar household types in one block or part of an estate or to avoid lifestyle clashes. Our aim is to deliver a sustainable tenancy through the best possible fit between a person's housing needs and the home they are offered and giving consideration to the interests of the wider community.

7. Existing Customers Who Need to Move

We offer advice to our existing residents who wish to move home, whether to another social housing property, into the private rented sector or through home ownership.

We will take every opportunity to explain the requirements in respect of property condition, the need to have a clear rent account and no current tenancy breaches before looking for a move; for example during tenancy visits and when you contact us for advice on how to move.

Where you ask we will support you with any housing applications by helping with paperwork, access to IT and where appropriate providing supporting information to CBL schemes.

We want to provide choice to existing residents wanting to move for employment, family, social and domestic reasons or to give or receive support across our area of operation. As well as advertising some vacancies each year through CBL as priority for our residents wanting to move, we support our residents in finding mutual exchanges through our membership of a national exchange scheme.

If you have applied for a transfer because a disability has made your current home unsuitable, we will work with you and other agencies to see whether adapting your home might offer a better long-term solution than a move.

If your relationship has broken down we will give you advice on applying to your local or other CBL schemes. We will not normally make a direct offer of alternative accommodation to the person leaving the property.

If you are a survivor of domestic abuse we will provide you with advice on your housing options. We will work with you to find an option where you can feel safe in your home. This may include supporting a CBL application, considering a direct match to another home and/or giving advice on retaining your tenancy. We may consider assisting with temporary or alternative accommodation for the perpetrator of the abuse, where this is supported by other agencies, and where they agree to move out so that your children have the stability of staying in their family home.

Appendix A – Definitions

Housing Need - We consider applicants to be in Housing Need if they:

- Are homeless or threatened with homelessness, or living in accommodation which is temporary or occupied on insecure terms, or
- Live in unsatisfactory living conditions for example the home is in disrepair, or
- Live in a home which is no longer suitable for the household for example overcrowding, under occupying, household's mobility needs which cannot be met in the current home, or
- Need to move because the current home is unaffordable for the household, or
- Need move to provide or receive care or take up an offer of employment.

Choice based lettings (CBL) - is an approach to letting homes which aims to give prospective residents more control over the lettings process, and make the process of getting a Local Authority or housing association home more transparent. Rather than homes being allocated directly by the local authority or association, choice based lettings allow residents and prospective residents to bid for the available properties they are interested in. Priority Bands are used to assess relative housing need. Available homes are advertised on a cycle, allowing applicants to see what local authority or housing association housing is available.

Nomination Agreement – is a legal agreement between LiveWest and a local authority which sets out how vacant homes will be let. A nominations agreement gives the local authority the right to use a percentage of LiveWest's homes that become vacant to house those in housing need from their housing lists.

Section 106 agreement – When new homes are developed special planning criteria may set out how the homes will be allocated in the future. This legal agreement between LiveWest and a Local Authority may give priority to particular groups of applicants. This could be to applicants who have a Local Connection to a particular area/parish or may be applicants within certain age range for example over 55 years of age.

Right to rent – Under the Immigration Act we have to check that all occupants of any new tenancy we let have the legal right to rent a home in the UK. We will do this when we assess applications. We will need to see original documents for each member of the household over the age of 18 and depending on the immigration status we may need to retain copies of these.

Local Lettings Plan - Is a time limited plan for the allocation and letting of homes within a specific Neighbourhood. A local lettings plan allows us to be more flexible in allocating homes to meet specific local issues. We include additional criteria which are considered when allocating homes, for example, we may under-occupy property, where there are concerns about density levels to achieve a balanced community or include criteria that aim to reduce the likelihood of anti-social behaviour. Where we agree local lettings plans we will do this in consultation with our partners and publish details of the additional criteria when we advertise a vacant home. In addition, for individual homes we may adopt a 'sensitive lettings' approach which exclude some customers from being considered. We will do this to manage specific issues, such as lifestyle clashes or where a property has become vacant following a period of serious nuisance or anti-social behaviour.

Appendix B – Reasons for refusals

Affordability

Whilst we will always take everyone's individual circumstances into account, we are unlikely to be able offer a home where:

- The applicant does not complete our affordability assessment or we identify that they have provided false information.
- The assessment shows that the applicant is unlikely to be able to meet and sustain the rent payments.
- The applicant owes rent, mortgage or other housing debts.
- The applicant has a history of making erratic or late payments to a previous landlord.
- The applicant has only recently cleared arrears or housing debt in order to be considered for another home.
- The applicant has previously been evicted from their home for rent arrears.

Anti-Social or Unacceptable Behaviour:

We will not usually offer a home where an applicant or a member of their household has a history of anti-social or unacceptable behaviour. When we consider this we will take into account, the extent of the anti-social behaviour and the impact it had on the local community, the length of time since this behaviour occurred, what has been done to change the behaviour and how they have conducted any subsequent tenancies they have held. We will not be able to offer a tenancy unless we have a reasonable belief that an applicant is now able to sustain a tenancy with us without behaving in an anti-social or unacceptable way.

Criminal Offences

We may not offer a home where an applicant or a member of their household has been convicted of a serious criminal offence that has not been spent or has been charged and is currently awaiting trial – we will undertake a risk assessment to determine whether we are able to offer a home. We will not be able to offer a home if our risk assessment suggests that there is a threat/risk to other customers, our staff or the community or where there is a risk of further offences which would be a breach of the tenancy.

Higher earners

We are unlikely to offer someone a home if they can afford to make their own arrangements in the private sector. We set a higher earners limit. We will usually only offer a home if the household's gross income (before tax) is below this limit. Our higher earnings limit will be reviewed periodically. If the household income is over these amounts we'll consider whether the applicant/s have sufficient financial resources to meet their own housing need, before deciding whether to offer a home. We'll take into account whether a Local Authority would have a duty to the household under homelessness legislation and the other eligibility criteria outlined in this policy.

Illegal use

We will not usually offer a home where an applicant or a member of their household has a conviction for using their home or allowing it to be used for illegal purposes such as drug dealing or where they or a member of their household has been arrested and charged for a serious offence that may lead to a custodial sentence and is awaiting trial.

Tenancy fraud

We will not usually offer a home where an applicant or a member of their household has a conviction for tenancy fraud or where legal action for tenancy fraud has been taken in respect of a previous tenancy. This includes action where a tenancy has been obtained or there has been an attempt to obtain a tenancy by deception, for example, by withholding information or by giving false or misleading information.

Unacceptable behaviour towards LiveWest staff

We have a duty of care to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of our employees and those who provide services alongside us. This means that we are unlikely to offer a home where an applicant or a member of their household has been verbally or physically abusive towards any LiveWest member of staff.

Other reasons for rejecting an applicant or refusing to make a tenancy offer include but not limited to:

- Where the assessment indicates a high risk that the tenancy will not be successfully sustained.
- Where the applicant has a joint tenancy elsewhere or included in a mortgage agreement.
- Relevant document not supplied to confirm identification and/or financial checks etc.
- No right to reside in the UK.
- Lack of mental capacity to understand the rights and obligations of such tenancy unless they have someone with the relevant Power of Attorney who can support them in making this decision.