

MERLIN HOUSING SOCIETY



LETTINGS POLICY

1 KEY OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 Merlin Housing Society (MHS) aims to provide good quality housing at affordable rents to those in housing need.
- 1.2 We will aim to make the most effective use of our housing stock by allocating homes that meet applicants' needs in terms of location, size and facilities, whilst giving priority to those who are in the greatest housing need in accordance with our registered, charitable objectives.
- 1.3 Housing need will be determined according to a person's eligibility for an allocation of housing and on their current housing circumstances using South Gloucestershire Council's points allocation system.
- 1.4 We will give reasonable preference to certain categories of household, including people who are owed a main homelessness duty as determined by the local authority; people living in poor, overcrowded, temporary or insecure accommodation; and people who have a need for settled accommodation due to ill-health or welfare considerations.
- 1.5 Taking account of peoples' needs both collectively and individually, we wish to create and develop stable and sustainable communities where there are good prospects that tenancies will be maintained in a reasonably economic and self-governing manner in the long term.

Also refer to the following associated documents: Empty Property Management (Voids) Policy, Tenancy Management and Housing Needs and Development Policy.

2 KEY POLICY STANDARDS

2.1 Lettings principles

- 2.1.1 Lettings for the majority of our vacant properties will be made from the local authority's housing register by means of formal nomination agreements as set out in the transfer agreement.
- 2.1.2 South Gloucestershire Council's housing register will include MHS's own transfer applicants whose applications will be assessed in accordance with the points system.
- 2.1.3 We will agree with the local authority the percentage of lettings that are made to applicants in the following groups:

- mainstream housing applicants;
- applicants who have been approved as homeless by the local authority;
- Merlin Housing transfer applicants;
- applicants with a connection to the area/parish in which they are housed (e.g 106 agreements).

2.1.4 In allocating our property we will work with relevant statutory and voluntary agencies to assess and manage the risks associated with housing vulnerable or disadvantaged people to ensure wherever possible that adequate support is provided to enable a tenancy to succeed.

2.1.5 We will participate in recognised national schemes that help people to move from one part of the country to another and where such moves may involve our tenants and/or our properties. We will encourage and support mutual exchanges in accordance with our Mutual Exchange and Succession Policy.

2.1.6 We aim to offer opportunities for the exercise of choice to applicants and tenants in respect of their preferences in terms of a property's location, type and any other particular features or adaptations.

2.1.7 We will classify properties that become available for letting as follows:

- houses, flats and maisonettes that are suitable for families;
- houses, flats, studios and maisonettes that are not suitable for families;
- sheltered flats and bungalows for single people and couples over 60 years;
- non-sheltered bungalows
- Adapted properties

2.1.8 In consultation with the local authority MHS may designate an area or estate or specific location as exempt from the normal allocation policy in order to make best use of available stock and/or to contribute to the creation of a balanced and sustainable community.

2.2 Eligibility

2.2.1 Applications to join the housing register will generally be accepted from anyone from within the European Economic Area who is habitually resident in the UK, the Channel islands, the Isle of Man or the Republic of Ireland and also from others from elsewhere except those who are subject to immigration control unless exempted by regulations laid down by the Secretary of State.

2.3 Assessment of applications

2.3.1 Eligible applications will be categorised according to the bedroom need and property type requirements of each household.

2.3.2 Eligible applications will be assessed for housing need and prioritised in accordance with South Gloucestershire Council's points allocation system.

2.3.3 Where an applicant is known to owe arrears of rent or other charges to MHS or owes a debt to another social housing provider, the application will normally be

classed as having low priority. In exceptional circumstances an applicant may be accepted if:

- There is no valid court order
- The debt is under £250 and an agreement has been made and kept for at least 12 weeks.

2.3.4 In the interests of enhancing community safety and the social well-being of neighbourhoods, no offer of accommodation will normally be made where the applicant (or any other person included on the housing application) has previously been convicted of, or evicted for, anti-social behaviour including drug related offences, harassment or violence and are therefore considered to be unsuitable to be a tenant of MHS. Where someone can demonstrate that they have conducted a subsequent tenancy satisfactorily or behaved acceptably for a sufficient period of time (at least 12 months) a fresh application will be considered.

2.3.5 In cases where concerns exist about the applicant's previous anti-social behaviour, the Head of Housing Services may authorise the inclusion of such additional reasonable conditions in the tenancy agreement as appear appropriate to protect the tenancy and the community.

2.4 Updating information

2.4.1 Applicants should contact either MHS or the Council about a change in their circumstances (eg. increase in family, change of address) or to enquire about any other aspect of their housing application.

2.4.2 All applications (including tenants wishing to transfer) will be reviewed at least annually to determine if there have been any unreported/unrecorded changes in circumstances and to confirm that the applicant wishes to remain on the housing register.

2.5 The letting process

2.5.1 When a property is known to be available for letting we will ask the local authority to provide one suitable nomination as determined by means of the points allocation system.

2.5.2 We will make an offer of accommodation to the applicant provided this does not unreasonably compromise the objectives and principles of our lettings policy.

2.5.3 Applicants will be entitled to two "reasonable offers" of suitable accommodation. We consider a "reasonable offer" to be a property suitable in size and type for the applicant's household, within their preferred locations as indicated on their application form.

2.5.4 Where it is possible and appropriate to do so we will accompany all applicants when viewing the property they have been offered.

- 2.5.5 Additional offers of housing will only be made if there are exceptional circumstances or to ensure efficient management of the housing stock.
- 2.5.6 We will sometimes allocate vacant properties for “management reasons” to a tenant affected by property redevelopment work or where substantial major repairs need to be carried out; or when a tenant has succeeded to a property which is too large for their needs and they are not entitled to stay in it. Such moves will be authorised by the Neighbourhood Services Manager.
- 2.5.7 In the best interests of housing management in exceptional circumstances as approved by the Head of Housing Services we may grant or withhold a tenancy or transfer to a particular person/household.
- 2.5.8 Applicants who have knowingly provided false or misleading information, withheld information, or did not inform the Society or the Council of material changes and obtained a tenancy from MHS may be subject to eviction proceedings.

2.6 Transfer applicants

2.6.1 Generally we will make no offer of re-housing where:

- there are current arrears of rent;
- any other debt is owed to MHS or any other social housing provider;
- there is any other proven breach of tenancy, including nuisance behaviour and/or domestic violence;
- the tenant is subject to a Notice of Seeking Possession, Court Order or other legal action against their tenancy;
- the property is not in a satisfactory condition due to tenant misuse.

In exceptional circumstances applicants maybe considered for transfer, each case will be considered taking into account all relevant factors.

2.6.2 In order to promote the best use of our housing stock and in accordance with the scheme of assessment we aim, subject to 2.6.1, to re-house single people and/or couples who are occupying family properties more appropriately, and we offer a Tenants’ Incentive Scheme to encourage such moves.

2.7 Employees and Board Members

2.7.1 Applications for accommodation from employees, or relatives of employees, will be assessed in the same way as other applications.

2.7.2 If an employee or their relative/s are eligible for re-housing by virtue of housing need, the application will be referred to the MHS Board for approval to allocate a property.

2.7.3 The Chief Executive shall ensure, in consultation with the Chair of the Services Committee, that all aspects of the application are in order. Arrangements will be put in place to ensure that the employee/s concerned shall have no involvement in the lettings process.

2.7.4 Lettings to a Board Member (and/or their relatives) who were not already tenants of MHS at the time of their election/appointment to the Board shall only be permitted in accordance with the exemptions permitted by the Housing Corporation in pursuance of Schedule 1 of the Housing Act 1996, i.e. those nominated by the local authority as homeless or relatives of Board member with special needs.

2.7.5 Ex-residential employees will qualify for re-housing in the following circumstances:

- a) When after at least two years' continuous service they:
 - 1. Retire; or
 - 2. Resign by service notice; or
 - 3. Are made redundant;
- b) Or after any length of service they: are no longer required to live on-site and this requirement is removed from their contract of employment.

2.7.6 This right will not apply where:

2.7.6.1 The employee owns residential property (excluding mobile homes) elsewhere, whether or not it is currently let; or

2.7.6.2 Their financial circumstances are such that they could reasonably buy a property suitable to their need in South Gloucestershire. In order to ascertain this, employees will have to provide details of their household's earnings, outgoings and capital, and this will be assessed against the market price for properties of the relevant size in South Gloucestershire to establish whether the employee would be able to obtain a mortgage.

2.7.6.3 In the case of any dispute under paragraph 2.7.6.2 the employee will have the right to have the decision reviewed by the Head of Housing Services. If the matter remains in dispute, the employee shall have a further right to have the decision reviewed by the Appeals Panel of the Services Committee.

2.7.7 Employees who qualify will be offered accommodation suitable for their needs in a reasonable choice of area. Resident Scheme Managers will not be offered re-housing in the scheme in which they have been working.

2.8 Complaints

2.8.1 Applicants who feel that they have been unfairly treated or that their housing application has been incorrectly assessed are able to follow our Complaints Procedure. Applicants may also ask for a review under part VI of the Housing Act 1996.

3. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

- 3.1.1 We will ensure that this policy is applied fairly and consistently to all our customers. We will not directly or indirectly discriminate against any person or group of people because of their race, religion, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, disability or any other grounds set out in our Equality and Diversity policy.
- 3.1.2 When applying this policy we will act sensitively towards the diverse needs of individuals and communities.
- 3.1.3 When applying this policy we will take positive action to reduce discrimination and harassment in local communities.
- 3.1.4 This policy and any other related publications of MHS are available on request in other formats (e.g. in an alternative language, in Braille, on tape, in large type).

4. KEY TARGETS AND PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

- Housing Corporation Regulatory Code, Housing Corporation inspection outcomes and Key Lines of Enquiry excellence standards
- Comparative benchmarking performance and performance indicators published by the Housing Corporation and other examples of best practice
- Compliance with relevant Audit Commission Requirements
- Percentage of dwellings vacant and available for let
- Average re-let times for dwellings
- Rent lost through dwellings being vacant
- Percentage of lettings to BME tenants
- Percentage of MHS transfers

5. MONITORING, CONSULTATION AND REVIEW

- The Board and the Housing Corporation will receive regular reports on the performance against agreed targets and indicators.
- In line with our Resident Involvement Policy tenants, leaseholders and other stakeholders will be included in:
 - monitoring our performance and
 - reviewing this policy in order to reflect their needs and priorities
- Further details about how this will be achieved are set out the Resident Involvement Policy and Agreement.
- This Policy will be subject to review in relation to the development of Choice Based Lettings in partnership with South Gloucestershire Council.

VERSION CONTROL AND APPROVAL DATES

Version no.	Name and date
1	Emma Lucker – June 2006

2	Policy Panel 01.08.06 and 22.08.06
3	Policy Panel – 18.12.06
4	Chris Knight, August 2007

Approval stage	Date completed
ITA	07.08.06
Tenant Advisory Panel	07.08.06
Union consultation	02.08.06
Board approval	28.09.06
Revised at Services Committee	23.8.07
Housing Corporation approval	
Review date	