

Lettings Policy

(General Needs, Sheltered, Housing with Care)



Review lead / author name and job title	Director of Customers		
Consultation process	Tenant Committee Jan 2026	Distribution and training	Website
Last reviewed	February 2026	Next planned review	February 2029
Approved by and date	Customer and Homes Committee 4 th February 2026		
Change record			
Version no	Nature of change	Last approved	Approval
1	Approved	July 2017	Operations Committee
2	Approved	November 2019	Operations Committee
3	Approved	February 2023	Operations Committee
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1. Introduction

As a Charitable Housing Association, we have a duty to ensure our homes are allocated to people in housing need in ways which are fair, accountable and make the best use of our housing stock. We also aim to provide high quality information to applicants and to assist people with support needs in seeking housing. Our policy is guided by current legislation and by the Regulator for Social Housing's Regulatory Standards. This policy applies to our General Needs, Sheltered and Housing with Care housing stock.

2. Applying for Housing

We do not keep our own waiting lists for housing. As a member of the Home-Link Choice Based Lettings Scheme operating across the Cambridge sub-region, and the HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme for Uttlesford, we let all general needs and sheltered homes by advertising them through these schemes, except in a small minority of cases.

If you wish or need to move home, we are committed to supporting you particularly if you need additional support. We will advise you on housing options, and in particular support you if you are a CHS tenant in making the best of your options.

3. The Home-Link Scheme

To use the Home-Link scheme you need to apply directly to HomeLink via its website. The local authority dealing with your application will place it in one of four bands of housing need, depending on your circumstances. Uttlesford District Council's HomeOption scheme is very similar to Home-Link. We agree to let our properties in accordance with the local authorities' lettings policies.

Available homes are clearly labelled to state who can be considered for them. To be considered for a home, you must make a 'bid' via the scheme's website. After the advertising period closes, a shortlist of eligible applicants is produced. The shortlist identifies the order of applicants based on who has been in the highest housing needs band for the longest time. Further details are set out in our lettings procedures including the steps we take to prevent tenancy fraud. Feedback on all lettings is available to you from HomeLink so you can use this information to make realistic choices on your housing options.

We will usually offer the tenancy to the bidder placed first on the shortlist, except in the circumstances set out below or where the property is unsuitable (e.g. too large or too small, or you are not in the age category required). As soon as the shortlist is available we make contact with the top bidder to confirm their details, collect information needed to take up references and arrange a home visit or viewing. If there is any doubt that this will result in a letting, we usually contact those placed second/third on the shortlist to avoid delay.

A **direct let** occurs when a HomeLink managing organisation (South Cambs. DC, Clarion Housing Group, Cambridge City Council, Sanctuary Housing Association, Huntingdonshire DC, West Suffolk DC), or Home Choice in Uttlesford DC, requests that an empty home be offered to an applicant they have identified directly, rather than the property being advertised.

4. Local Lettings Policies

In certain rural schemes there are legal agreements under section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended) which means that people having an existing connection with the immediate area have priority to be housed there. These are advertised with this requirement and the local connection of those on the shortlist is checked and if necessary discussed with the relevant Local Authority.

We may also operate a "Local Lettings Plan" to encourage sustainable communities. For example, we let one group of studio flats to women only and often aim to have a range of children's ages within a newly built scheme. We will ensure that this is clear in any Home-Link advertisement so that you can make the most appropriate bids. Such local policies may also permit letting some properties to smaller households than would usually occupy them, in order to prevent long re-let times. See paragraph 7 below for more detail on the approach to under- occupation.

5. Other Nomination Agreements

For some rural schemes nomination rights are held by Parish Councils (and occasionally independent charities) in addition to the local authority, to help meet local housing needs. We will agree with the parish council/charity how its nomination rights will be used – through the Home-Link system, or by direct nomination. Where parish councils hold their own waiting lists to be used for nomination, we ask them to promote this within the parish to ensure equality of access.

We reserve the right to decline your nomination if you would not otherwise have qualified under our policy.

6. Who qualifies for Housing (General Needs and Sheltered homes)

We apply the Allocations policies of the local authorities in which we operate. The local authorities assess housing applications and decide what housing needs band they should be placed in. The Bands for the HomeLink sub-regional scheme are:

Band A: Urgent Need (urgent medical, overcrowding, homeless, urgent multiple needs, under-occupying by two or more bedrooms)

Band B: High Need (high medical, harassment/violence/abuse, lacking one bedroom, homelessness prevention, under-occupancy by 1 bedroom)

Band C: Medium Need (medium medical, social reasons, shared facilities, homeless and not in priority need)

Band D: Low housing need / financially able to resolve housing need

We will not normally make an offer to you if :

- a) You are unable to sustain a tenancy without additional support and are unable to obtain a commitment from an outside body to provide that support
- b) You have outstanding housing debts to CHS, another Social Housing Provider or Local Authority or private landlord unless you have kept to an agreement to pay such debts for a reasonable period. An exception may be made for you if you have a housing-related debt as a result of experiencing domestic abuse or where rent arrears were the result of housing benefit / housing allowance being reduced as a result of under-occupation which will no longer be an issue once you move
- c) You have seriously breached the terms of your current or previous tenancy with CHS or another landlord (e.g. nuisance, anti-social behaviour, harassment, drug use / dealing or other illegal use of the property) or been engaged in behaviour (e.g. criminal) that increases risk to our existing tenants or our homes. Consideration will be given to how long ago the incidents occurred, any mitigating factors, how you have managed your tenancy since and whether your circumstances have changed significantly
- d) You do not have a local connection with the village or parish, where that is required by formal agreements with local authorities. In these cases, the applicant with a lower priority on the shortlist but having the required local connection may be offered the property
- e) You are likely to be dependent on housing benefit/Universal Credit to meet your rent payments, and such benefit would be reduced as a result of under-occupation, and you do not have the means to meet the shortfall (see para 7 below for more detail).

7. Under-occupation

The Welfare Reform Act 2012 introduced a provision where occupiers claiming housing benefit/Universal Credit will have such benefit reduced if they are deemed to under-occupy the home. It is not our policy to allocate properties that you cannot afford.

We will not normally permit under-occupation from the start of a tenancy but in exceptional circumstances where it is known that certain properties tend to generate low demand and no more suitable applicant has been identified, we may consider your application if you would under-occupy the home, in order to avoid long re-let times. In these circumstances we will complete a financial assessment before making an offer to ensure that you have adequate financial arrangements in place to pay rent and service charges and /or the shortfall in benefit is temporary (e.g. a child is due to become 16).

When you are a new tenant our Money Matters team will contact you to offer advice which may help with the costs of moving and settling in, and an overall financial healthcheck.

Where the pre-tenancy contact by the Housing Officer raises concerns about affordability or resources (e.g. with furnishings) the Money Matters team involvement will be brought forward to a date before the tenancy begins, in case assistance can be given to help you with moving in e.g. an application for financial or other types of support.

Any new tenancy includes a condition that we may seek possession if the property is under-occupied by two or more bedrooms and that suitable alternative accommodation is available to the tenant. Where there is such under-occupation we will work closely with you to find suitable alternative accommodation, however if you decline to move we may seek possession to make the best use of housing stock. You will have the right to request a review of the reasonableness of such a decision within 14 days of receiving a Notice of Seeking Possession, which will be considered by one of our Directors.

8. Transfers

If you are one of our existing tenants and wish to move, you should register with HomeLink (or Uttlesford District Council). The Banding system works in the same way as for other applicants. Our support for you as our tenant includes helping you to present supporting information to local authorities who manage waiting lists, offering advice on how to access HomeLink information and how to place bids, and providing information on seeking suitable mutual exchanges.

Exceptionally we may carry out a management transfer for you as one of our tenants if there is an urgent need, without advertising within the Home-Link system. The criteria for urgent management transfers are set out in the separate Management Transfers & Direct Lets Procedure and include the need to escape domestic abuse; severe harassment; serious threat of violence or injury; the impact of a severe medical condition, or your home becoming uninhabitable due to an incident such as a fire.

If you are a resident of one of our supported housing schemes and you are ready to move into more independent accommodation, we may offer you a tenancy where there is unlikely to be an opportunity to move through HomeLink within 6 months.

We take at least 50% of our new tenants of publicly funded homes as nominees from the Local Authorities' waiting lists; the proportion is usually much higher. Most of our schemes have an agreed percentage of nomination rights (i.e. the proportion of lettings which will be made to nominees). By using the HomeLink scheme we ensure that we meet these obligations as all applicants registered with Home-Link have the opportunity to express an interest in the homes we advertise. However, where a local authority nomination would not be due, we may advertise a vacancy as being available only if you hold a tenancy with a member landlord and wish to transfer. This increases the opportunity for our tenants to move and may be a tool to improve tenancy sustainability in an identified scheme.

9. Mutual Exchanges

If you are an existing Assured/Secure general needs tenants of ours you have the right to exchange homes with another tenant, whose landlord may be another Registered Social Landlord or a local Authority. Both landlords must give permission for the exchange, which can only be refused for certain reasons (e.g. property size, or there is a s.106 agreement that requires the incoming tenant to have a local connection). This is a particularly useful option if you do not qualify as a high priority for a transfer. We subscribe to the national "HOMESWAPPER" scheme for mutual exchanges so that it is free for you as our tenant to use. Home-Link also has its own free mutual exchange matching service that offers help finding exchanges across the country. There is a separate policy on managing mutual exchanges.

10. Housing with Care schemes Allocations

Housing with Care schemes allocations are not managed through the HomeLink scheme. All prospective tenants must apply via the Cambridgeshire Extra Care Allocations Panel using our Housing with Care Housing Application Form. The form collects information about your housing and care needs.

The Allocation Panel is organised and managed by the Cambridge City & South Cambridgeshire Locality Team and includes social landlords and care providers of all Extra Care schemes in Cambridgeshire, Adult Social Care representatives and Local Authority Housing representatives.

We attend in our capacity as a social landlord and as a care provider for Richard Newcombe Court, Dunstan Court and Moorlands Court. You must be aged 55 or over and have both a care and a housing need, evidenced by a care grid from your local Social Services team. While all applicants who fulfil these criteria will be considered for Housing with Care housing, those with a local connection to Cambridge City or South Cambridgeshire will be considered as higher priority.

Exceptionally, we will offer tenancies outside of the Allocations Panel process if no nominations are forthcoming from the Panel and we have vacant flats. These offers require agreement by our Service Manager for Supported Housing.

If there are multiple applications for one of our flats, the Housing with Care Service Manager will consider the dependency of the prospective tenants (for example the need for ground floor, or hoist / double-up care) and assess whether their needs can be met by the care team. Unsuccessful applicants are contacted by the Locality Team and may be offered a placement at an alternative Extra Care scheme. We will keep a record of the reason for not offering a tenancy.

11. False Information

If you are found to have given false information to raise your position on a shortlist, your application will be bypassed, and the local authority will be informed. If you have already been housed after giving false information we may seek to evict you using the ground for possession introduced in section 102 of the Housing Act 1996.

12. Pets

Where you are being considered and tell us you have pets that would require our consent to keep at your new home (see criteria set out in our Housing Management Policy), officers will discuss whether such permission is likely to be given – we may not make you an offer if consent would not be given (e.g. flats with no external access) and you indicate you would not give up your pet.

13. Equality and Diversity

We are intent on fairness and transparency when considering housing applications and allocating housing. We monitor lettings by ethnic origin and review these annually in line with the percentage of ethnic diversity of applications to Home-Link. Where you have a need for adaptations to make the property suitable, we will act positively within available resources to meet that need and seek grants from other sources. We will provide interpreting/translation facilities for you if you need it, and will provide documents in other formats or languages as required, to make our services fully accessible to the full range of actual and potential tenants. If you are one of our tenants and have difficulty gaining online access to Home-Link then we can also support you by visiting you at home to complete the online application, or arranging a suitable support provider to do so; we will also provide supporting information to the Home-Link managing organisation if such additional evidence is required.

We welcome tenants and applicants being supported by a representative or advocate in communicating with us about your re-housing options or applications for housing. We will confirm with you that you are happy for your information to be shared with your advocate.

14. Monitoring

Our Customer & Home Committee receives an annual report on lettings in the first meeting following the end of our financial year. We also monitor the satisfaction of new tenants with the lettings process, and on the ethnic diversity of lettings compared with the Home-Link register.

15. Appeals

If you are dissatisfied with a decision taken by us in respect of your application for housing, you may appeal to the Senior Housing Manager within 7 days of being informed of the decision (or to the Director of Customers if the Senior Housing Manager was involved in the original decision). It may not be possible to delay re-letting a property while an appeal is being considered however the outcome of the appeal may help to inform a future allocation decision for the applicant.

16. "CORE"

We participate fully in the CORE (COntinuous REcording) system for monitoring the characteristics of new tenants e.g. age, income, employment status, reason for re-housing. The data provides central government with statistical data on trends in social lettings over time. Although any information sent to the CORE system is entirely anonymous, the data is covered by the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and once submitted digitally to CORE the paper record completed with the new tenant is destroyed.

17. Access to Information

You have the right to see information held about you by us or provided about you or by a third party (e.g. GP, Social Worker, previous landlord), if the third party agrees. We also ensure we meet the requirements of the GDPR and signpost all customers including those applying for housing to our privacy notices.

18. Lettings to Staff/Board Members/their relatives

We may offer accommodation to our employees, former employees, or their relatives, or Board or Committee members or their relatives. If this applies to you, you would receive exactly the same consideration as any other applicant and would be given no priority because of your connection with us. You would also have no involvement or influence over the decision-making process.

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