



LETTINGS POLICY

1. POLICY STATEMENT

- 1.1 Homechoice is a one stop shop providing a range of housing options and services to assist applicants into suitable housing. The Homechoice, Choice based lettings scheme advertises properties on behalf of a number of Registered Social Landlords and private sector landlords who have properties in the Middlesbrough area. Vulnerable applicants will be assisted with their housing by the Disabled Persons Housing Service or the Vulnerable Persons Officer to ensure appropriate support packages are in place prior to rehousing. We will endeavour to reach all vulnerable groups by actively promoting the service and making it accessible to those who are hard to reach through the active marketing and monitoring of groups identified as not accessing the scheme.
- 1.2 Erimus Housing is committed to ensure that our approach to letting homes is independent, fair, consistent and accountable whilst ensuring that it makes the best use of all available stock. We will aim to increase customer choice while meeting the housing needs of individuals and communities in Middlesbrough. Addressing imbalances in the diversity of communities and encouraging further social cohesion.
- 1.2 Erimus Housing delivers these objectives through Homechoice, our Choice Based Lettings allocation Scheme.
- 1.3 All applicants who apply to be rehoused by Erimus Housing will receive good quality information and services to assist them in making informed choices about their future home.
- 1.4 Erimus Housing will ensure that no individual, group or community is socially excluded or disadvantaged.

2. REFERENCES

2.1 External

Legislation and regulation

- Children's Act 1989;
- Housing Act 1996;
- Human Rights Act 1998;
- Data Protection Act 1998;
- Crime and Disorder Act 1998;
- Asylum and Immigration Act 1999;
- Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000;
- Homelessness Act 2002;

- Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003;
- Housing Act 2004;
- Housing Corporation Regulatory Circular 02/03 Local Authority nominations.

Guidance

- KLOE 7: Allocations and lettings
- CRE Code of Practice on Racial Equality in Housing
- The Housing Green Paper Quality and Choice: A Decent Home For All (2000) ODPM

2.2 Internal

Business plan/ Corporate

Erimus Housing will aim to deliver excellent landlord services for all our tenants, making ourselves available and accountable is essential, if we are to maximise the opportunities for those in housing need. Erimus wants to improve the promotion of its service to hard to reach, under represented groups as well as to other providers of good quality accommodation.

Related

- Anti-social behaviour policy and procedure;
- Aids and adaptations policy and procedure;
- Equality and diversity strategy;
- Nominations agreement;
- Suspensions policy;
- Tenancy management policy and procedures;
- Homelessness Strategy;
- Respect Agenda;
- Shared Ownership Policy and procedure.

3. POLICY CONTENT

3.1 Eligibility to register for Homechoice

3.1.1 Erimus Housing will promote and operate an open application, meaning any person over the age of 16 can apply to register and bid for available properties advertised on the scheme, regardless of whether or not there is a local connection with Middlesbrough.

3.1.2 Vulnerable households and young people under the age of 18 will have their housing and support needs assessed when they join the scheme.

3.1.3 People who have been guilty of unacceptable behaviour serious enough to make them unsuitable to be a tenant may not be accepted onto the register. People considered unsuitable will be given the opportunity to appeal and/or to show that the behaviour in question has been modified.

3.1.4 Applicants who have arrears or anti-social behaviour which are not serious enough to suspend from the scheme may be overlooked for an applicant of the same priority who does not have rent arrears or anti-social-behaviour unless they are taking actions to remedy this behaviour i.e. making regular repayments off rent arrears.

3.1.5 At the point of registration and before a firm offer of accommodation is made to an applicant who has successfully bid against a property, verification and reference checks will be carried out to determine eligibility. Applicants will be notified in writing if they have any behavioural issues or rent arrears to address prior to being allocated a property, however, we will only suspend applications who we consider that a judge would have found it reasonable to make an outright possession order.

3.2 Asylum seekers, refugees and new migrants

3.2.1 Erimus Housing will consider all applications for social housing that are made in accordance with the policy and procedures of the Choice Based Lettings scheme. In considering applications, an assessment will be completed to confirm that an applicant is eligible for accommodation or whether they are excluded from the allocation under s.160A (1) (a), (3) or (5). Please refer to appendix

3.2.2 People who are disqualified under section 160A of The Housing Act 1996 or any subsequent legislation (these include people from abroad who are ineligible for an allocation of social housing) will be considered for an offer of accommodation by Erimus Housing in their role as a Registered Social Landlord, providing they have the financial means to maintain rent charges.

3.2.3 Erimus Housing provides accommodation to asylum seekers as a sub contractor to Middlesbrough Council as part of the regional contract with the National Asylum Support Service (NASS).

3.3 Suspensions from the register

3.3.1 Erimus Housing does not operate blanket exclusions the register. However, in certain circumstances, we may suspend applicants from the register. In doing so Erimus Housing will consider whether the behaviour:

- was serious enough to have entitled a landlord to have obtained a possession order;
- was serious enough to render the applicant or household member unsuitable to be a tenant;
- is unacceptable at the time of the application.

3.3.2 In addition, specific individual circumstances will be taken into account prior to applying a suspension period. Erimus Housing will regularly review all suspensions at least on an annual basis. Applicants who have been guilty of unacceptable behaviour or rent arrears, which are not considered serious enough for a landlord to have obtained a possession order, may be overlooked for an allocation of a property, if they are not taking actions to remedy these

actions for an applicant of the same priority who does not have any outstanding rent arrears or unacceptable behaviour. Applicants will be advised of this in writing and what actions they need to take to remedy this. The full details of our approach are set out in the Suspensions Policy.

3.4 How applicants can make an application/register

3.4.1 Applicants will have to complete an application form to become an applicant of the scheme. This can be done on-line by accessing the website address or by completing a paper based application form, available from the Homechoice property shop or any Erimus housing office. An officer will be available in Homechoice to assist with this process, or in some instances an application can be completed via the telephone. Applicants will then be placed in a “banding” within the scheme reflecting their housing need (see section 3.5).

3.4.2 The questions on the application form will highlight any direct or urgent housing need; sick; disabled; homeless; persons fleeing violence; and vulnerable groups to either the Homechoice Team, Homeless and Housing Advice Team or the Disabled Persons Housing Service (DPHS) for assessment.

3.4.3 All applicants will be notified in writing of their username, password and registration date once their application form is fully completed. When the application form is registered on-line, an acknowledgement will appear confirming that these details have been recorded and received by Erimus Housing.

3.5 Information and support

3.5.1 Erimus Housing will provide applicants with an information guide on all aspects of our Homechoice scheme in the form of frequently asked questions leaflet. This leaflet will be readily available in a range of formats and languages and will summarise how the Homechoice scheme works. The leaflet will be sent out in the welcome pack, which applicants receive once they have fully completed the registration process to register on the scheme.

3.5.2 Assistance will be provided to applicants who need help in completing the application form, including those who have language or literacy difficulties and those with special needs, e.g. applicants with a physical disability; major medical needs; and older/vulnerable people. Vulnerable customers will be identified from the questions on the application form or during office or telephone interviews with applicants or staff. Home visits will be arranged with applicants who have difficulty in accessing the scheme.

3.5.3 Information and support systems will be developed to ensure vulnerable applicants are identified and assisted in accessing available properties. This includes targeting information and outreach sessions with particular groups e.g. elderly, care leavers and ethnic minority applicants.

3.5.4 One to one support and advocacy services will be made available which incorporate external advice agencies.

3.6 Prioritising applicants

3.6.1 Scheme applicants will have their housing needs and requirements assessed at the point of registration and will be placed in one of 4 bands, according to their level of housing need.

Band 1a

Applicants of the scheme losing their home as part of a current recognised demolition and regeneration scheme, assessed with multiple needs as defined in the reasonable preference groups in Band 2b, i.e. medical and losing their home as part of a recognised demolition are given priority over all other scheme Applicants.

Band 1 b

Applicants of the scheme losing their home as part of a current, recognised demolition and regeneration scheme in Middlesbrough. Without multiple needs.

Band 2 a

Applicants who are assessed as having multiple priorities as defined in band 2b, on the scheme. i.e., statutory homeless and assessed as in need of urgent rehousing on medical grounds. This excludes applicants leaving supported housing schemes who are in suitable housing.

Band 2 b

All other priority status applicants of the scheme, who have been assessed as having a priority need for rehousing. These include statutory homeless, children leaving care, applicants leaving supported housing schemes that have been assessed as successfully completing their tenancies and no longer in need of support, people living in unsatisfactory housing conditions such as severe disrepair to the property, severe overcrowding conditions and people with urgent medical or housing needs.

Band 2 C

Erimus tenants with an excellent tenant status. This is a tenant who has not breached any of their tenancy conditions. Has maintained their property and gardens to a high standard and complies with the "Good Neighbourhood agreement" (currently under development). These will be assessed on an individual basis to ensure that no individual groups are discriminated against.

Band 3 a

Applicants who have undergone a relationship breakdown or have been assessed as non-priority homeless or intentionally homeless

Band 3 b

Applicants residing in Middlesbrough without any urgent need for rehousing. This includes transfer applicants who have not been assessed as having an excellent tenant status.

Band 4

Owner-occupiers and applicants living outside the Middlesbrough area without specific urgent housing need requirements.

3.6.2 Where there is more than 1 applicant of the scheme in the same priority banding bidding against the same property, the scheme applicant with the earliest priority date will be ranked 1st. If the priority date is the same, the earliest registration date will be considered.

3.7 Social service referrals

3.7.1 Under the Children's Act, priority status will be issued to young people registered on the scheme, where social services have formally recommended the need for settled accommodation, and the applicant cannot reasonably secure this themselves. Young people in this category will be given reasonable preference within the scheme and placed in Band 2b.

3.8 Advertising properties

3.8.1 Vacant properties will be advertised on a weekly bidding cycle. The following methods may be used to advertise vacant properties:

- Homechoice website;
- Homechoice property shop window;
- Local Erimus Housing offices;
- The property guide of the local evening paper;
- Targeted mail-shots to statutory and voluntary organisations;
- Targeted mail-shots to vulnerable customers.

3.8.2 The website will be accessible from Homechoice property shop, Erimus Housing's area offices and designated statutory and voluntary organisations. Where a property has been formerly advertised and no suitable applicants are identified apply, the property will be re-advertised as "Property of the week" with suitable incentives to encourage applicants on the scheme to bid for it. The property will be offered to the first suitable applicant who has made a bid on the property of the scheme, providing the applicant meets the eligibility criteria and satisfactory verification checks are completed.

3.9 Property advertising criteria

3.9.1 Each property is labeled with a short description, including the property type, number of bedrooms, room sizes, special features and the weekly rent. Erimus Housing will not apply any specific criteria which deliberately excludes specific groups.

3.9 Bidding, offers, viewings and refusals

3.9.1 Available properties will be advertised on the Choice Based Lettings scheme. Applicants can bid on properties by telephone, completing a bidding coupon, on the internet or by attending the office. The cycle will be open for a 7 day period

to give applicants the opportunity to bid on properties. The cycle will close on Wednesday re-opening Thursday afternoon. The Homechoice Lettings team will generate a list of scheme members who have successfully bid against properties, carry out verification and reference checks. Viewing arrangements will be made and offer letters sent out after this process.

3.9.2 Viewing appointments will be arranged with the top 3 qualifying scheme applicants at allocated time slots. A 'successful member' is ranked in order of either their priority banding, priority date or registration date. The property will be offered to the first qualifying applicant who is ranked in the highest position. If it is refused, it will be offered to the applicant who is ranked in the next highest position and so on.

3.10 Announcement of Lets

3.10.1 Results of all general rehousing lettings will be published openly, and made available to the public. The announcement of lets will be published on the Homechoice website and will be available to view at the Homechoice office. The following details will be

incorporated:

- Total number of expressions of interest received for the property
- Confirmation of the successful customer's membership date
- Property type
- Number of management lets
- Number of priority lets

3.11 Review of register

3.11.1 Erimus Housing will carry out an annual review of the Homechoice scheme. Applicants will be asked to confirm if they wish to remain registered within 28 days of receiving this letter, by either telephoning the office, returning the return notification slip from the letter or visiting an Erimus housing office. If there is no further contact from the applicant, the Choice Based Letting application will be suspended and a reminder letter will be sent, contact will be made with any agency involved, prior to cancelling him/her from the scheme. Applicants who have been identified as being vulnerable will be contacted via their support workers or a named contact.

3.12 Disabled Persons Housing Register

3.12.1 The disabled persons housing service provide a supported bidding service for vulnerable applicants on the scheme. Properties with minor adaptations will be advertised on the Choice Based Lettings scheme whilst properties with extensive adaptations may be directly matched to an applicant who requires these adaptations. Applicants who require adapted accommodation will be identified from the trigger questions asked on the Choice Based Letting application form, and contact will be made to collect further information. Applicants may also be referred by external agencies such as Health or Social Services.

3.13 Nominations

3.13.1 In their role as an acting agent for Middlesbrough Council, Erimus Housing has agreed 50% nomination rights with our RSL partners. This means that these properties will be advertised on the choice based lettings scheme, apart from adapted and specialist properties, which will be forwarded to the DPHS for nomination. The first 3 qualifying applicants will be shortlisted as defined (section 3.5 prioritising applicants) from the choice Based Lettings scheme and will be forwarded to the RSL. The RSL will notify Erimus Housing on the outcome of the allocation. The final decision on who will be allocated the property will be the participating RSL. These allocations will be advertised with the announcement of lets (section 3.10).

3.14 Local lettings schemes

3.14.1 To make best use of housing stock and create balanced, mixed and sustainable Communities, Erimus Housing may introduce local lettings policies on some estates. Local letting policies will not be used unless prior consultation has been completed and agreed with local residents.

3.14.2 Local lettings policies will allow us to apply specific criteria in advertising our properties in order to attract certain groups of people, if for example there have been particular issues concerning sustainability, high void turnover or low demand. Erimus Housing will work with local residents in developing local lettings initiatives and will take into account the views of residents groups and the wider community to ensure that these initiatives are flexible and sensitive to their needs.

3.14.3 Properties with local lettings policies will be advertised on the Choice Based Lettings scheme, giving details of the local letting policy in the property labeling criteria.

3.15 Home Purchase Housing Option

3.15.1 Any applicant that owns and resides in a property located on an Erimus Housing Estate, which has been identified for demolition and regeneration, will have the option of purchasing an empty Erimus property. Each property will be individually valued and applicants in this category will have the option of purchasing a property of a similar value in exchange for the sale of their property to Erimus Housing. Owner occupiers in this category will also have the option to trade down to a property of lesser value or trade up to a higher valued property. The property labeling criteria will not be enforced when advertised on the CBL scheme, if the property is being purchased through the Home Purchase Housing Option.

3.16 Shared Ownership

3.16.1 Shared ownership will be promoted through the Choice Based Lettings scheme. However, these will be allocated in line with the Housing Corporation

New Build and Homebuy guidelines. Applicants are eligible to apply for shared ownership if they meet three tests of suitability:

- Unable to afford satisfactory housing at current market prices;
- Able to afford shared ownership property without hardship;
- Suitably occupying Shared ownership property.

Applicants will then be shortlisted using a scoring system. Full details are available on the Shared Ownership Policy.

3.17 Transfers

3.17.1 Existing tenants of Erimus Housing can apply to become members of the scheme and will have their applications considered on the same basis as new applicants. Existing tenants of Erimus Housing applying to transfer within the scheme will be placed in the relevant category within Band 3, unless there is an urgent need for housing, in which case the applicant will be placed in the relevant priority banding.

3.17.2 Erimus tenants who are considered to have excellent tenant status i.e. have kept their property and gardens to a high standard, have not breached their tenancy agreement and have complied with the "Good Tenant Agreement" (still under development). Will be given a band 2c.

3.17.3 Existing tenants who are subject to legal action for breach of their tenancy agreement will generally have their membership suspended until the situation has been remedied.

3.17.4 If an Erimus Housing tenant is successful in bidding for a property the notice of termination for the previous tenancy will, in most, instances be one week.

3.18 Direct housing management lettings

3.18.1 There may be certain specific and exceptional circumstances (e.g. fire/flood, fleeing harassment) where people registered on Homechoice will be directly matched to vacant properties, which will not be advertised on the scheme. Most applicants considered for a direct housing management let can bid for properties for which they meet the property labeling criteria on the choice Based Lettings scheme. However, sex offenders and applicants moving from supported housing schemes with specific issues, which need a planned approach to housing, will not be able to bid on the scheme. Where possible a suitable property will be identified in conjunction with the Area Housing Manager and Public Protection unit to take into account local knowledge and circumstances to the case. Prior to an offer of accommodation being made, all risks to the community will be considered, including whether there are any known victims in the area.

3.18.2 Erimus Housing will also make the best use of our housing stock by directly matching tenants that are under occupying their current accommodation, to a property suitable to their household size and needs. (Please see appendix 3)

3.19 Lettings to board members, employees and close relatives

3.19.1 Erimus Board Members, Erimus employees or their close relatives are entitled to join the Homechoice and can register in the normal way. They will also, where applicable, be given priority in the normal way. However, if they are successful in their bid, prior to a formal offer of accommodation being made, the Head of Agency Services must give approval. The full details of the restrictions and exemptions are set out in Schedule1 of the Housing Act 1996.

3.19.2 In order to ensure Erimus Housing is able to demonstrate transparency and confidence in staff integrity, staff will be fully trained and will not be involved in handling applications from close friends or relatives.

3.20 Appeals and review mechanisms

3.20.1 All applicants of the scheme can request a review of a decision, provided they do so within a period of 21 days from the date of the decision. Whilst the initial request may be verbal, they should be advised to make a written representation detailing the full reasons why they think the decision is wrong, and to supply any additional information that they feel may help their case will be required. Any person with literacy difficulties or language barriers will be provided with assistance upon request. Appeals are addressed by Middlesbrough Council's appeals committee as part of the Service Level Agreement.

3.20.2 The applicant may ask someone else to present their case on their behalf, providing written authorisation for this action is given.

4. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

4.1 Erimus Housing recognises that it operates in a community within which there is wide social diversity, and are committed to providing equal opportunities and valuing diversity.

4.2 In the delivery of our Homechoice lettings scheme, we aim to treat all customers fairly, and with respect and professionalism regardless of their gender, race, age, disability, religion, sexual orientation and marital status.

4.3 To enable all residents to have clear information and equal access to our Homechoice service, Erimus Housing publishes clear information in a range of appropriate languages and formats and through a range of media. Feedback is also accepted through a variety of different routes to reflect individual customer's preferences or needs.

4.4 To help demonstrate our approach to managing our lettings process through the Homechoice lettings scheme is fully in keeping with the equality and diversity strategy, we will collect equalities information on all aspects of the process detailed in the monitoring section below. This will assist in establishing whether there is equality of access to the service across all representative groups and

identify any barriers for any particular groups, specifically BME and vulnerable households. This will feed into our monitoring and review processes.

4.5 Full details of our approach are set out in our Equality and Diversity Strategy.

5. CUSTOMER INVOLVEMENT

5.1 Erimus Housing recognises the importance of working in partnership with our customers to develop and continuously improve our services and raise standards.

5.2 Erimus Housing actively involves all customers in at the beginning of decision making processes and ensures tenants are empowered to play a part in wider consultation and involvement structures, as detailed in full in our Resident Involvement Strategy.

5.3 To demonstrate this commitment, this policy:

- Will be reviewed in consultation with applicants, service users and customers;
- Involves applicants and customers in the monitoring and testing of service delivery standards laid out in this policy and relevant procedures;
- Publishes information in relation to performance against the aims and standards set down by this policy;
- Will be developed and reviewed in light of customer feedback, comments and complaints.

6. POLICY MONITORING AND REVIEW

6.1 Monitoring

6.1.1 The monitoring of outcomes is essential for Erimus Housing to track the impact of our lettings policy. Monitoring of the implementation of the lettings policy and the associated procedures will consider :

- Applications to the Homechoice lettings scheme including number by access route, ethnic origin, gender, disability, type of household, property type and size needed, income and employment status of household;
- Suspensions including number by access route, ethnic origin, gender, disability, type of household, property type and size needed, income and employment status of household;
- Length of waiting time including number by access route, ethnic origin, gender, disability, type of household;
- Offers to applicants – number by access route, ethnic origin, gender, disability, type of household, property type and size needed, income and employment status of household plus type and size of property offered;

- Refusals by applicants – number by access route, ethnic origin, gender, disability, type of household, property type and size needed, income and employment status of household plus reasons for refusals;
- Lettings made – number by access route, ethnic origin, gender, disability, type of household, property type and size needed, income and employment status of household, plus performance against any targets set;
- Nominations made and accepted – number by access route, ethnic origin, gender, disability, type of household, property type and size needed, income and employment status of household plus performance against any targets set and reasons for refusals;
- Cost of the service – maintaining the CBL register, assessing applicants, assessment of medical and social needs, cost per letting.

6.1.2 Monitoring information will be reported to x y and z, and publicised to customers on a regular basis.

6.2 Review

6.2.1 Monitoring results will be used by Erimus Housing to inform future policy review in this area. All reviews will consider whether:

- The current policy adheres to legislative and regulatory requirements, and reflects current good practice;
- The aims and objectives of the policy being met;
- The current policy outcomes meet the needs and aspirations of our diverse customer base;
- Service users are aware of and understand the policy and believe it to be consistent and fair;
- The policy provides sufficient choice for customers;
- The service offers value for money;
- Partnership arrangements are working effectively.

6.2.2 Overall monitoring and review of the policy will be undertaken in consultation with:

- Staff groups;
- Board members;
- Existing and future service users;
- Resident and community groups;
- Partners, local voluntary agencies and other statutory services as relevant.

6.2.3 This policy will be reviewed every two years or in line with legislative or regulatory changes.

7. RESPONSIBILITY

7.1 The Group Director of Operations retains the overall responsibility for the implementation of this policy.

7.2 The service head is responsible for the operational delivery of this policy and the associated procedures. This includes responsibility for monitoring and review, staff awareness and training, policy development and communication to customers.

Appendix A

The Allocation of Housing Regulations 2002 sets out under Section 160A of the Housing Act 1996 the persons who are eligible for an allocation of housing accommodation due to their immigration status or being from abroad. This is:

- Any person subject to immigration control within the meaning of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 who have been granted:
 - Refugee status;
 - Exceptional leave to remain and provided that there is no condition requiring that they maintain and accommodate themselves, and any dependants upon them, without recourse to public funds;
 - Indefinite leave to remain – provided that they are habitually resident in the Common Travel Area (CTA – see definition below) and that their leave to remain was not granted within the past 5 years based on sponsorship given in relation to maintenance and accommodation (or, if so, that their sponsorship has died);
 - A national of a country that has ratified the European Convention on Social and Medical Assistance (ECSMA) or European Social Charter (ESC), and are lawfully present in the UK, and habitually resident in the CTA;
 - An A8 national who is a registered worker with the Home Office Worker Registration Scheme and is in full time employment, or an A8 national who is self employed in the country.

CTA – Common Travel Area – means the UK, Channel Islands, Isle of Man and the Republic of Ireland.

If an application is received and the applicant's eligibility needs to be determined, it may be necessary to undertake a Habitual Residency Test to clarify eligibility.