

Lettings Statement - Whitefriars Housing Group

Author and Responsible Officer: Simon Brooke

Date approved by Whitefriars Board: 11 March 2010

Next review date: March 2013



1. Policy framework

Whitefriars manages over 16,000 homes in Coventry and has around 40 properties available to let each week.

Whitefriars is a part of the WM Housing Group. In letting its properties Whitefriars and the other housing associations within the WM Housing Group follow the Group's Lettings Management Policy. This gives discretion to Whitefriars and the other partner associations to form its own priorities that responds to the needs of its customers and the communities that it works with.

Whitefriars is committed to transparency in how we let our properties and therefore this "Lettings Statement" advises how we will let our properties.

Whitefriars are committed to the vision of the WM Housing Group which is "creating places where people are PROUD to live and work". It seeks to achieve this by ensuring customers have a choice of properties and areas to select from, in order to maximise customer satisfaction with their home and the community they move into.

2. Partnership arrangements

Whitefriars are committed to working in partnership with local authorities and other partners to provide good customer care and to maximise choice.

In Coventry we are partners with Coventry City Council, other housing associations in the City and local advice agencies represented by Advice Services Coventry. This partnership has formed "Coventry Homefinder" and we have agreed a common waiting list and a common priority system that means customers looking for social housing in Coventry need only make one application and only have to understand one priority system. Customers can see all Whitefriars vacancies advertised each week, alongside all other housing association available properties.

Whitefriars are committed to ensuring that this partnership delivers good customer care, prioritises those in most need of housing and seeks feedback from customers to ensure it is responsive to the communities that we seek to assist. The Coventry Homefinder policy can be found on our website or on www.coventryhomefinder.com

Where we have properties outside of Coventry we will also seek to work with local authorities to support the development of "choice based lettings", common waiting lists and priority systems.

We are committed to work with Coventry City Council and other local partners to reduce homelessness and problems associated with homelessness. We are members of the Homelessness Strategy Implementation Group. This group brings together all the agencies dealing with homelessness to develop a strategy and ensure it is put into practice. Whitefriars has also developed its own Homelessness Action Plan that seeks to ensure effective services are in place.

3. How to apply for accommodation

Whitefriars does not have its own waiting list.

In Coventry, applicants for housing should apply online directly to Coventry Homefinder www.coventryhomefinder.com. The application will be assessed and applicants will receive confirmation within 14 days. Coventry City Council are responsible for the administration of the Coventry Homefinder waiting list. If applicants do not have internet access, all libraries in Coventry allow free internet access. Users will need to get a library card and make an appointment to use the internet. A list of libraries in Coventry is available in a leaflet from our offices. This is also available on our website or on the Coventry City Council's website.

Staff at our housing offices or staff working for Coventry Homefinder will assist customers who are vulnerable and cannot access the service without assistance.

In other local authority areas please approach the local authority concerned to see how to apply for accommodation.

When advertising our properties on Coventry Homefinder we will include the type and size of accommodation as well as the area. We also categorise properties according to the accessibility i.e. for those who find difficulty with stairs etc. For category 1 Disabled Persons Bungalows and category 2 & 3 adapted properties, only those with medical evidence that such accommodation is required can bid for these properties.

Once registered, applicants can "bid" (express their interest) for up to 3 properties per week, that they wish to be considered for. All of our properties available for letting are advertised each week. They can be seen on the Coventry Homefinder website or in a weekly leaflet "Weekly Property List". This is available from our offices and local libraries. Properties are advertised every Thursday until the following Tuesday. Applicants can register their interest by "bidding" on line or on the 24 hour telephone line.

Sheltered accommodation is available and advertised on the Coventry Homefinder site when available.

We also have a number of Housing with Care Schemes for elderly customers. These are not allocated via Coventry Homefinder. This accommodation is allocated following an assessment by Coventry City Council's Social Service Team, they can be contacted on Tel. 024 76833784 or at

housingwithcare@coventry.gov.uk

We also have hostel accommodation available at the Chace Centre, Willenhall. These rooms, for single homeless men, are not advertised through Coventry Homefinder. They can be accessed directly by contacting the Chace Centre on 024 76302694.

4. How we prioritise applicants

Applicants in Coventry are prioritised for accommodation in accordance with the partnership agreement with Coventry City Council and other partners to "Coventry Homefinder". Full details of this are available in the Lettings Policy of "Coventry Homefinder". This is available on our website and at www.coventryhomefinder.com

The partners to Coventry Homefinder have agreed that 75% of all properties available to let will be prioritised according to a banding system that prioritises on the basis of housing need i.e. homelessness, overcrowding, medical needs.

The partners have also agreed that 25% of properties available to let will be prioritised according to the time the applicant has been waiting for accommodation on the Coventry Homefinder waiting list.

Details of which properties are prioritised by priority or by registration date only, are indicated on the advert for the property.

At the end of the bidding cycle the applicant at the top of the list will be assessed and checks made to verify their application. If the checks confirm the applicant is eligible, an offer will be made to the applicant.

The successful applicants will be able to view the property with a member of our staff, who will explain the main features of the property and answer any questions. Staff will take account of the needs of applicants with particular issues or disabilities in carrying out the accompanied viewing.

If the applicant refuses the offer or does not reply to our contact, the next person on the shortlist will be assessed and checks made. This will continue until we have a successful bidder.

The successful applicant will then sign a tenancy agreement and move into the property.

5. Eligibility type and size of property

We will work with local authorities to agree common rules for the eligibility for type and size of accommodation that applicants are eligible for.

The following are our general rules when we advertise our properties on common systems such as Coventry Homefinder.

Size

We will agree eligibility criteria with our partners. When advertising a property through Coventry Homefinder or any other 'choice based lettings' arrangements we will determine the size of the family who are eligible to bid for the property. Only those eligible for the size of property will be able to bid for them.

See table in Appendix 1.

Houses

Due to the shortage of family housing, Whitefriars will only let houses to those with children under the age of 16. Applicants with access arrangements only, will not be eligible for a house, they will be eligible for a two bedroom flat.

Bungalows

Bungalows (apart from disabled persons bungalows) will be available for those over 55 years of age.

High rise 2 bedroom flats

In addition to our normal eligibility rules, single people will also be able to bid for 2 bed flats in our high rise accommodation. However, preference will be given to those who are normally eligible for a two bedroom flat.

Age restricted properties

We also have a number of properties that are restricted according to the age of the applicant. These age restrictions form part of the advertising when we look to relet a property. Any changes to the age restrictions to our properties will be subject to consultation with residents of the properties concerned.

Adapted accommodation

Adapted properties. We will seek to make best use of properties that have adaption's, for example properties that have through floor lifts or level access showers. We will work with our local authority partners and other specialist agencies to ensure these properties are let to those with need of the adaption's.

Sheltered accommodation

Our sheltered housing is reserved for applicants who are aged 60 or over, or 55 and over if in receipt of Disability Living Allowance.

6. Affordable Rents

Whitefriars will let some of its properties at the new 'Affordable Rent' levels which are in agreement with the Home and Community Framework. Rents will be set at 80% of gross market rent values this will be inclusive of service charges. Properties which will be let on Affordable Rent will be advertised on Coventry Homefinder. There will be properties excluded from Affordable Rents these are listed below;

- Sheltered and Very Sheltered
- Bedsits
- High rise blocks
- Supported Housing

- Existing Satisfactory Dwellings (ESD's) which have been indentified for disposal
- Section 106 sites which have covenant restrictions

All customers moving to an Affordable Rent property will be charged an Affordable Rent for that property based on the open rental market. The only exceptions to these will be those people who are having to move through no fault of their own; for example people who are moving on emergency grounds, those under occupying much needed family size homes and are moving to free up at least 2 bedrooms within our own stock or because WM Housing Group needs them to move to facilitate major repairs or development programmes.

Affordability checks will be completed prior to acceptance stage to ensure the applicant can afford the property and meet the rental payments. There are restrictions below for those which cannot demonstrate this.

7. Restrictions on access to accommodation

Whitefriars will not normally accept applicants for rehousing where:

- The applicant is under 18, except in schemes where support arrangement are in place.
- The applicant is subject to immigration control or a person from abroad unless they are a qualifying person.
- The applicant or members of the household have caused serious anti social behaviour.
- There is an outstanding current debt owed by an applicant to Whitefriars Housing Group or another housing association or local authority landlord, as a result of failure to pay rent, court costs, rechargeable repairs or any other housing debt.
- There are former tenant arrears owed by the applicant to Whitefriars or another housing association or local authority landlord as a result of failure to pay rent, court costs, rechargeable repairs or any other housing debt. We may accept the applicant if they have been paying the debt off for a period of two years and the amount outstanding is less than £300. Minimum repayments will be £3.20 per week. Additional flexibility may be allowed where there are exceptional circumstances or to meet the local authorities statutory duties with regards to homelessness.
- We will also consider arrangements with support agencies whereby they pay a third of the outstanding debt, the customer pays a third and Whitefriars agree to write off a third.
- For existing tenants of Whitefriars or a partner housing association where we have inspected the current property and the condition is not to acceptable standards.
- Applicants who cannot demonstrate that they can afford to pay the rent for the property. Those without recourse to public funds will need to demonstrate that they can pay their rent, for example students.
- Applicants whose income or capital exceeds the levels advised by the Charity Commission.
- Owner occupiers / leaseholders except where there are particular circumstances where their housing needs are not met by their present accommodation and their financial position means that alternative

- accommodation in the private sector is unavailable.
- Applicants who have social needs that require a high level of support and support arrangements have not been arranged / assessed or cannot be arranged in a reasonable timescale.

Flexibility will be considered for exceptional cases. These cases will be referred to the Assistant Director.

Applicants in the above categories who have bid for properties will be overlooked. We will write to the applicant to advise them of the reason and of their right to appeal. We will only write on one occasion.

8. Tenancy agreements

Whitefriars offer most of its new customers an Assured Tenancy. This gives security of tenure as long as the conditions of tenancy are being maintained. For some properties we offer an Assured Shorthold Tenancy. This also gives security of tenure but it allows easier possession of the property if conditions of tenancy are broken. This type of tenancy is offered as a starter tenancy in some areas and customers will be offered a full Assured Tenancy after one year as long as there are no problems associated with the tenancy.

We will also offer Assured Shorthold Tenancies for any properties that are offered at Intermediate Market Rents.

Our rooms in our hostel accommodation at the Chace Centre are offered on a contractual licence.

9. Transfers

Existing customers of Whitefriars can apply for a transfer in the same way as other applicants. They should register an application with Coventry Homefinder. The application will be assessed in accordance with the agreed Coventry Homefinder Lettings Policy.

Customers looking for a transfer should look each week at the properties available and express an interest by bidding online www.coventryhomefinder.com or via the 24 hour automated phone line.

Customers looking to transfer should ensure they do not owe any rent or other charges.

If the tenant comes to the top of the shortlist, the application will be assessed and checks made to verify their details. If the checks are satisfactory, we will inspect the customers property. The property should be in good condition and decorative standard.

If the property is not to an acceptable standard, or there are arrears or incidents of anti social behaviour, the bid will be overlooked and we will write to the customer to confirm this. Future bids will also be overlooked, until the problems have been rectified.

10. Emergency Transfers.

In some emergency cases, there will be a need to provide immediate rehousing and it may not be possible to accommodate our tenant within our normal arrangements.

Emergency transfers will be considered where there are circumstances that threaten the life or would seriously affect the safety of the tenant or other household member to remain in the property.

An emergency transfer will not be approved before other options have been explored. In most cases action to address the cause of the problem may be a more effective solution.

An emergency transfer must be approved by the Area Services Manager concerned or their line manager.

Once approved the alternative accommodation should be provided as quickly as possible. We will look to provide accommodation of similar type, size and demand to the current property where possible. However as the offer of alternative accommodation is an emergency it should not prevent us offering another property of adequate size and type. We will make one suitable offer of alternative accommodation.

11. Rehousing due to redevelopment or demolition - Decants

For our customers who cannot continue to live in their property due to redevelopment or major works, we need to ensure alternative accommodation is provided in a timely manner and be suitable to the customer who has to move.

We are committed to ensure these customers get priority under the arrangements for common waiting lists i.e. Coventry Homefinder and Solihull Home Options. Whitefriars can also directly let properties in these cases. Where this is the case, the Area Services Manager or their manager must approve any move.

We will try to provide alternative accommodation of like demand and size to the property required for any redevelopment/demolition. For major developments we will develop a Local Lettings Plan in consultation with residents affected. This will outline, in more detail, how we will deal with the rehousing of our customers and create a balanced community. Whitefriars will consider re-housing homeowners whose home is required for a redevelopment involving Whitefriars, where this is the case, the circumstances will be defined in the Local Lettings plan.

Customers losing their home on a permanent basis will be entitled to Statutory Home Loss Payments. We will also pay a Disturbance Allowances to reflect the actual costs or relocation or a fixed payment of £1,000 to cover such costs.

If the property is subject to temporary work and can be moved back into, this

will be facilitated. We will also pay a Disturbance Allowances that covers the costs of the relocation of utilities and removal costs.

If the customer wishes to move to the new property on a permanent basis this will normally be approved at the discretion of the Area Services Manager. Exceptions will be where the alternative property provided is of a specialist nature or larger than the existing property and that required according to the family composition.

12. Support schemes

We may also agree with support providers to provide accommodation and directly offer these properties. Such schemes currently include 15 properties let in agreement with Coventry Cyrenians to provide support to young people and our partnership with the Community Safety Partnership to support the Family Intervention Project.

The provision of accommodation via such schemes must be approved by the Head of Lettings and Empty Property Management.

13. Mutual Exchange

Whitefriars support customers wishing to improve their housing situation by exchanging their home with another customer of Whitefriars or another housing association or local authority tenant.

Whitefriars are supporting a national organisation called "Homeswapper". This allows our customers to register their details on a national database and describe what they are looking for. This website is www.homeswapper.co.uk This service is free to our customers. A list of all those registered with Homeswapper and looking for an exchange is available at our housing offices.

Customers must have permission from us before any exchange takes place. We may refuse permission if there are rent arrears outstanding, the property will be overcrowded or underoccupied. We will normally permit underoccupation by one bedroom. However, due to the shortage of family homes, we will not permit a single person to exchange to a two bedroom house.

14. Succession and assignments

We will follow the legal requirements of the 1985 Housing Act in considering successions and assignments.

On the death of a tenant, a member of the family may be able to take over the tenancy acquiring all the rights and responsibilities of the tenancy. The person who takes over the tenancy is called a "successor".

The successor must be living at the property as their only or principal home at the time of the tenant's death. If the successor is not the husband/wife/civil partner of the deceased tenant, the family member must be able to prove that they have lived with the tenant for 12 months prior to the tenant's death.

The following people have the right of succession to the tenancy:

- The deceased tenant's husband/wife or civil partner
- Son, Daughter, Parent, Grandparent, Grandchild, Brother, Sister, Uncle, Aunt, Nephew, Niece

The law only allows one legal succession although we may consider a second succession provided the family member has lived there for 5 years prior to the death of the 1st successor.

Any succession prior to the transfer of the housing stock to Whitefriars in September 2000 will be disregarded.

Occasionally, more than one family member may be entitled to take over the tenancy. Eligible successors may decide between themselves who takes over the tenancy, but if there is no agreement Whitefriars is entitled to choose who the tenancy will pass to.

Under some circumstances, when the property passes to a family member other than the spouse/partner, we may ask the family member to move to another property. This may happen if the property is too large for the person succeeding to the tenancy and/or the property is adapted for the use of someone with a physical disability and that person no longer lives in the property. Where this is the case we will provide suitable alternative accommodation.

If we do not accept a succession claim we will confirm the decision in writing. The person in occupation will be asked to make urgent arrangements to move out and return the keys. If the person fails to move out, Whitefriars will take legal action to regain possession of the property and the person will also be liable to pay any court costs.

Assignment is a transfer of the tenancy from a tenant to another person, which is as a result of the request from a tenant to hand over the tenancy ("assign it") rather than a result of the death of the tenant.

When considering the request we will apply the same criteria as a successor as outlined above but there will be no right to a second assignment.

15. Local lettings plans

Whitefriars are committed to ensuring stable and sustainable communities. At times, we may need to develop additional lettings rules for a block of flats or locality to ensure a balanced community is created or sustained.

Whitefriars will develop local lettings initiatives where circumstances warrant such an intervention. This may be due, for example, to the high number of children in a locality and we will look to under occupy; or problems of anti social behaviour where we may look to complete police checks or seek references.

The local lettings plan will be available to potential applicants and when advertising a vacancy, the details will be provided, to ensure openness and

accountability.

Any local lettings plan should be approved by the Assistant Director and should follow consultation with the local authority and local residents.

16. Discretionary cases

There are occasions that an allocation maybe justified but that falls outside of the normal criteria for housing or would not normally be prioritised under the policy of Coventry Homefinder. These cases may involve a request for a transfer due to very particular personal issues, or where it would make financial sense for the company. If approved a direct match would be made.

It is expected that any such cases will require the approval of the relevant Director of Whitefriars. Any such cases will be reported to Whitefriars Board on an annual basis.

17. Difficult to let properties

After advertising the property via Coventry Homefinder, where we do not manage to let our property due to lack of demand, the Property Lettings Manager or their line manager will have the authority to relax our requirements in order to achieve a letting.

18. Management of empty properties

Whitefriars are committed to letting our properties quickly.

We will repair our properties to our lettable standard. This is set out in the leaflet "Your new home – Standards for reletting." This is provided to all prospective customers at the accompanied viewing. This is also available on our website.

Our standards have been developed in consultation with our customers.

19. Equality Impact Assessment

This Lettings Statement has been subject to an Equality Impact Assessment. Our staff have considered the impact of this statement on different sections of our communities. We have sought to ensure that we will not discriminate adversely against any group and will respect the diversity of the communities we are working within. We will not discriminate on grounds of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender or age.

We will be aware of other factors in delivering services, so that where a person suffers with poor mental health, has limited literacy skills or other vulnerability we can deliver services that that are sensitive to these issues.

20. Customer and stakeholder Involvement

Whitefriars recognise the importance of working closely with customers to ensure our services are responsive to the needs of our customers.

This Lettings Statement has been developed with our customers following discussions in our Customer Service Improvement Group and from feedback from our customers.

This Lettings Statement has also been subject to consultation with the following stakeholders in Coventry.

- Coventry City Council
- Coventry Cyrenians
- Coventry Law Centre
- Council for Disabled People
- Coventry Mental Health Team
- Salvation Army
- Coventry YMCA
- Coventry MIND
- Willenhall Money Advice Centre
- Holbrooks Community Centre
- Wood End Advice Centre

21. Monitoring and review

This Letting Statement will be reviewed every three years and earlier if required. We will consult with our customers on any review of this statement.

Whitefriars Board will receive an annual report on our lettings service. This will include a breakdown of our lettings, our activities over the year, and our performance.

We will publish this Lettings Statement and it will be available on our website. Each year details of our lettings will be published in our customer magazine and on our website.

Appendix 1

Eligibility Table

	Bedsit	1 bed	2 bed	3 bed	4 bed	5 bed	6 bed
Single Person	x	x					
Couple - no children		x					
2 Independent Adults			x				
Family with 1 child			x				
Family with 2 children			x	x			
Family with 3 children				x			
Family with 4 children				x	x		
Family with 5 children					x		
Family with 6 children					x	x	
Family with more than 6 children					x	x	x

N.B

Single Person and Couple with no children will be eligible for 2 bedroom high rise block.

Family with 2 children will only be eligible for a 2 bedroom house if the children are the same sex or both children are under the age of seven.

Family with 4 children who have 3 children of one sex and one of the other sex will only be eligible for a 4 bed room house.