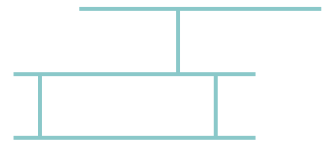


Plus Dane Housing

Lettings Policy

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1 Policy Statement

This policy sets out how Plus Dane Housing will allocate its housing stock in line with existing requirements set down by the Social Housing Regulator, giving due regard to the strategic housing functions of the Local Authorities within which we operate, and our business aims and aspirations.

This policy applies to general needs and sheltered housing stock.

We will apply our lettings policy consistently and fairly and will not discriminate against any person on grounds of their age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

We will use this policy to effectively manage our housing stock to ensure our homes are let to the people with a housing need.

We will use this policy to create sustainable communities by using local lettings plans and direct allocations.

We will support our Local Authority partners to meet housing need and participate in choice-based lettings schemes and any accompanying restriction policies.

This policy does not apply to supported housing, market rent, intermediate rent, shared ownership, mortgage rescue or where another provider manages a scheme under a management agreement.

2 Policy Aims

Our aim is to provide a flexible and effective lettings service that will:

- ensure our homes are let in a fair, transparent and efficient way;
- support the local authority's strategic housing function;
- give people choice through participation in choice based letting schemes;
- make best use of available stock and create sustainable communities;
- minimise the time that properties are left unoccupied;
- allow us the opportunity to market our homes in a diverse, accessible and innovative way;
- minimise the potential of financial hardship from under occupation due to welfare reform;
- promote the best use of stock by making appropriate use of adapted properties.

3 Links to Corporate Plan

This policy links to our corporate plan and supporting objectives and organisational values by demonstrating:

- Locality Working - working with local authority partners and commissioners to combat homelessness
- Sustainable organisation – Letting our properties in a timely manner to minimise void rent loss.
- Customer Experience – providing a customer experience that is efficient and responsive, tailored to individuals and their circumstances.

4 Our Approach

We operate across several Local Authority areas across Merseyside and Cheshire, each with different nomination arrangements, allocations policies, housing demand and other relevant issues.

We shall let our homes as quickly as possible to avoid loss of rent, vandalism or squatting.

In the main, there are three types of lettings we carry out.

- Choice Based Lettings
- “Direct lets” through alternative marketing methods
- Management Moves.

To assist the Local Authority with their strategic housing function, most of our homes are let through Choice Based Lettings (CBL). A proportion of our homes will also be let through direct marketing to ensure our communities are sustainable and when required, we will undertake management moves when there is a business need or other health and safety matter relating to our tenants.

Through this policy, we reserve the right to operate and enter into Service Level Agreements with a range of Agencies to assist in re-housing particular applicant groups.

All applicants being considered for an offer of accommodation will undergo pre-tenancy checks and interview. The pre-tenancy interview is designed to advise prospective tenants of their obligations as a tenant, to assess whether they can afford to sustain the tenancy and to consider the appropriateness of the property.

We may withdraw an offer of accommodation at any point in the lettings process if there is evidence to suggest there is a significant risk that the applicant is unable to sustain a tenancy or where false or misleading information has been provided.

4.1 Choice Based Lettings

To assist our Local Authority partners in their statutory duty of meeting housing need, we shall offer a percentage of our homes for letting through our participation in Choice Based Lettings Schemes.

It is through our participation in CBL Schemes, we will meet our agreed nomination targets with our Local Authority partners.

As a minimum, 50% of our homes will be allocated through CBL. This figure may differ depending on the current arrangement with the respective Local Authority.

Currently, Plus Dane participates in the following CBL schemes.

Chester West & Chester		West Cheshire Homes
Cheshire East	-	Cheshire Homechoice
Merseyside	-	Property Pool Plus

Applicants wanting accommodation through CBL will ‘bid’ for a property and the success of the bid will depend on the priority band that they have for the vacancy, within the criteria of the individual scheme.

Bids can be made online through the dedicated CBL website, by telephone or by text message.

4.2 Alternative Marketing Routes

To broaden Plus Dane’s customer base, we may market some of our homes on external property advertising websites.

Properties not advertised through CBL will be offered, subject to local connection eligibility, on a first come first served basis, subject satisfactory verification checks and the applicant meeting the relevant eligibility criteria (which includes not falling within any restrictions or being ineligible) as referred to below.

The range of marketing methods we may use for “direct lets” may vary but in general, such properties will be advertised on either Right Move or Zoopla, our website, via a leaflet drop and our on social media pages.

Expressions of interest will be prioritised by date order with preference given to those who will fully occupy the property and those who can demonstrate they can afford the rental obligation via an affordability assessment.

Each expression of interest will be assessed for eligibility in the same way a CBL applicant would.

4.3 Management Moves

In instances where a management move is required for one of our tenants, this will generally be in exceptional circumstances where the health and safety of our tenant could be at serious risk if they remain in their own home (e.g., fire, flood, domestic abuse etc. this list is not exhaustive), or where other exceptional circumstances need to be addressed.

Where a management move is required, the Housing Management Team will write a supporting report detailing the reasons for the move.

Management moves are entirely at our discretion and will meet housing needs rather than desires.

In these instances, we will house tenants in 'like for like' properties unless the tenant is under-occupying, when a smaller property will be offered. Where there is an immediate danger to safety and there is no suitable property available, we will work with the Local Authority Housing Solutions team.

We will usually withdraw a management move offer if the tenant does not engage appropriately with us during the process and/or refuses to accept a reasonable offer of alternative accommodation.

4.4 Sensitive Lets

To avoid perpetuating certain social issues afflicting a community, where there has been a housing management issue at a specific property, we may decide to treat the letting of that property as a sensitive let.

In these instances, rather than concentrating on housing needs alone, we will take into account other factors when determining if an applicant is eligible to apply and whether the property would be suitable.

This approach is to ensure there is a wider benefit to the community or where the health and safety of an applicant, is, or could, be put at risk.

We will ensure that sensitive lets are necessary, equitable, proportionate and in line with the Equality Act 2010.

4.5 Local Letting Schemes

We aim to let tenancies that are sustainable and contribute to stable communities. To help us do this, we may put in place local lettings arrangements for particular properties to take account of local circumstances or to tackle tenancy management or lettings issues.

Where Local Lettings schemes apply, where appropriate, we will work with the respective Local Authority to put them in place. Where a Local Lettings Plan applies, we will state this within the marketing on the property advert.

To create balanced and sustainable communities we will always apply Local Lettings policies on our new build schemes.

We will ensure that our local letting schemes are necessary, equitable, proportionate and will review these annually.

4.6 Medical Needs

We will ensure a property is suitable for an applicant’s physical needs before making an offer. Should an applicant apply for a property that does not meet their physical health needs or where it is identified that major adaptations are required to make the property suitable, we reserve the right to withdraw the offer.

4.7 Who Can Apply

Applications will not be accepted from persons who have no “right to remain” in the UK or from other persons subject to immigration control within the meaning of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 (as amended).

Applicants with leave to remain but a condition of their status is that they have no resource to public funds are not eligible for accommodation.

All applicants will be subject to verification, landlord reference checks, credit checks and residency checks.

4.7.1 Local Connection requirements

Applicants not currently Plus Dane tenants, need to meet one of the local connection criteria to ensure wherever possible social housing goes to local people.

Local connection is demonstrated by:

- Employment in the area
- Immediate family member living in the area. (Parents / adult children, Brother / Sister).
- A need to live in the area to receive specific health treatment or to give or receive specific support
- Living in the area for at least 6 out of the last 12 months or 3 out of the last 5 years

4.7.2 16 and 17 year olds

We will not usually grant tenancies to people under the age of 18 as this age group cannot hold the legal interest in a tenancy under the Law and Property Act 1925.

We will consider applications from care leavers or statutorily homeless 16 and 17 year olds nominated by the Local Authority where a support

package and a guarantee of the rent for a property is in place. If Plus Dane were to house a minor, we will grant an agreement for a tenancy stating the terms on which they may occupy the property up until their 18th birthday from which date Plus Dane will provide them with an appropriate tenancy.

4.7.3 Staff and Board Members

To avoid any conflict of interest, we will ask all applicants, irrespective of the marketing route used, to confirm whether they are employed by Plus Dane or have close relatives who are employed by us.

Staff and Board member applications may be accepted in certain circumstances as long as all eligibility criteria and regulatory requirements are met. No preferential treatment or advantage will be given. Any offers to be made will be authorised by the Director of Housing.

4.7.4 Homeowners

We will not usually house applicants who own a property if this will lead to them having a second home. Owner-occupiers must demonstrate their house is on the market and that they are actively looking to sell. Exceptions will be considered for applicants needing sheltered or adapted properties with all other cases considered on a case-by-case basis. We will refuse any application found to have no housing need or where an applicant would be financially profiting from living in our property.

4.8 Transfer Requests

Existing Plus Dane tenants may apply for a transfer to alternative accommodation once they have lived in their home for 12 months. Requests for a transfer should be made direct to the relevant Choice Based Lettings scheme.

To manage turnover and demand for our homes, we reserve the right to stop non-essential “like for like” transfers where there is no demonstrable housing need where tenants are adequately housed. This includes transfer requests from tenants who apply through alternative marketing routes. In these instances, we will encourage the tenant to pursue a mutual exchange.

We may, in exceptional circumstances and on a case-by-case basis, consider exceptions for cases of severe medical need, harassment, hate crime, domestic abuse or where the tenant is in danger (this is not an exhaustive list). In these circumstances, we will try to ensure that the tenant is assisted with rehousing as quickly as possible.

Generally, transfers will not be approved if:

- there are rent arrears of more than 4 weeks rent.

- there are outstanding / unpaid rechargeable repairs
- there is an Anti-Social Behaviour and or Tenancy Breach Injunction in place
- Notice to Seek Possession is in place for Anti-Social Behaviour or a tenancy breach
- A possession order has been granted.

All transfers will be subject to a property inspection before any offer is approved.

Where tenants are transferred with an outstanding debt, payment of the sums shall form a condition of the new tenancy agreement.

4.9 Credit Check and Affordability Assessment

To ensure tenancies are let sustainably, most properties will be let to households who meet the bedroom standard.

All applicants, irrespective of how they applied for housing with us, will be subject to a credit referencing checks by an approved external provider.

In addition, we will also complete with the applicant a welfare benefit assessment, known as “Entitled too” to assess benefit eligibility ensuring they can afford to sustain the tenancy.

Where an applicant has no income, benefits, or savings, in place to pay their rent, **no offer** will be made.

A payment of the first weeks rent is required at all sign-ups irrespective of whether the tenant may be eligible for Housing Benefit or the Housing Element of Universal Credit. Inability to pay such advance-rent would be taken as an indicator that the applicant was unable to afford to a tenancy.

We reserve the right to withdraw any offer of accommodation if the first weeks rent cannot be paid.

4.10 Verification Criteria

In addition to a credit check, before any offer is made, we will carry out several checks against the applicant and any member of their household moving with them to verify the details on the application form are correct.

This will include a document and photographic identification check to verify identity and residency. Landlord references; both current and former, will be also sought where the applicant has held a private or social rented tenancy.

If an applicant does not pass the verification assessment, no offer will be made. We will tell an applicant the reasons why we are unable to make any offer.

4.11 Bedroom Standard

To enable us to make best use of our available stock, preference will be given to applicants whose households who fully meet the bedroom criteria.

In determining the number of bedrooms needed, a separate bedroom will be required for each of the following groups:

- A co-habiting couple, or a single parent
- A pair of children aged under 10 regardless of sex
- A pair of adolescents aged 10 to 20 years of the same sex
- Any single adult aged 21 years or more
- Any other person in the household who has a medical condition requiring a sole bedroom

The standard disregards children who live with the applicant less than 50% of the time. An expectant mother will be counted as if the child was born.

We will not usually consider applicants for properties that have more bedrooms than their assessed need.

We may choose to under occupy a property if there have been no bids from an applicant who would fully occupy. In deciding to under occupy, we will fully consider affordability before making any offer. Any under occupancy will be limited to a maximum of one bedroom.

4.11.1 Property prioritisation

We will consider a room a bedroom if it has been designated by us as a bedroom, regardless of its use.

As houses are in exceptionally short supply, houses shall be prioritised to families with children under 18 with bedrooms allocated in line with our bedroom standard. Where there is no demand from families with dependent children, in the case of small two-bedroom houses, we may consider mature single applicants, couples or applicants with access to children.

Bungalows will generally be prioritised to people over fifty-five or those who would benefit on medical grounds from the amenities afforded by a bungalow. Priority in the first instance will be given to applicants with a medical condition who require this type of accommodation.

Adapted properties - Adapted properties are homes, which have been designed for or significantly adapted to meet the needs of applicants with physical or sensory disabilities. In most cases, we will advertise adapted homes along with all other vacant homes to ensure that applicants needing this type of accommodation are given the widest possible choice. In some circumstances, a property may be allocated out of priority order, if a property is particularly suitable for the needs of an applicant.

Flats – Ground floor - in the first instance will be offered to applicants who need ground floor for health reasons. Should there be no applicants with health/care/support needs preference will be given to families with young children under five followed by all other applicants.

Flats – above ground floor – due to the practicalities of living in flats with young children, preference will be given to families with children above 5 years of age.

4.12 Restrictions & Ineligibility

We are committed to achieving stable, balanced, and sustainable neighbourhoods through promoting good tenancy conduct and tackling crime and anti-social behaviour.

Applicants who withhold or give false information may have their application cancelled and any pending offer withdrawn

By law, applicants subject to immigration controls, who do not have refugee status or indefinite leave to remain, cannot apply for social housing.

We may refuse applications for housing where the previous behaviour of an applicant or member of their household is such, they would be unsuitable to be offered a tenancy. This entails any behaviour that would give us possession via a court order.

In making this decision we will be fair and transparent in our decision-making process and will demonstrate our reasons for refusal.

Ineligible reasons may include, but are not limited to:

- outstanding current or former tenant rent arrears or other tenancy related debts*

*Tenancy related debts apply to both the applicant and members of their household

- unacceptable behaviour** whereby Plus Dane is satisfied the applicant or member of their household have, been the perpetrator of:

**Unacceptable behaviour includes but is not limited to:

- Harassment and other hate related crimes
- Domestic abuse
- Property damage
- Assaulting, abusing, threatening, or harassing staff or contactors engaged in Plus Dane business or activities
- Fraud relating to public funds
- Breaching the terms of a previous tenancy agreement
- A criminal offence deemed serious enough to pose a risk to neighbourhood stability (this is without prejudice to applicants or members of the applicant's household who are deemed high risk offenders)
- the applicant or a member of their household demonstrating a history of preventing Plus Dane from carrying out its housing management functions. In this regard, we will take in to account the nature of the actions; the impact on Plus Dane's housing management functions at the time and how long ago they occurred.
- acts of criminal behaviour, by the applicant or a member of their household, including unspent criminal convictions serious enough to make the applicant unsuitable to be a tenant**

Each application will be dealt with upon its own merits, taking into account the impact, the length of time passed and any extenuating circumstances and factors such as disability or other protected characteristics. The aim is to ensure that any tenancy offered would be sustainable, with the household not posing a risk to other residents, the wider community, or staff.

Applicants whose applications are refused on unacceptable behaviour grounds have a right of appeal. For further details, please see below

4.12.1 Criminal Convictions

All applicants and members of their prospective household are required to disclose any pending court cases or unspent criminal convictions. Spent convictions do not have to be declared.

The existence of criminal convictions will not automatically lead to a disqualification unless the conviction was because of unacceptable behaviour serious enough to make them unsuitable to be a tenant. It may

however prevent offers being made in certain areas subject to local lettings.

In most instances, ineligibility for acts of criminal behaviour shall be 12 months from either (i) the date of offence; (ii) the date of conviction; or (iii) the date of release from prison, whichever is the later. Convictions that have been 'spent' under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 are not taken into account.

4.12.2 High Risk MAPPA Offenders

Multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA), is the process through which the Police, Probation and Prison Services work together with other agencies to assess and manage high risk offenders to protect the public from harm.

We acknowledge that it is in the interest of public protection that offenders who pose a risk to others have a fixed address or are housed in circumstances that make it possible for the Police and Probation services to monitor them appropriately.

Applications received from applicants declaring serious convictions including sex offence(s) convictions, in relation to themselves or any member of their household will be referred to the Lettings Manager for individual consideration before being processed. Due regard will be given to the restrictions and ineligibility criteria above before making any decision in relation to the application.

4.13 Accepting and refusing applicants

We want to create sustainable tenancies and avoid establishing tenancies that may fail. We may refuse to offer a property where an applicant is unable to demonstrate their ability to manage their tenancy, for example, this could be where it is evident that support is required to maintain the tenancy and this support is not in place or where an applicant is not ready for independent living. Where we refuse an offer of accommodation, we will explain the reasons why.

We will not offer a property, to an applicant where a risk to either themselves or others is identified. This list is not exhaustive but typically may include a physical risk, community risk, or risk to health and well-being either of the applicant or towards people who live in the locality.

A minimum payment in advance of one weeks' rent is required from applicants in all cases at the point when the tenancy agreement is signed. This payment will be required irrespective of the customers' entitlement to Housing Benefit or the Housing Element of Universal Credit.

4.14 Other Housing Options

It would be impossible to reflect the circumstances of every applicant requiring housing. This Lettings Policy, therefore, includes a provision to approve offers to applicants faced with an urgent and special need for housing. When considering requests of this nature, we will consider the impact any such offer will have on other applicants (if any) within the existing shortlists for the property in question.

The following are not 'allocations' under this Policy:

- Succession of a tenancy after a tenant's death.
- Assignment by way of mutual exchange.
- Assignment of a tenancy by a court under family law provisions.
- Assignment of a tenancy under the terms of the tenancy agreement
- The conversion of a starter tenancy into an assured tenancy

4.14.1 Mutual Exchange

We will encourage tenants requesting a move to consider a mutual exchange as a way of moving to more appropriate home. Tenants will be encouraged to register with the national Homeswapper scheme which facilitates countrywide property matching.

4.14.2 Extra Care Housing

Applications for extra care housing should be made to the Local Authority. Extra care applicants will have to demonstrate a need for care in accordance with the criteria agreed with the relevant Local Authority.

4.14.3 Decants

We will assist other registered providers and the Local Authority with the housing of decants but priority will always go to our tenants.

Decants may not always be on a like for like basis but will meet essential needs and be in line with our bedroom criteria.

4.15 Tenure types

Generally, any new applicant granted a tenancy under this Policy would normally be offered a Starter Tenancy. Plus Dane existing tenants will usually have their tenancy and rent type preserved when moving within our housing stock. This excludes Plus Dane Secure Tenants who choose to move to an affordable rent home. In these circumstances, they will be granted an Assured non-shorthold Tenancy. Refer to Plus Dane's Tenancy Policy for details on the types of tenancies we will grant.

4.16 Fraudulent Information

Any applicant seeking to obtain accommodation by making a false statement whether knowingly or recklessly (either via themselves or someone on their behalf), withholding relevant information or by failing to

tell us about any material change in circumstances will have their application cancelled and/or any offer of accommodation withdrawn.

Where an allocation has been made and the applicant knowingly or recklessly gave false information (either via themselves or someone on their behalf), we will take action for possession under Ground 17 of the Housing Act 1988, as amended by the Housing Act 1996.

4.17 Appeals

Applicants may request an appeal against any decision made in relation to their application for housing.

Applicants, who have applied via Choice Based Letting who feel they have been treated unfairly or are dissatisfied with our decision about whether to offer a tenancy and/or support a move, should refer to the appeals procedure of the relevant Choice Based Lettings Scheme. Applicants who have applied outside of Choice Based Lettings should use our Customer Complaints Compliments and Comments Policy to make an appeal against that decision.

Any request for an appeal should be made in writing within 15 working days of receiving their decision.

5 Assurance

The Lettings Team Manager and colleagues are responsible for applying the policy as described.

Performance on lettings, including our relet times, tenancy turnover and tenancy sustainment targets will be reported to and monitored by our Neighbourhood Committee.

5.1 Complaints

An applicant who wishes to make a complaint about the level of service they have received from us may register a complaint under our Customer Complaints Compliments and Comments Policy.

5.2 Customer Standards

The following standards, agreed with customers are in place for this policy:

We will:

- explain our reasons if we are unable to accept an application and make an offer.
- offer an accompanied viewing when the property is ready to view.
- provide information about the property and an applicant's tenancy rights.

5.3 Data sharing

Your data will be managed in accordance with Plus Dane's Data Protection Policy, which is available upon request. A copy of our Privacy Statement is also available on our website, www.plusdane.co.uk.

We will process and share your personal and sensitive data that you provide us, in compliance with Data Protection Regulations for the purpose of providing your Tenancy. We will not transfer, sell, or share the data apart from the purposes detailed in our privacy

6 Equality Impact Assessment

An Equality Impact Assessment undertaken on this Policy has indicated there are no negative impacts arising from this Policy based on a customer's race, religion, disability, gender or gender identity, sexual orientation, marital or civil partnership status, pregnancy, or age.

7 Modern Slavery & Human Trafficking

We acknowledge some of the most vulnerable groups at risk of Modern Slavery include homeless people and people with learning disabilities.

As outlined in Plus Dane's Modern Slavery Statement, we are committed to preventing modern slavery and human trafficking in our corporate activities.

Under this Policy we will undertake status checks to confirm that a person is eligible to rent a property from us and will require that all potential tenants provide us with proof of identity, National Insurance number, address, and income prior to signing up for a property.

Where we have concerns, we will raise these concerns through our wider safeguarding approach.