

1. Introduction

Sovereign are committed to providing good quality affordable homes to people in need, in neighbourhoods where people want to live. We will take into account the needs and aspirations of existing and potential residents and offer a range of housing products to meet their requirements.

We aim to let our homes in a fair, transparent and efficient way, making the best use of the housing available. We will work closely with local authorities and contribute to supporting them to meet their strategic housing aspirations.

This policy sets out how we will let our social rent and affordable rent homes. This policy does not include leaseholders, shared ownership, intermediate rent, market rent or garages.

2. Understanding and responding to residents

We will make sure that everyone is treated fairly and without discrimination, regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion or belief, gender re-assignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership and age. We will promote inclusion and challenge discrimination and we will ensure that everyone can access our services and that no one is excluded inappropriately from any services or activities provided by Sovereign.

3. General approach to lettings

We will make the best use of all our properties and will:

- Let our homes as quickly as possible to avoid loss of rent, vandalism or squatting.
- Encourage, support and prioritise our existing residents to move to smaller homes if their current ones are larger than they need or can afford.
- Encourage and support mutual exchanges and provide free subscription for all existing residents to the national home swap service (HomeSwapper).
- Offer suitable alternative accommodation if a person has succeeded to a home that is larger than they need.
- Work with other organisations to offer a wide range of housing options to those considering a move.
- Aim to match adapted properties to those in need of the adaptations.
- Work with Local Authorities and other stakeholders to develop local lettings plans (LLP) with the aim of improving access to housing and creating sustainable neighbourhoods.

4. Criteria for who can be offered a Sovereign home

4.1 Size

In aiming to make best use of the housing we own, there are clear criteria around the size of home we will offer for each type of household, for example, a single person, a couple, a family with 1 child etc. The guidance around this is available in the attachment to this policy called *Bedroom Entitlement*.

4.2 Nominations and advertising of vacant homes

- We will let the majority of our homes to people nominated by local authorities and other statutory agencies but reserve the right to refuse a nomination in line with the attachment to this policy, *Grounds for Refusal*
- We reserve the right to allocate direct to applicants in line with our agreements with our local authority partners
- We will let our homes in accordance with any Town and Country Planning Acts in place and ensure the criteria are clearly advertised.
- We reserve the right to refuse a nomination in line with our grounds for refusal.

4.3 Employees and relatives

- We will only let a property to an employee, their relatives, Board members or their relatives in accordance with Sovereign's Conflict & Declaration of interest policy.

4.4 Existing Sovereign residents

- Our existing residents may be able to move to alternative accommodation through the relevant Local Authority nominations process.
- We will support transfer requests from our existing residents if the rent account is up to date, the home meets the Empty Home Standard at the time of the move and no other tenancy conditions have been broken.
- Where we operate an internal transfer list, we will provide support and guidance to existing residents who want to apply.

5. Advice and support

- We will provide applicants for our homes with advice and guidance on accessing housing, including support with the application and bidding process where required.
- We will aim to provide access to view advertised properties in a range of ways to meet the needs of our applicants.
- We will offer translations services to applicants who do not speak English as their first language and others who have difficulties with written English.

- When letting our homes we will work closely with applicants and partner agencies to identify any vulnerability or support needs and ensure support packages are in place.

6. When we offer a tenancy, we will:

- Meet all applicants prior to offer to make sure the property is suitable for them, that the household meets all our letting criteria and can afford to live there.
- Collect applicant information and financial information as part of this visit to allow us to assess the needs of the whole household.
- Carry out an accompanied viewing of the property before expecting the applicant to accept the offer.
- See proof of and verify the identification of all our new applicants, preferably photographic ID such as passport or driving licence.
- Take a photograph of all our new residents and hold this on file. This will assist us to tackle tenancy fraud and ensure our homes continue to be occupied by the people named on the tenancy agreement.
- Hold this information in line with the Data Protection Act.
- Make sure that every property is let in a safe, clean condition that meets our Empty Home Standard.
- Issue Probationary tenancies to anyone who does not currently hold an assured or secure tenancy.
- Explain to residents their rights and responsibilities under their tenancy agreement.
- Require an advance payment of at least one week's rent before we let the property.
- Let our homes and issue tenancy agreements or terms of occupation that:
 - are compatible with the purpose of the accommodation
 - meet the needs of the individual households
 - ensure stability of the community
 - make efficient use of our housing stock
- Consider offering a home to young people aged 16-17 years. If an offer of a tenancy is made we will issue a Deed of Trust and will require a suitable trustee until the young person reaches 18 years of age.
- Offer housing for older people to those who have reached the set minimum age for that particular scheme or who have a disability or support need.

7. Appeals

- In exceptional circumstances, we may agree lettings that are outside the normal lettings process. This will be at the discretion of a senior manager and records will be kept to explain the reasoning behind the decision.

- Anyone who does not feel that they have been dealt with fairly when applying for a Sovereign home can let us know through our complaints process

8. Monitoring and Reporting

We will monitor the performance of the Lettings Service and provide reports which will check the following:

- Average time taken to relet our homes
- Refusals by applicants and by Sovereign
- Percentage of homes accepted on first offer
- Percentage of rent lost through voids
- CORE ¹ reports

9. Equality analysis

This policy has been checked to make sure that it is fair and equally accessible to those in need of housing. A copy of this analysis is available along with any changes that we have made as a result.

1. CORE – Continuous Reporting forms are completed by every social housing landlord to record each letting, transfer and exchange it makes.

Appendices: Lettings – Grounds for Refusal; Bedroom Entitlement

Document:	Lettings Policy
Version number:	V4 (October 2015)
Issued (date):	March 2013
Review (date):	January 2017
Linked documents:	Mutual Exchange Policy; Voids Management: Arrears Policy; Transfer Policy, Affordability Offers & Refusals
Authorised by (name):	Kelly McArthur, Head of Lettings

Agreed by	Date
H&CS Senior Leadership Team	27 Nov 2012
Residents' Council	6 December 2012
Executive Board	19 December 2012
Sovereign Board	21 February 2013

Appendix 1 - Grounds for Refusal

Sovereign is committed to working closely with Local Authorities, our partners and customers to provide affordable homes to people most in need. However there will be occasions where we feel the letting would not be suitable for the nominated person or our existing residents. We will carry out in depth assessments with all nominated customers as part of our lettings process. This will identify any issues or concerns the customer or we might have. We will try to resolve these issues but if we are unable to do so we can make refusals in line with the grounds set out below.

The grounds for refusal must be used in conjunction with the Sovereign Lettings Policy.

Application stage:

1. The property they have been nominated to is unsuitable as the household would be over- crowded or under-occupying without agreement.
2. The property is subject to a local lettings plan and the applicant does not meet the agreed criteria for allocation.
3. The property is subject to a Town and Country Planning Act Section 106 Agreement and the applicant does not meet the required criteria.
4. We are unable to make contact with the applicant either by phone, email or letter over a period of 5 working days.
5. We have no documentary evidence that the applicant has the right to reside in the UK and/or has no access to public funds.
6. The applicant has an interest in an alternative property and they are legally and reasonably able to reside in it.
7. The applicant has pets which are not permitted in the property, in line with the Sovereign Pet Policy or local lettings plan.
8. There has been a change in circumstances which results in the applicant's points or banding being amended and they are no longer the successful bidder.
9. The applicant is unable to supply appropriate identification along with other information requested by Sovereign.
10. The nominated person is under 18 years of age and has failed to provide an appropriate trustee.
11. The property is designated for older people and/or there are age restrictions in place.
12. The property is subject to a sensitive letting due to historic issues in that area and the person is not considered suitable or does not meet the criteria set out in the letting agreement.

Financial Status:

13. The nominated person is an existing Sovereign resident or leaseholder who owes us money, either for rent, service charges, garage rent, care and support charges, rechargeable works orders or any other debt.
14. The new applicants to Sovereign or former resident of Sovereign still has a housing related debt i.e. rent arrears, recharges etc. either with Sovereign or another housing provider.
15. The nominated person has an interest in an alternative property, either by way of a financial interest, being named on a mortgage agreement or named as a tenant of another property and, can reasonably be expected to raise funds to secure alternative accommodation in the private sector
16. The applicant/or household's, financial status is in excess of £60,000 per annum and/ or has Savings/assets over £16,000, and there is no overriding medical condition. (guidelines of the Charitable Status of the organisation)
17. The applicant is not able to produce evidence of access to sufficient funds which will enable them to pay for the rent on the property and associated living expenses following an affordability assessment by Sovereign.

Support Needs:

18. On completion of our Pre Tenancy Assessment, the applicant is deemed to be 'vulnerable', and a suitable confirmed support package is not in place.
19. The applicant has failed, or is refusing to engage with relevant support services in relation to an existing or proposed support package, to assist in the monitoring and management of their tenancy and/or health.
20. The applicant's needs (either physical or mental health) exceed what our service can provide after considering all relevant information from key support providers.
21. The applicant has bid for a property that does not meet their immediate need, e.g. an adapted property where the applicant does not need the adaptations provided or needs adaptations which cannot be made in the property.

Conduct:

22. The property the existing resident is transferring from fails to meet the Sovereign Empty Home Standard
23. The tenant(s) (including anyone living within the household) have failed to provide accurate disclosure of their circumstances to Sovereign or the local authority either verbally or by housing application form and have thereby obtained tenancy by fraud or deception.
24. There is a documented history of Anti-Social- Behaviour (i.e. this could be from a Registered Provider, Local Authority, the Police or confirmation of a conviction).

This could include Domestic Abuse, Harassment or other violent offences, within the previous 24 months and legal action was or could justifiably have been taken.

25. The applicant has a history of, or has existing substance (including drugs and/or alcohol) misuse issues, which have resulted in ASB or criminal proceedings. Each case will be carefully considered taking into account all relevant circumstances.
26. The nominated person is a former resident of Sovereign and caused significant damage to our property and has failed to repay any recharges that have been raised as a result. The nominated person is a Scheduled Offender as defined by Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA). Each person will be considered on a case-by-case basis on completion of a risk assessment for housing in a particular property through the local MAPPA arrangements for that area.
27. The applicant has been subject to legal proceedings as a perpetrator of domestic violence. An appropriate risk assessment will be carried out.
28. The applicant has been threatening, abusive, or has been persistently vexatious toward any employee of Sovereign.
29. The applicant refuses to accept responsibility for any alterations to the property that have been carried out by a previous tenant and that Sovereign do not accept liability for, and/or to sign an alterations disclaimer.
30. We have documentary evidence that the applicant has previously used social rented accommodation for illegal or immoral purposes.

Each case will be considered on its own merit and taking into account all relevant information provided by key partners, support workers and Police.

We want to ensure our residents, both new and existing are successful in sustaining their tenancy. We will use these grounds to help us achieve this.

We will provide advice and guidance to any nominated person whom we have refused. If they are an existing Sovereign resident we will work closely with them to improve the situation and assist them to move where possible.

In exceptional circumstances we may allow a move to proceed even if the person fails into one of these categories. This will be at the discretion of the Regional Housing Manager with Lettings responsibility.

Customers have the right to appeal against our decision through our complaints process.

Appendix 2 - Bedroom entitlement

When letting our homes we aim to allocate according to bedroom need to make best use of our housing stock and to avoid under occupying. We will apply the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) size criteria when considering bedroom need.

The LHA size criteria allow one bedroom for each of the following:

- Adult couple
- Any other adult (aged 16 or over)
- Two children of the same sex under the age of 16
- Two children under 10 regardless of sex
- Any other child (other than a foster child or child whose main home is elsewhere)

This table shows the size of property a household will be considered for:

Household circumstances	Studio	1 bed	2 bed	3 bed	4 bed	5 or more bed
Single applicant	✓	✓				
Couple		✓				
Two people not in a relationship			✓			
Parent / couple with 1 child or pregnant*		✓	✓			
Parent / couple with 1 child under 10 and pregnant			✓			
Parent / couple with 2 children (eldest under 10 years)			✓			
Parent/couple with 2 children same sex (under the age of 16)			✓	*✓		
Parent / couple with 2 children of different sex (eldest 10 year or over)				✓		
Parent / couple with 2 children and pregnant with 3 rd child*				✓	*✓**	
Parent / couple with 3 children**				✓	**✓	
Parent / couple with 4 or more children**				✓**	✓**	✓*

- * May be accepted for additional bedroom (HSM discretion) but must be advised of the bedroom tax and how they will be affected if they are claiming benefit now or in the future if their circumstances change. If claiming benefit they will be responsible for 14% of the rent.

** Dependant on age of children – Apply LHA criteria

Separated parents who share the care of their children and who may have been allocated an extra bedroom to reflect this, may be affected by the Spare Room Subsidy Rules (Bedroom Tax). Benefit rules mean that there must be a designated ‘main carer’ for children (who receives the extra benefit).

Under Occupying

With the introduction of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 we have seen new measures introduced for calculating benefit entitlement. From April 2013 the Spare Room Subsidy (Bedroom Tax) came in to force, where working age residents who under occupy their property saw a reduction in housing benefit. Under occupancy is also measured by the Local Housing Allowance size criteria.

We may approve a letting outside of the LHA criteria. This will be at the discretion of the Housing Services Manager (HSM).

Examples of when we may allow this are:

- a parent/couple with 2 children (same sex) and pregnant with a third child – LHA size criteria would consider household eligible for a 2 bedroom property, we may allow them to move in to a 3 bedroom property;
- a parent/couple with two children of the same sex (aged 10 and 15) – LHA size criteria would consider household eligible for a 2 bedroom property, we may choose to allow them to move to a 3 bedroom property due to the eldest child soon turning 16 and qualifying for a separate bedroom;
- a property is hard to let.

In situations like this we must consider our customers’ circumstances and how they will afford their rent if they were to under occupy their home and be eligible for benefits.

Additional bedrooms

If an applicant requires an additional bedroom for medical reasons, confirmation will be required from a suitable professional, such as a Doctor or Occupational Therapist.

An additional bedroom can be agreed in exceptional circumstances, such as where failure to meet this need will significantly affect the health or wellbeing of the applicant.

The following are examples of cases that could qualify for an extra bedroom:

- If an applicant has been assessed by social services as needing 24 hour care.
- If an applicant or partner needs an additional room for a non-resident overnight carer

- If an applicant requires large and essential medical equipment which cannot be stored elsewhere in the property.
- If an applicant will be adopting or fostering a child

The decision will be made by the HSM. In making a decision, the HSM will consider:

- The risk that the extra bedroom will not be used, leading to a property being under occupied.
- If in receipt of benefit, can the household afford to pay the 14% of rent not covered by housing benefit?
- If the household would be eligible for discretionary housing payment (see advice in Welfare Reform guidance pack).

Guidance to customers

We must ensure the customer is advised of the Spare Room Subsidy (Bedroom Tax) and how they will be affected. Please use the step-by-step guides in Sovereign's welfare reform guidance pack to calculate this.

Record any notes on the housing system of any conversations you have with customers about this, especially if you have advised them that they will be affected by the Spare Room Subsidy Rules (Bedroom Tax).

If the customer chooses to go ahead with the move after you have given them advice that they will be affected by the Spare Room Subsidy Rules (Bedroom Tax) give them a letter confirming the advice you have given (see the 'Pre-letting advice letter' and amend with your own contact details).

Linked to: Lettings Policy, Mutual Exchange Policy, Transfer Policy