

## **Servite's homehunt Policy**

### **1. Introduction and General Aims**

Servite aims to provide accommodation and services to those in most need. Our house lettings policy has therefore been designed to ensure that priority is afforded to those with specific housing needs and to allow quick and easy access to anyone wishing to apply for a vacancy.

Servite has now adopted a system that aims to provide as much choice as possible to those looking to rent one of our houses. Our new system is designed to be simpler to understand and more transparent to those looking for a house.

We have set out the criteria for awarding priority to ensure that those with housing need are most able to access suitable housing.

Where necessary, further guidance & procedures will be developed to help staff to fairly administer the system.

Each property that becomes available for let will be publicly advertised (local press & internet) and any **registered** applicant will then be able to apply for that specific tenancy.

Servite will continue to work in partnership with local authorities in whose areas we operate. We will seek to develop our current nomination and referral agreements with these Councils so that they compliment our lettings policy.

Details of how each vacancy is let will subsequently be published and any applicant wishing to appeal any decision may do so, to the Housing Services Manager. If still dissatisfied, they may register a formal complaint as set out in our Complaints Policy, a copy of which may be obtained on request.

In adopting and subsequently operating this policy Servite will comply with all relevant law and regulations. Any decisions taken in relation to applicant assessment or the letting of properties will also comply with other related Servite policies such as those on Equal Opportunities, Confidentiality and Data protection. Copies of any related policies can also be made available on request.

This policy together with related documents and forms can be made available in other formats and community languages on request.

### **2. The Right to Register & Housing Options**

Anyone over 16 years of age with the right to reside or work in the United Kingdom can register and apply for a Priority Pass.

However, applications to register may be rejected if the applicant's needs are not able to be met: i.e. Servite does not currently own or manage the type/size of property required in the location(s) requested and has no immediate plans to build such properties or where adapting existing properties is not feasible or will still not meet the needs of the applicant.

We have a wide range of house types, many of which incorporate extensive support and other services to assist tenants. Applicants should give full consideration to whether a particular type would best suit them and register their application accordingly. Those with specific need for the amenities or services associated with any particular tenancy will be given first consideration – see also Section 5.

Details of individual housing types will be provided to applicants in order to assist them make an appropriate choice.

The ability to apply for any particular tenancy or to make use of any priority pass can be restricted in certain cases and this will be made clear to the applicant at the time.

Currently, on average, less than 10% of our houses become available for re-letting in any one year. Applicants will be advised to take note of the level of pass/date of registration required to secure any particular tenancy and adjust their choices accordingly.

### **3. Excluded Properties**

Our Extra Care properties (in Leuchars) will *not* be advertised or included in our homehunt service. These will continue to be let in line with our partnership agreement with Fife Council, with full care and financial assessments being required. Further details on Extra Care can be obtained on request.

Servite also reserves the right to withdraw or exclude other properties from this scheme should these be required to fulfil a commitment or specifically negotiated agreement to house a certain applicant, or group of applicants. These will normally be part of a partnership agreement where special services, support, care or other features have also been arranged with specific applicants in mind: e.g. to support a programme of resettlement from long term hospital care.

On very rare occasions, it may be necessary to exclude properties in order to facilitate a “management transfer” where severe estate management problems or major repair requirements necessitate moving current tenant(s).

### **4. The Lettings Process**

If more than one applicant applies for an advertised property, the tenancy will be offered in line with the following.

First to any applicant who would make “best use” of the property as defined in Section 5 below.

Then, if more than one applicant is regarded as falling within this definition, the tenancy will be offered to the person with the highest Priority Pass (see Section 6).

Then, if more than one applicant has the same level of Pass, the tenancy will be offered to the one with the earliest registration.

## 5. Making Best Use of A Property

For purposes of letting a vacant property, and choosing between more than one applicant, “best use” will be defined as follows;

Where the property has design features or adaptations required by the applicant – e.g. designed to accommodate wheelchair use / amenity housing for older people over 50 years of age. Or;

Where the tenancy is linked to support services or an alarm system that is required by the applicant – e.g. sheltered and very sheltered housing for older people over 65 yrs of age.

It should be noted that “best use” will *not* be taken to mean that the applicant with the largest household will automatically be given priority over others who apply for any specific vacancy, even if technically this might result in under-occupation.

For example, Servite has consistently argued that single people or couples should be able to apply for 2- bedroom properties and not be restricted to bedsits/one bedroom. Equally, in order to promote as much choice as possible, we would not wish to deny access to 3 bedroom properties to families who might usually be seen as currently only requiring 2 – e.g. with 1 child or 2 children of the same sex.

There are many reasons why applicants may choose to apply for a certain size of property and given that housing need will be recognised where necessary, we would, within reason, intend leaving this choice to the applicants themselves.

We have therefore set some minimum and maximum occupancy limits to guide applicants. We will normally expect an applicant’s household to fall within these limits when applying for specific accommodation but reserve the right to lower minimum levels, if demand from larger household groups is not forthcoming or for some other estate management reason (e.g. house/flat not suitable for children).

Normal Minimum/Maximum Occupancy Limits:

Bedsit /Single Bedroom	1 person only
1 x Double Bedroom	1 - 2 persons
2 Bedrooms: 1x Single & 1 x Double	1 – 3 persons
2 Bedrooms: 2 x Double	1 – 4 persons
3 Bedrooms: 1 x Double & 2 x Single	2 – 4 persons
3 Bedrooms: 2 x Double & 1 x Single	3 – 5 persons
3 Bedrooms: 3 x Double Bedrooms	3 – 6 persons

In general, Servite reserves the right to make a reasonable interpretation with regard to best use of any property.

## 6. Priority Passes

There are 5 categories under which an applicant can apply for a Priority Pass, as listed below. Under each category, different levels of Pass can be awarded with Gold Plus being the

highest possible level, then Gold, Silver and finally Bronze. Applicants can apply for passes under more than one category but only the highest one will be awarded.

Applicants who wish to apply for a pass must provide additional information as requested. Passes will normally be valid for 12 months from issue.

If they have not been used within the 12 months and a suitable property has been advertised, then Priority Passes will be withdrawn and no subsequent application for a Priority Pass will be considered for a further 12 months.

If no suitable property is advertised within the 12 months of the Pass being issued it will be automatically renewed for a further 12 months.

If the reason(s) for awarding a Pass relate to a specific type or location(s) of properties, then it will be restricted to those properties only.

New applicants cannot apply for Priority Passes in relation to currently advertised properties, apart from those awarded Gold Plus Passes under the Homelessness category. Existing applicants cannot apply for passes/to vary passes in order to use them for currently advertised properties.

#### **(A) Homelessness**

- i. “Gold Plus”** Only if agreed referral by Council under Section 5 of Housing Act
- ii. “Bronze”** If assessed by the Council as homeless through no fault of the applicant but not in priority need as defined by the relevant homelessness legislation.

#### **(B) Unsuitable Property**

- i. “Gold”** No water or hot water supply or no inside WC or no cooking facility or no bath or shower or categorised as Below Tolerable Standard by Council
- ii. “Silver”** No fixed heating source or no WH Basin or categorised In Severe Disrepair by Council
- iii. “Bronze”** Current property considered unsuitable for other substantial reason. Only considered if priority is not awarded for this reason under any other section.

#### **(C) Health/Support Needs**

Awarding a Priority Pass will only be considered if the individual’s medical or support needs are not able to be met/continue to be met in their current accommodation and that this would be improved by a move to the accommodation requested.

- i. “Gold”** Rehousing is essential to allow discharge from hospital, care home or institution.

- ii. **“Silver”** Applicant cannot access or make use of (essential) part of current accommodation.
- iii. **“Bronze”** Rehousing would improve the applicant’s ability to carry out daily living tasks.

**(D) Overcrowding**

- i. **“Silver”** Severe Overcrowding (more than one person in the household has no suitable bedspace) or;  
Applicant’s household is sharing accommodation or any part of accommodation, with another household. (This would not apply if the property had always been the family home of a single applicant.)
- ii. **“Bronze”** Minor Overcrowding (one person has no suitable bedspace)

In order to assess the extent of overcrowding and designate suitable bedspaces, the following criteria will be used.

Children of the opposite sex over 8 years of age should not share a bedroom.  
Children of the same sex over 14 years of age should not share a bedroom.  
All rooms bigger than 5 square metres with natural lighting, other than any kitchen, bathroom, toilet and one living/dining room will be presumed to be able to be used as bedrooms.

**(E) Need to Be in Specific Location**

- i. **“Bronze”** To be nearer work place & no suitable transport available or journey to work time is > 1 hr; *or*  
To be nearer essential amenities & no suitable transport available; *or*  
To provide / make it easier to provide, care / support to family member.

**7. Deliberate Worsening of Circumstances**

If a registered applicant is considered to have deliberately worsened their housing circumstances in order to qualify for a Priority Pass, then no such priority will be awarded for a period of 24 months from the date of the worsening.

**8. Providing False Information & Initial Declarations**

If any applicant is considered to have provided false or misleading information when registering or applying for a Priority Pass, the application will be put on hold for 24 months.

If the situation is discovered after an offer has been made, it will be withdrawn and the same 24 month on hold period applied, subject to any appeal.

If a tenancy has commenced before the discovery is made, Servite will take legal advice with a view to starting court proceedings to end the tenancy and recover the property.

At initial registration, applicants must sign declarations relating the following:

- Residential Qualification
- Rent Arrears/ Rechargeable Repairs
- Anti Social Behaviour / Breach of Tenancy Conditions
- Agree that relevant bodies may provide Servite with supporting information
- All information provided is correct

(We will also ask for equal opportunities information at this stage)

If an applicant is unable or refuses to sign any of the declarations or will not allow Servite to obtain supporting information as required, the registration will be put on hold until Servite is satisfied that it is reasonable to accept it and sufficient information is made available.

## **9. Recording Decisions & Appeals**

All decisions relating to registration, priority and offers of tenancy, including rejection and withdrawal, will be fully recorded and applicants notified in writing.

If an applicant wishes to appeal any decision, they may firstly wish to obtain a full explanation from the Area Housing Officer concerned. If they are still dissatisfied, they must then ask the Housing Services Manager to review the decision. The results of this review will normally be sent to the applicant in writing within 15 working days of formal notification of the appeal being received by the Housing Services Manager. If further time is required to investigate, the Housing Services Manager will advise the applicant in writing within the first 15 days advising the reason for delay and giving a reasonable time limit by which a final decision will be made.

If still dissatisfied, the applicant will be advised to take up a formal complaint in line with Servite's Complaints Policy, at which stage the matter will be referred to Servite's Director.

## **10. Council Nominations & Referrals**

Nomination Agreements with local Councils will remain in place and we will negotiate where necessary to adapt any procedures to suit this lettings system. We will send Councils a copy of property to let adverts for their area, showing details of available properties and ask them to make suitable nomination(s). If the nominee(s) are not already registered, we will send out an invitation to do so, with a copy of the advert relating to the property they have been nominated for. They can then register and declare an interest in a particular property at the same time.

Normally Council nominees will be afforded no special priority (assessed as all other applicants) but if a referral is accepted in line with agreed Homelessness Protocols, they would be afforded Gold Plus priority status as described above.

## **11. Transfers**

Any current Servite tenant may register and apply for a Priority Pass in the same way as any other applicant. All other rules and eligibility criteria will equally apply to current tenants.

## **12. Mutual Exchanges**

Exchanges between Servite tenants or between Servite and any other social landlord will be allowed, subject to prior written permission being obtained from Servite and any other landlord.

Servite will only grant permission if properties are considered suitable and fit the needs of all parties concerned. This is taken to mean that once the parties have moved, they would not qualify for any priority for re-housing by Servite.

All tenants concerned will be expected to have maintained their tenancy to a satisfactory standard and would, in other circumstances have been able to sign the declarations required of other applicants at time of registration.

## **13. H.O.M.E.S Mobility Scheme**

The Association participates in this national mobility initiative. An application will be accepted under this scheme if they fulfil the criteria contained in Section 6 (C)iii. or 6 (E)i. above and a Bronze Priority Pass will therefore be awarded. HOMES applicants will then be advised to apply for advertised properties as they arise and considered along with other applicants as per this Policy.

## **14. On Hold Status**

Basic Registration should normally be completed immediately a form is received but any application may be placed “On Hold” for reasons listed below and as described under Section 16 in respect of refusing an offer of tenancy. While their registration is On Hold, the applicant cannot apply for any vacancy. The applicant will be advised in writing of his/her current status and will require to demonstrate good reason for it to be altered.

Reasons for Using On Hold Status -

- If the applicant is unable or unwilling to sign the declarations required at registration.
- If the applicant owes the Association or any other social landlord more than one month’s rent or the equivalent in terms of rechargeable repairs, recovery costs or legal expenses and has not made an arrangement to pay and made agreed payments for 3 months.
- Where the applicant has been subject to Anti Social Behaviour Order or legal action to recover any previous tenancy due to serious breach of tenancy conditions and there is no evidence or support to indicate that this will not be repeated.
- When applications require to be considered jointly with partner agencies or where Servite needs to be assured that sufficient support is available to help the applicant sustain any future tenancy - e.g. for Very Sheltered accommodation, where Care/Support packages have still to be agreed. In such cases Servite will actively refer the matter to the appropriate agencies.

- Where registrations are made via the internet or telephone, the application will be placed On Hold until a signed registration form is received. Thereafter the registration will apply from the date the information was received rather than the date the signature was applied.

## **15. Applying For More Than One House**

Registered Applicants (unless On Hold) may apply for as many vacancies as they wish. If they apply for more than one at a time, they will be asked to indicate their order of preference and only one tenancy will be offered to any one applicant at a time.

## **16. Refusing an Offer of Tenancy**

If an applicant refuses an offer without reasonable cause, they will be put on hold for 24 months. If their circumstances deteriorate substantially, though no fault of their own, their application may be reinstated within this period but this would only be in exceptional cases and will require the authorisation of the Housing Services Manager.

## **17. Publishing Information on Allocations**

Servite will regularly publish statistical information relating to lettings. This will detail the location/type of property, the number of applicants applying, whether best use or a priority pass was used and the date of registration of the successful applicant.

## **18. Keeping Registration Lists Up to Date**

All Registered Applicants they will be asked to reaffirm their interest once a year. See also details in Section 6 above whereby Priority Passes will automatically be withdrawn if they remain unused for 12 months and suitable properties have been advertised.

## **19. Schedule 7 Applications**

In accordance with legislation, special rules apply when Servite is considering offering a tenancy to any members of its Management Committee, employees or close relatives of either group. These rules also apply to anyone who has served on the Committee or been employed by Servite within the previous 12 months.

All applicants will therefore be asked to declare any such connection and where they do so, the Committee of Management must specifically approve any offer of tenancy.

In all other respects, such applications will be handled and assessed in accordance with the rules and criteria detailed in this Policy.