

FORUM HOUSING ASSOCIATION

Forum Housing Association is committed to the promotion of Equality of Opportunity, recognising that passive policies will not succeed in combating discrimination.

All the Association's Policies and Procedures have implicit in them a determination to challenge discrimination and promote positive action to achieve Equality of Opportunity which is not a paper exercise but a reality.

The above statement is applicable to this Policy.

RENT AND SERVICE CHARGE

ASSOCIATION POLICY

Forum Housing Association as a non-profit making organisation providing supported housing for young people provide homes using grants from the ODPM through contacts with administering authorities, and loans from Banks and Building Societies. Forum Housing Association also manage properties for other Registered Social Landlords and private landlords.

RENT SETTING POLICY

Forum Housing Association will set and maintain its rent levels in line with its Rent Restructuring policy.

PROCEDURE

1. The rent within the Association is set having regard for what the rent pays for, therefore rents will cover
 - the payment of loans
 - the costs of managing the housing
 - the costs of repairs and maintenance
 - future improvements
2. Rents are reviewed annually in line with the Housing Corporation and rent restructuring guidelines.
3. Full details of rent increases will be communicated to residents/tenants as described in their handbooks/welcome packs.

SERVICE CHARGE SETTING POLICY

Forum Housing Association aims to provide suitable and value for money services for its residents/tenants taking account of residents'/tenants' needs and wishes.

PROCEDURE

1. The cost of services provided are met through the levy of a service charge which is in addition to rent.
2. The service charge fee is based on existing and anticipated levels of service and cost.
3. The detail of services provided and the initial costs are contained within the tenancy/licence agreement.
4. Service charge reviews will be held annually in accordance with the tenancy/licence agreements and statutory requirements.
5. Full details of increases of service charges will be communicated to residents/tenants, by letter.

HOUSING BENEFIT POLICY

The Association accommodate a client group who may be on low incomes and qualify for Housing Benefit. Association staff will ensure residents/tenants understand the concept of and the requirement to complete Housing Benefit application forms by informing residents of the relevant material in the 'Welcome Pack' and working with the resident with regard to money management. As part of the support services staff will assist in the completion of Housing Benefit forms where required.

PROCEDURE

1. The Association will assist all residents/tenants in completing application forms for any benefit but the responsibility for making a valid claim rests with the resident/tenant. Housing Benefit may not pay the whole amount of rent due for residents/tenants who will then be responsible themselves for paying the difference from their personal income.
2. Housing Benefit claim forms once completed by the resident/tenant will be delivered to the Benefit office by a staff member (by post or by hand).
3. Potential Residents should be asked to bring as much identification as possible with them when attending an interview.

The detailed procedure for Association staff to follow covers the next 7 pages.

HB0 (Clarification Letter)

Should be **faxed** off to Housing Benefit Department the **day** the Resident moves in. Ensure this is signed by the Resident before faxing.

This to be noted on the Referral and Application Form.

HB00 (Housing Benefit Claim Form.)

Ensure these are signed correctly. Initials will **not** be accepted by Housing Benefit. Photocopy pages as listed below:

Wirral

- A - For all applicants pages 2, 3, 4, 13, 14, 15, 25, 31, 32.
- B - If working/training, as with A plus pages 4, 19, 20.
- C - If on Incapacity/DLA, as with A plus page 22

Sefton

- A - For all applicants pages 1, 2, 8, 18, 21, 24.
- B - If working/training, as with A plus page 9.
- C - If on Incapacity/DLA, as with A plus pages 3 or 12.

Ellesmere Port & Neston

- A - For all applicants pages 1, 2, 3, 8, 12, 22, 24.
- B - If working/training, as with A plus page 14.
- C - If on Incapacity/DLA, as with A plus page 16.

It is then taken/sent to Housing Benefit with the accompanying **HB1, HB2, HB3**, Licence Agreement (**Sefton Only**) and **HB6** if required.

This to be noted on the Referral and Application Form.

HB1 (Authority to Act)

Ensure this is signed and photocopied. Original is sent to Housing Benefit with the Claim Form, and copy is placed behind the Referral and Application Form.

HB2 (Rent Invoice)

Ensure this is signed and photocopied. Original is sent to Housing Benefit with the Claim Form, and copy is placed behind the Referral and Application Form.

HB3 (Receipt) Wirral only

This is sent to Housing Benefit with the Claim Form. Receipt will be signed and officially stamped by Housing Benefit and kept behind the Referral and Application Form.

HB4 (Hostel Verification) Not Applicable to Sefton

Ensure as much information as possible is written on this form. Send/take to One-Stop Shop/Housing Benefit with at least 2 forms of identification for each Resident. This to be noted on the Referral and Application Form and a copy HB4 kept behind Referral and Application Form.

HB5 (Proof of Income/Change of Address)

Can only be used for people claiming Benefits. This is given to the Resident to take to the Benefits Agency when the relevant information has been filled in. **Do not** fill in sections A or B. This will be done by the Benefits Agency. When the Resident returns this form, and Section A has been completed, it is to be photocopied. The original form is sent/faxed to Housing Benefit and the photocopy is placed behind the Referral and Application Form. If only Section B is completed the appointment is noted in the diary and the HB5 is given to the resident on the appointment date to represent. Only when Part A is completed is it proof of income.

This to be noted on the Referral and Application Form.

HB6 (Pre-Determination Form)

This is to be used **only** when a Resident has never claimed Benefits before i.e. 16/17 year olds leaving home and parents are claiming family allowance for them. This should be sent with the Housing Benefit Claim Form so that Housing Benefit is aware that the Resident has no income at the time of filling in the Claim Form (Copy is placed behind Referral and Application Form).

HB7 (Nil Income)

To be signed by the Resident only. Nothing else need be filled in. This is then placed behind the Referral and Application Form for future use if necessary.

HB8 (Authority for Housing Benefit to Contact Employers)

To be filled in and signed, ensuring all the relevant information is obtained, then sent/faxed to Housing Benefit. It is important to obtain wage slips and bank statements from the Resident and send to Housing Benefit. Employer's detail to be written on Referral and Application Form and a copy HB8 is placed behind the Referral and Application Form.

HB9 (Change of Circumstances)

This is to be used when the Resident has any changes in their circumstances, from working to benefits, from one benefit to another or change of pay whilst in work i.e. pay rise, going into hospital, starting training, change of room/flat etc within Project (Wirral only).

N.B. Change of address within the same Council, a change of address form is required. (Blue for Wirral – Yellow for Sefton)

This change is to be noted on the Referral and Application Form and faxed to Head Office to inform them of the change.

HB9.1 (Change of Finances)

Letter must be filled in. The original is given to the Resident and a copy HB9.1 kept behind the Referral and Application Form.

This change is to be noted on the Referral and Application Form and faxed to Head Office to inform them of the change.

Blue Change of Address Forms – Project to Project move Wirral only

N.B. Live Claim Checks to be completed every week until the Claim is up and running. Then every two weeks thereafter. These need to be diaried so all staff members are aware. If the staff are aware that the Resident has received a Giro or is on Benefit Payment Book, then they only have to monitor these claims or do monthly checks. Staff also need to monitor Residents on training schemes, because Residents have finished schemes and not informed the staff, thus causing problems with their Housing Benefit claim.

RENT COLLECTION POLICY

The Association will collect all its rent in the most efficient way.

The Association will receive a mandate from all residents/tenants authorising Housing Benefit to be paid directly to the Association.

PROCEDURE

1. The management of Housing Benefit rent collection is detailed in the Association's Housing Benefit system procedures and monitored via the computerised rent system.
2. All Project staff will ensure the collection of 'direct charges' from residents/tenants on a regular basis and by the processes detailed in the procedures.

RENT ARREARS POLICY

Forum Housing Association will endeavour to assist all its residents/tenants to be responsible for timely payment of all monies due to the Association. Should a resident/tenant fall behind on any due payments every effort will be made to come to an agreement on a schedule for paying off the arrears.

PROCEDURE

Housing Benefit Arrears Procedure

When a resident/tenant is accommodated by Forum Housing Association they will be informed that the responsibility for claiming Housing Benefit remains with themselves and the importance of co-operating with the staff in obtaining the relevant information to support their Housing Benefit claim. Staff will endeavour to help the resident as much as possible to ensure their claim runs smoothly.

The Housing Benefit Arrears Procedure should commence after a 4 week period of non-payment of Housing Benefit, due to the lack of co-operation from the resident. This will be in line with the "Procedure Guide for Positive Action" as detailed in the Behaviour and Lifestyles policy. Due to the particular subject matter of this policy "Stage 1 Verbal Statement" is not applicable. The resident should be made aware before this point, that failure to comply and co-operate in obtaining the required documentation for their Housing Benefit claim, would result in the "procedure guide for positive action" commencing. Procedural guidelines with positive options and procedural factors with positive outcomes have to be implemented before non-payment reaches 4 weeks.

Stage 2 – Written Statement

This is issued after a period of 4 weeks of non-payment of Housing Benefit, or when the monetary value of the outstanding balance exceeds 4 weeks of the Housing Benefit payment, due to insufficient evidence being obtained by the resident, to enable their claim for Housing Benefit to be processed e.g. identification / proof of income. The resident should be reminded again of their responsibility to produce the required documents and failure to comply with the instructions will result in further action being taken. Stage 2 written statement will be issued along with positive outcomes.

Stage 3 – Final Written Statement

This is issued after a period of 6 weeks (2 weeks after Stage 2) of non-payment of Housing Benefit, or the equivalent balance, due to failure by the resident to produce the required documents to process their Housing Benefit claim. This will result in an automatic audit. It may be appropriate to arrange a meeting between the resident/tenant and a Rent Liaison Officer to discuss ways to remedy the situation. This can be requested at any point from this stage.

Stage 4 – Notice to Quit

This is issued after a period of 8 weeks (2 weeks after Stage 3) of non-payment of Housing Benefit, or the equivalent balance, due to failure by the resident to produce the required documents to process their Housing Benefit claim. A 28 day notice will be issued. The resident/tenant will have the right to go on to the appeal stages from this point.

Direct Charge Arrears Procedure

When a resident/tenant is accommodated by Forum Housing Association they will be informed about the importance of paying their Direct Charges on a regular basis, according to when their income is received. This is part of the resident/tenant induction.

The Direct Charges Arrears Procedure should commence after a two week period of non-payment. This will be in line with the “Procedure Guide for Positive Action” as detailed in the Behaviour and Lifestyles policy. Due to the particular subject matter of this policy “Stage 1 Verbal Statement” is not applicable. The Resident will be made aware before this point, that failure to pay would result in the Arrears Procedure commencing. The evidence of this will be the procedural guidelines with positive options and procedural factors with positive outcomes being implemented.

Stage 2 – Written Statement

After a period of two weeks of non-payment, or when the monetary value of the outstanding balance exceeds 2 weeks of the Direct Charges due to persistent underpaying. Stage 2 written statement with positive options will be issued. (Unless staff are aware of the reasons for not being able to make the required payment e.g. Resident is being paid monthly, or having problems with their claim). The Resident should be reminded again that failure to comply with the contractual arrangements would result in the next stage of the procedure being implemented.

Stage 3 – Final Written Statement

After a period of three weeks of non-payment (one week after the second stage intervention was issued) or a Direct Charge balance of equivalent value, Stage 3 final written statement will be issued and will result in an automatic audit. An arrears invoice detailing the Direct Charges due, payments made by the Resident and the total outstanding balance should be attached giving the Resident a breakdown of the arrears and how they have been accrued. The Resident will be required to repay the arrears in full unless unable to do so without causing hardship to themselves and in this case, a revised repayment contract should be agreed. The Business Support Assistant as directed by the Project Manager will prepare this paperwork. The Resident should be reminded again that failure to comply with the contractual agreement may result in loss of accommodation.

Stage 4 – Notice to Quit

This is issued after a period of four weeks of non-payment (one week after the Stage 3 was undertaken) or a Direct Charge balance of equivalent value. A 28 day notice will be issued. The resident/tenant will have the right to go on to the appeal stages from this period.

Social Services Arrears Procedure

When the rent is paid by Social Services rather than Housing Benefit, periodic invoices are sent to the relevant Social Services Department. It is expected that invoices will take from 4 to 6 weeks to be paid, after this length of time the arrears procedure should commence.

Stage 1 (SS1)

This is issued after 6 weeks of non-payment of an invoice. The letter should be sent to the appropriate Social Services Department together with a copy of the original invoice.

Stage 2 (SS2)

This is issued after a period of 8 weeks of non-payment of an invoice. It should be followed up by a phone call to the relevant Department to ensure that they have received the letter and have the original invoice.

If necessary send a further copy of the invoices.

Stage 3 (SS3)

This is issued after a period of 10 weeks of non-payment of an invoice. A statement of the account should be sent to the relevant Local Authority Finance Department along with the letter. If payment is still not forthcoming it will then be necessary to move it to the bad debt procedure and consider write off of the invoice.

BAD DEBT WRITE OFF AND PROVISION POLICY

The Association aims to minimise the provision they make for bad debts by ensuring the collection of all monies due to it.

When it is inevitable that bad debt is written off only the Association's Board are authorised to do so.

PROCEDURE

1. Definition of a bad debt is described as 'a debt which has not been paid and is assessed as never likely to be paid'. The Association's procedures will determine the decision of bad debts.
2. Provision for the potential write off of bad debt will be determined annually with the assistance of the Association's auditors, having regard to the previous 2 years' position and the current climate prevailing.
3. Control and reporting of rent accounts will minimise bad debts arising and those reporting systems are integral to support decisions arrived at to write off bad debt.

4. Annually, when the management decision has been taken in respect of bad debt, a full report will be compiled and presented to the Resources Committee, who after discussion will determine what debt to write off and recommend to the Board the amount for writing off.
5. All bad debts, write offs and provisions will be reflected in the Association's accounts on the basis of S.O.R.P. and the Housing Corporation's guidance.
6. Unless otherwise directed any bad debt recovered after being written off will be credited to the current year's bad debt write off figure.

Non-compliance with this policy may result in disciplinary proceedings.