Frequently Asked Questions about Home4U

FEEDBACK / DETAILS OF THE BIDS YOU HAVE MADE

“Why do some of the properties I bid for still show as ‘shortlisting’ or ‘offered’ for weeks afterwards?”

We try to update the feedback as quickly as possible but there are a number of factors that can get in the way of this:

- If the property belongs to a landlord other than Stevenage Borough Council, North Herts Homes or Howard Cottage Housing Association, the process is longer and more complex and inevitably takes longer than for our own properties. They are sometimes slow to let us know the outcome of our nominations to them.
- Properties do not always become empty as soon as we expect them, so there is a delay before people can view them.
- Delays on properties can also occur because of unexpected lengthy repair work being needed.
- A property may be refused and so need to be offered and viewed more than once.

“What do the different ‘Statuses’ mean?”

There is a list at the bottom of the ‘Feedback’ page - although after you have made several bids you will have to scroll down to find it.

Status Key:

Open for bids = Bidding for this property is still open
Shortlisting = Bidding is closed and the shortlist is being prepared
Offered = The top bidder has been invited to view the property
Accepted = The property has been accepted and we are waiting for a letting date
Let = The property has been let

“Why don’t you let people know when they are not successful bidding for a property?”

700 or more bids are made every week, so it is not possible to give individual feedback on the position of every bid. The feedback available on the website shows the priority levels of successful applicants on properties, so applicants can see for themselves how their own bid compared.

As we contact the top bidders within a day or two of the bidding closing, if you have not heard from us within a few days you will realise that you have not been successful. This may occasionally take longer if we have to re-offer the property.

“What does ‘My Rank’ mean?”

This tells you your approximate position for that particular property only. We divide it up into 1\textsuperscript{st} to 5\textsuperscript{th}, 6\textsuperscript{th} to 10\textsuperscript{th}, 11\textsuperscript{th} to 20\textsuperscript{th}, Over 20\textsuperscript{th}
You will probably see that your rank/position is different from one property to the next and you may be able to use this to work out which are the best properties or areas for you to bid for.

“I would like to see my actual position when I make my bid”

Unfortunately our system does not support this at the moment as it is something that changes all the time as applicants make bids or delete previous bids. The figure that matters is reached only when the shortlist is closed. And even then it can be misleading as it is possible that, for example, someone who is 10th on the list could be successful because the applicants in front of them have bid successfully for other properties, or have refused offers, or have failed final checks on their eligibility.

THE BIDDING PROCESS

“Why does bidding start on Thursday when it says it starts on Friday?”

When we were on a fortnightly cycle, bidding would start on Friday morning at the latest, but it was often set up before then – so if it was, we ‘switched it on’. Since we moved to a weekly cycle each new void edition should be available online from noon on each Thursday.

It does not matter whether you make your bids as soon as the system is switched on or just before 2.00pm the following Wednesday or at any time in between – your level of points will decide your position on the shortlist.

“We should be able to bid for more than 3 properties at a time”.

Since we moved to a weekly bidding cycle we still allow 3 bids each cycle so have effectively doubled the number of bids you can make.

“I would like to be able to check how points are awarded”

For Stevenage applicants, you can do this from the Home4U website in Contacts by clicking on the Stevenage Borough Council link. Then on the left of the screen click on “I want to apply for housing”. At the bottom of the page you can click on the link to Stevenage Borough Council Allocations Scheme 2010 to get the full version of the policy, which should give you all the answers you need.

For North Herts applicants, please look at your registration letter, which tells you why you have been awarded the band and points. For the allocations scheme, please go the website of North Herts District Council, North Herts Homes or Howard Cottage Housing Association.

PROPERTY INFORMATION

“Why don’t you provide more photographs for each property?”

Home4U is run by a small team of people and, unlike estate agents, we do not have the facilities to provide more information on the properties. We also create the adverts for the properties while the existing tenant is still living there, so could not insist on taking photos of the interior.

We try not to specifically identify an advertised property as this can be a source of nuisance to the existing tenant if they have not yet moved out. It could also increase the risk of ‘squatters’ moving in.

When the property belongs to a housing association, they do not always provide a photograph.
“Why don’t you provide floor plans for each property?”

This is something we would like to do but again our resources and time are limited. In Stevenage, we have an archive with floor plans covering some of the properties built by the Development Corporation from the 1950s to the 1970s, but because of their age we feel that their clarity and accuracy may fall short of today’s expectations.

In North Herts, we do not have floor plans of properties.

“What does ‘affordable rent’ mean?”

‘Affordable rent’ is a new policy introduced by the government and is intended to provide an alternative to social rented homes and will be used only by housing associations.

- In the future, most housing association new build homes and some re-let homes will be let on affordable rents.
- Housing associations will be able to charge rents of up to a maximum of 80% of a private sector rent for a property of similar size and location.
- Tenants living in affordable rent homes will be eligible for housing benefit.
- We will advertise Affordable rent properties in Home4U in the same way as social rented homes and the advert will clearly state that the property is affordable rent.
- Applicants will be free to bid for the property or not, as they choose, exactly as they do now.

What does ‘fixed term tenancy’ mean?

Housing association tenancies used to be ‘tenancies for life’. In many cases, housing associations have stopped giving such tenancies, and new tenancies are for a fixed term, usually 2 years, 5 years or more. You should check with the housing association landlord about whether the tenancy would be renewed, at the end of the term.

“Why do you withdraw some properties after we have bid for them?”

This is unfortunate but if a tenant withdraws their notice before surrendering the keys to us, we cannot force them to move out. We will withdraw a property ourselves if it becomes obvious once we have the keys that major structural works are needed and we know it will be months before it is ready to let. (We must begin to advertise properties as soon as we hear they are going to become empty otherwise we would be faced with much longer ‘void’ periods, take longer to re-house people and lose large amounts of rent).

On rare occasions we may need to use a property at short notice to re-house one of our tenants whose home has been seriously damaged by e.g. a fire or flood.

Housing associations face similar problems with their properties.

“Why don’t you advertise the sort of properties I want?”

All of our residential properties are advertised in Home4U - if you do not see the type and/or size of property or area you want, it will be because they are not coming empty.

“We would like to see how many bids there are already on a property, to decide whether it is worth bidding.”

This is one of the ideas that we would be interested in as well, and we have asked our software supplier to consider including it in a future release.