

1 Scope

- 1.1 This policy sets out our approach to the collection of rent, support, and other charges, and the action we will take to recover arrears. It highlights our commitment to ensure our customers are financially included, able to sustain their tenancies and receive a flexible person-centred service.
- 1.2 This policy applies to all Aster Group customers, including their appointed family members and advocates where applicable.
- 1.3 The policy links to Aster's Rent First approach which encourages all colleagues to understand that rent collection is critical to the aims of the business. This includes improving our digital approach to income collection providing our customers with every possible payment option making our income collection more efficient.

2 Policy Statement

- 2.1 We will ensure that our methods of rent and arrears collection comply with the Rent Standard and housing legislation, along with the court pre-action protocol. We will also ensure compliance with any data protection policy and anti-money laundering policies.
- 2.2 We will maximise the collection of rent, support charges, service charges and any other monies owed to us.
- 2.3 We will offer customers a variety of payment methods which are easy to use and economical.
- 2.4 We are unable to accept cash payments at our offices (with the exception of East Boro Housing Trust - EBHT).
- 2.5 Our Financial Wellbeing Team will support customers who are experiencing financial hardship by providing advice, support with benefit advice, and sign posting to specialist financial and debt organisations. They can signpost and support customers who need to set up a bank account. For EBHT customers, EBHT's Income Management Team will be able to provide this support.
- 2.6 We will support customers affected by welfare reforms such as the under-occupation penalty, the benefit cap, and local housing allowance restrictions to downsize to a more affordable home.
- 2.7 We will encourage customers to pay their rent in advance to prevent arrears on their account. We can help customers in financial hardship achieve this over time by putting payment plans in place.
- 2.8 We will communicate with our customers by providing account statements when requested, telling them of any changes to their accounts, encouraging them to tell us before they get into difficulty with their payments, and having appropriate advice on our website.

- 2.9 We will communicate primarily by telephone, email, and letter; but will take the customer's preferred method of contact into account.
- 2.10 We will tell customers when their account goes into arrears. We'll give advice and provide signposting to customers and work with our partners and other agencies to help customers in financial difficulty. We'll make arrangements for the repayment of debt, considering the circumstances of the customer.
- 2.11 We will use a staged approach to debt collection. We only consider court proceedings when arrears have not been reduced or when a repayment agreement hasn't been made. We will take action to evict when engagement and agreed repayments from a court order have failed. When necessary, we will take legal action to collect money owed by former customers.
- 2.12 We reserve the right to refuse to re-house an existing Aster Group customer or leaseholder who owes us money for rent, support charges, service charges or any other debt other than in exceptional circumstances as approved by the Regional Head of Housing (Aster), Director of Housing Services (EBHT) or Director of Housing and Customer Services (Central and Cecil Housing Trust – C&C).
- 2.13 We reserve the right to refuse to house new applicants or former customers of Aster Group who still have housing or support related debt with Aster or another housing provider, who have failed to keep to a repayment plan for six consecutive months or make a reasonable attempt to clear the majority of the debt other than in exceptional circumstances as approved by the Regional Head of Housing (Aster), Director of Housing Services (EBHT) or Director of Housing and Customer Services (C&C).
- 2.14 Garages won't be let to anyone who owes money on any other Aster account. If a customer has a rent account with Aster and they fall into arrears, we will look to end the garage licence. If payments are made to a garage in favour of rent arrears on a property, we reserve the right to move the payments to protect the home tenancy.
- 2.15 We will take the needs of vulnerable people into account when enforcing this policy, including any disabilities, deputies, appointees, or informed consents.
- 2.16 If you would like any help and support with your rent or financial concerns, please contact the Financial Wellbeing Team on 0333 400 8222. There is further information on our website: [Get help with paying your rent \(aster.co.uk\)](https://www.aster.co.uk). The Financial Wellbeing Team can also support with income maximisation, budgeting and into work advice.
- 2.17 We are committed to inclusivity and accessibility and will endeavour to provide our communication and policies in accessible formats and in other languages when requested or required.

3. Consultation, Monitoring and Review

- 3.1 In reviewing this Income Management Policy we consulted with involved customers who have expressed an interest in giving us their views on customer service policies, as well as colleagues who are involved in the lettings and management of our homes.
- 3.2 Policy updates will be delivered to relevant teams following implementation of this policy to ensure the content and responsibilities are understood.

3.3 There are a range of Key Performance Measures (KPIs) used to monitor arrears performance:

- Current tenant arrears
- Former tenant arrears
- % Rent Collected
- Leasehold arrears
- Shared ownership arrears

Arrears performance is reported monthly to the Aster Customer Service Leadership Team and the EBHT Board, and included in the Business Critical KPIs to ensure compliance and adherence with this policy and relevant Aster strategies.

3.4 The effectiveness of this policy will be continuously monitored, and the embedding of the policy scrutinised after 12 months by the *Customer Experience Panel*.

3.5 This policy will be reviewed every 3 years unless business need, regulation or legislation prompts an early review.

4 Related Policies and Procedures

- ❖ Diversity and Inclusion Policy
- ❖ Rent and Other Charges Policy
- ❖ Recoverable Service Charge Policy
- ❖ Honesty Policy
- ❖ Customer Accounts Procedure
- ❖ Former Customer Accounts Procedure
- ❖ Former Customer Accounts Legal Remedies Procedure
- ❖ Write On Write Off Procedure
- ❖ Collection of Income by Credit/Debit Card Procedure
- ❖ Refund Procedure
- ❖ Bankruptcy & Debt Relief Order Procedure
- ❖ Garage Customer Accounts Procedure
- ❖ Shared Ownership Procedure
- ❖ Leasehold Arrears Procedure
- ❖ Recharge procedure
- ❖ Eviction Procedure
- ❖ Financial Wellbeing Service Procedure

5 Governance			
Effective From:	13/10/2022	Expires:	13/10/2025
Policy Owner:	Regional Operations Director		
Policy Author:	Policy and Assurance Officer		
Approved by:	<i>Customer Overview Group</i>		
Delegation Matrix Reference:	R056	Version Number:	5.0