



Affordable Home Ownership Update

December 2022

Summary

We are changing the services we provide for Affordable Home Ownership

Affordable Home Ownership (AHO) covers the Shared Ownership (SO) and Rent to Buy schemes which Homes England funds using the Affordable Homes programmes.

From 31 March 2023 the current Help to Buy (HtB) Agent services will end. Currently Homes England requires grant recipients to list AHO homes for sale on a HtB Agent website and sell to someone who is registered with a HtB Agent.

From 1 April 2023, we are replacing the current service with a new service on gov.uk. The new service will allow customers to:

- check if they are eligible online (and get an immediate answer)
- find an organisation providing affordable homes themselves, using a new online search directory designed and built by Homes England

Background

We have undertaken a research and development project exploring how we can improve the current AHO service. We have conducted extensive research into how people buy affordable homes. We interviewed and held workshops with:

- people looking to buy using an AHO scheme (home seekers)
- organisations that have been given grants to build affordable homes
- other stakeholders in the home-buying process (such as local authorities, legal advisers, and mortgage advice firms)

We used the feedback from this research to redesign our service.

Feedback





Our research showed that:

- The most common customer need was to be able to find clear, consistent information on the AHO schemes
- Customers do not typically find their home using the current HtB Agent service. They use property search websites, or find a home through provider marketing
- Customers have to complete an application form with a HtB Agent as well as giving the same details to Providers. Often they have already registered with a Provider and found a home to buy, but then have to go through the registration process with a HtB Agent as well. This could cause a delay of up to 4 days while their application was approved. In some cases, this meant they missed out on the home they were hoping to buy
- Customers who had been confirmed as eligible for the scheme were disappointed when they then did not meet affordability criteria to buy. They felt that understanding affordability was more important than eligibility checks
- Providers felt that replacing the 3 regional Help to Buy Agents with one service would help users as there would only be one place to go
- Providers had differing opinions on whether Homes England providing a single application service would be useful. They felt that it would still cause issues for customers who came to the Provider via their own database or marketing
- Providers told us that the HtB Agent websites were not a main source of their leads
- Many providers felt that removing the obligation to list AHO homes for sale on HtB Agent websites would save them time and give them flexibility to choose where to advertise. They did recognise that this may make the experience worse for some customers who use the current service

The new service

When considering the new service, we have considered:

- The user needs we discovered in our research
- The feasibility of delivering a new service
- The value for money of delivering a service using public funds

The new service will go live 1 April 2023 (excepting the Guidance content which is already live).

The new service is split into three parts:

- Guidance content
- Eligibility checker
- Provider search directory

The new service will meet all government accessibility standards.





Guidance content

Customer and providers told us that it was important to have information about AHO schemes which was clear, concise, and consistent. Customers wanted this to be from a trusted source.

We have updated the guidance for [Shared Ownership](#) and [Rent to Buy](#) on gov.uk.

We have launched [Key Information Document](#) packs (KIDs) for providers to use when advertising and selling homes. These provide information to customers in a clear and consistent way.

All of this content was tested with users and providers using an iterative process to make improvements. The guidance will be updated to reflect the new service when this goes live.

Eligibility checker

Customers wanted to be able to check upfront if they were eligible for an AHO scheme. This was so they didn't waste time searching for a home they couldn't buy.

We will publish a self-service eligibility checker where customers can input their details and find out in real time if they may be eligible.

Providers will be responsible for ensuring the customers they sell to are eligible for the scheme. Homes England will provide updated guidance on how to evidence this in January 2023.

As there will no longer be a database of applicants, Providers will no longer be able to access aggregated demand data through the HtB Agents.

Provider search directory

Customers who did not find a home through property search websites or providers' marketing wanted a way to find an AHO home in their area.

We will build a service which allows customers to find an organisation providing grant-funded AHO homes, using a new online search directory.

They will be able to search by:





- location
- scheme type (shared ownership, rent to buy, OPSO, HOLD etc)

Homes England will no longer require Providers to list grant-funded homes on the HtB Agent websites, because these will be decommissioned from 1 April 2023. Instead, Providers will supply us with details to ensure the search directory is up to date.

We'll be contacting providers early next year to collect these details:

- Company name
- URL for where you want users to land on your website
- Telephone number
- Email
- Which schemes you offer (OPSO, HOLD)
- The local authority areas where you develop AHO homes.

This process will be repeated periodically, so customers have up-to-date information

We have designed a prototype search directory and tested this with customers to make sure it is easy to use and meets their needs. Initial feedback has been very positive and we will make improvements based on what we have learned. This will be tested again in the new year.

Next steps

Homes England will:

- Work with HtB Agents and Providers to finalise plans for closing down the old service
- Provide messaging to customers who have already applied and those who visit the HtB Agent websites
- Provide process guides and support for Providers
- Update guidance on GOV.UK and other government owned websites
- Provide messaging to property aggregator sites who list AHO

Contact

If you have any queries or would like to book time to discuss how your organisation can implement these changes, please email AHO.transformation@homesengland.gov.uk