

Agenda Item	10.
Report No	HP/20/22

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Housing and Property Committee

Date: 17 November 2022

Report Title: Tenant Participation and Engagement Update

Report By: Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides an update on a range of actions being undertaken to continually improve Tenant Participation in Highland.

2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to: -
NOTE the ongoing progress in improving tenant participation in Highland.

3 Implications

3.1 **Resource** - There are no resource implications arising from this report.

3.2 **Legal** - There are no legal implications arising from this report. Submitting the Annual Return of the Scottish Social Housing Charter; submitting a Committee-approved Annual Assurance Statement to the Scottish Housing Regulator; and issuing an Annual Customer Report to our tenants are all regulatory requirements.

3.3 **Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural)** - There are no equality implications arising from this report.

3.4 **Climate Change** - There are no climate change implications arising from this report.

3.5 **Risk** - Risk is managed through regular review and reporting to allow corrective action to be taken if necessary.

3.6 **Gaelic** - There are no Gaelic implications arising from this report.

4 Background

- 4.1 The Scottish Social Housing Charter (SSHC) was established in April 2012 and sets out the standards and outcomes that service users such as tenants, homeless households and Gypsy/Travellers can expect from social housing providers. As part of the regulation process, the Scottish Housing Regulator requires social landlords to provide it with an annual performance return, focused on the outcomes of the Charter.
- 4.2 One of the fundamental Charter principles is that social landlords need to involve tenants and other customers in the design and delivery of housing services. The Scottish Social Housing Charter sets out 4 outcomes that directly relate to Tenant Participation
- 4.3 Outcome 2 - Communication: Tenants and other customers find it easy to communicate with their landlord and get the information they need about their landlord, how and why it makes decisions and the services it provides.
- 4.4 Outcome 3 - Participation: Tenants and other customers find it easy to participate in and influence their landlord's decisions at a level they feel comfortable with.
- 4.5 Outcome 14 & 15 - Rents and service charges: a balance is struck between the level of services provided, the cost of the services, and how far current and prospective tenants and service users can afford them. Tenants get clear information on how rent and other money is spent, including details of any individual items of expenditure above thresholds agreed between landlords and tenants.

5 Communication

- 5.1 The Coronavirus pandemic meant that we had to adapt the way we communicated with our tenants and customers. This included a move to digital communications and support was put in place to assist our tenants in accessing information and forums online.
- 5.2 Since Coronavirus restrictions have eased, we have restarted face-to-face meetings and events. However, many of our tenants and customers wish to continue communicating and meeting online. We have now adopted a hybrid approach which reflects our tenants' preferred means of communication.
- 5.3 The Highland Tenant Network, a private online platform for our tenants and customers to interact with officers and with each other, continues to grow and provide up-to-date information on tenant services and engagement activity.
- 5.4 We have resumed delivery of our printed tenant newsletter which delivers information and news to all Highland Council Tenants. The October issue contained the Annual Customer Report; information about the Annual Assurance Statement; and news from tenant representatives across Highland. This issue was also strongly focussed on the "Cost of Living" crisis with information and advice for tenants who require help or support in these difficult times.

6 Participation

- 6.1 The objectives of the Tenant Participation Team are:
 - To actively encourage tenants to be involved in decisions which will affect them, their homes and communities;
 - To actively support tenants and the Council to work together to improve services for all tenants;

- To offer a range of options for tenants and residents to participate collectively or individually at a level that suits them;
- To ensure tenants have the support and information needed to enable them to be involved;
- To provide tenants with up-to-date information on the services that affect them;
- To develop training opportunities for staff and tenants across a range of housing activities; and
- To ensure tenant participation activities reflect equal opportunities and are accessible to all.

6.2 Over the past twelve months we have continued to:

- carry out telephone, online and face-to-face tenant surveys;
- hold online and face-to-face tenant meetings and Forums; and
- deliver informational web casts on a variety of topical subjects. These have included Fire Safety, Mental Wellbeing, Energy Efficiency and Awareness of Scams.

6.3 There has been a recent upturn in interest from tenants and residents in coming together to form new registered Tenant and Resident Groups. This has resulted in six new groups being formed within the last year. New committee members - including many younger tenants - have joined existing groups and there are now 22 groups in total across Highland.

6.4 The Tenant Participation Team have been supporting many of these groups to access external funding to enable them to carry out community projects in their area. These projects include food-growing projects, community fridge / larder projects and open advice days which are attended by the Council's Welfare Team, energy advisors, Citizens Advice and other statutory services and advice agencies.

6.5 We have carried out 12 Rate Your Estate walkabouts across Highland so far this Summer and Autumn. These were well attended by tenants and residents, Council officers and Elected Members. The walkabouts enable tenants and residents to highlight issues that are important to them and prioritise work they would like to see carried out in the areas they live in. Action plans are now being worked through for each of the areas.

6.6 We have worked closely with and provided support to the following tenant strategic and working groups:

- Highland Tenant Scrutiny Group – this independently scrutinise policies and services, the most recent being the Empty Homes Standard;
- Highland Disability Panel – this consults and works directly with Housing on those services and facilities which affect tenants with disabilities;
- Value for Money Working Group – this consults and works directly with Housing on issues around budgets priorities, the HRA and rent setting;
- Towards Net Zero Working Group – this consults and works directly with Housing on issues around energy efficiency and Scottish Government Net Zero targets to reflect tenant priorities;
- Repairs Working Group – a short-term working group looking at improvements in the delivery of the repairs service;

- Tenant Participation Strategy Working Group – this consults and works directly with Housing on reviewing the Tenant Participation Strategy and Action Plan and ongoing regular monitoring of the action plan.

6.7 We work closely with and support the two tenant representatives on the Housing and Property Committee. The current representatives were nominated by the Highland-wide Tenant Forum in September 2022 and the representatives consult with the Forum.

6.8 It should be noted that we have three of our interested tenants involved in Tenant Participation at a national level.

- A tenant from Beaully sits on Regional Networks as a Region 1 representative. She also sits on several regional networks working groups and has recently been appointed to the Scottish Government advisory group “Accessible Housing and Independent Living Stakeholder Group”, which has a remit to advise on relevant commitments in the Scottish Government’s Housing to 2040 strategy document;
- A tenant from Ballachulish sits on the Board of Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) Scotland;
- A tenant from Caithness sits on the National Panel of Tenants for the Scottish Housing Regulator.

6.9 Highland Council officers and tenants lead on the regional group Northern Tenant Partnership. This is a landlord and staff group who meet quarterly to work collaboratively to share information and improve levels of tenant participation. Members include both officers and tenants from local authorities and housing associations in Highland, Moray, Orkney, Shetland and Western Isles.

7 Rents and Service Charges

7.1 The 2023/2024 rent consultation is currently underway. The consultation is mainly digital with Highland Council tenants being contacted by either email, text message or, where we did not hold email or mobile contact details, by post. All tenants are given the opportunity to respond by email, by text or by phone.

7.2 The consultation is available on the Highland Council website and is being promoted on Facebook and Twitter. A video of the rent discussion workshop was produced and published on the Council website for tenants to access at their own convenience.

7.3 We have also held meetings with registered tenant organisations and groups of interested tenants via Microsoft Teams. These workshops focus in greater depth on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), the affordability of rent and the priorities of tenants.

7.4 The response rate to the consultation will be presented to Committee in January 2023 as part of the 2023/2024 Revenue Estimates report.

8 Going Forward

8.1 In addition to the work detailed already in this report our priorities for the coming year are to:

- increase provision of information to tenants on where they can access support and advice in relation to the current cost of living crisis. This will be done digitally with online webinars, the Highland Tenants Network and social media, in print through newsletters, leaflets and at face to face drop in roadshows and events;
- increase engagement with young tenants (under-30 years) to understand how we can support them to reduce rent arrears / improve tenancy sustainment;

- continue to increase awareness of the role of the Highland Council Housing Service among young people through our Junior Warden schemes;
- increase our usage of digital media to promote and increase participation, particularly with young people;
- produce a series of short informative videos for tenants based around the Tenant Handbook;
- produce a series of short training videos and leaflets for tenants based around the housing services we provide; and
- produce a series of short training videos for tenants and officers on good practice in Tenant Participation.

8.2 We are working with tenants to produce a revised Tenant Participation Strategy 2023-2026 and this will be circulated to Members once it is approved by tenants.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property

Date: 26 October 2022

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Background Papers: Scottish Social Housing Charter