



# Rural Stirling

HOUSING ASSOCIATION

## **Tenant Participation Strategy 2015-16**

## 1 BACKGROUND

As an organisation Rural Stirling has actively supported tenant participation since it was established. Over the years we have consulted our tenants in a range of housing related issues. We encourage our tenants to become members of the Association and to take an active role in influencing our policies and the services we provide.

We recognise the benefits of involving and consulting with tenants in the management of the organisation and about the services we provide - we believe it leads to the provision of better, more effective and efficient services. As an organisation we are committed to providing a range of opportunities for tenants to become involved, at a level they feel comfortable with, in issues they are interested in.

We aim to make tenant participation an integral part of RSHA. We are not doing this to fulfil legal obligations but because we believe that tenants should have their opinions listened to and that this is an essential and positive component of our aim to continually improve our services.

As a small housing association operating in rural areas with stock widely dispersed in small settlements over a large area, we face challenges and barriers which landlords operating in urban areas do not- problems such as getting people together, poor and expensive transport links and ensuring that information is effectively disseminated. . We will work in a way that attempts to deal with these barriers.

The independent Tenant Satisfaction Survey carried out in 2013 –involving face to face interviews with over 40% of our tenants- indicated a high level of satisfaction with our approach to participation and consultation

- 94% of tenants think RSHA is good at keeping them informed about its services and the decisions it makes ( up from 91% in 2010)
- 95% of tenants are satisfied with the opportunities given to participate in RSHA's decision making processes

When asked in the survey, what level of involvement in RSHA's work they would prefer, 87% of tenants said they just wanted to be kept informed whilst 13% wanted to have their say and be involved in decision making.

This Strategy aims to set out how we will seek to continue work in partnership with tenants to make sure we provide the best services we can. We will aim to do this in a way that meets the needs and aspirations of those who 'just want to be kept informed' as well as those who want a greater level of involvement.

Although they do not have the same legal rights as tenants in terms of participation and consultation, we aim to use the key principles of this strategy in our dealings with our others who use our services – sharing owners, factored owners and applicants for housing.

## 2. WHAT IS TENANT PARTICIPATION?

Tenant Participation can be defined as a two-way process involving sharing of information and ideas, where tenants are able to influence decisions and take part in what is happening. Through this tenants are enabled to have a say in decision making and the accountability of the landlord to tenants is promoted.

The National Strategy for Tenant Participation uses the following definition:

“Tenant participation is about tenants taking part in decision making processes and influencing decisions about:

- housing policies
- housing conditions
- Housing and related services.

It is a two way process which involves the sharing of information, ideas and power. Its aim is to improve the standard of housing conditions and service”, and ‘ effective participation leads to better and more responsive management and this helps inform decisions about improving service delivery and providing value for money’

## 3. LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

The Housing (Scotland) Act introduced specific responsibilities on social landlords to develop tenant participation and consultation processes.

The main provisions can be summarised as follows:

- A legal duty to provide information to tenants on matters concerning their tenancy, how their houses are managed and maintained,
- A duty to prepare a strategy for tenant participation which promotes the participation of tenants in the formulation of proposals in relation to the management of housing and related services in so far as these are likely to affect tenants.
- A duty to set up and maintain a register of tenants organisations (RTOs); to make this publicly available; to publicise criteria for registration and the fact that there is a statutory right of appeal by groups denied access to it.
- A duty to consult with tenants and RTOs on proposed changes to rents/service charges and any other significant changes to housing management/maintenance services and the tenant participation strategy. Landlords must also consider how they aim to involve tenants groups which do not seek to register.

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 does not supersede the 2001 Act but refocuses the role of tenants. It introduced the Scottish Social Housing Charter (SSHC) which sets out the standards that landlords are expected to achieve for tenants and other customers to deliver high quality services. The standard in relation to tenant participation is as follows

*‘Social landlords should manage their businesses so that tenants and other customers find it easy to participate in and influence their landlords’ decisions at a level they feel comfortable with’.*

Tenant scrutiny of performance forms a key part of Charter requirements and offers a new way to get involved and participate. We have previously made performance information –

along with comparisons of our performance with other landlords- in our newsletters, annual report, and website. We intend developing mechanisms for meaningful tenant scrutiny of our performance on an ongoing basis.

#### **4. EQUALITIES**

The Equality Act 2010 applies to everyone who provides a service to the public, and aims to ensure that everyone is treated fairly and with respect. Through the our Tenant Participation Strategy we aim to adhere to this legislation and ensure that no individual or group is treated unfairly or discriminated against on the grounds of race, colour, culture, ethnic or national origin, religion, orientation , marital status or disadvantaged by any other factor.

##### **Barriers to getting involved**

We realise that are many barriers which make it difficult for people to get involved, and in addition there are some that are a particular problem in the rural areas. Most of these were highlighted in a 'Code of Practice for Tenant Participation in Rural Areas' published by the Scottish Executive in 2001. We are committed to trying to overcome these barriers by developing particularly rural solutions to encourage participation.

When organising events or holding a consultation exercise we will

- Hold meetings in places that are convenient and easy to get to, and are barrier free
- Arrange transport where necessary and encourage car sharing
- Hold meetings on days and times that are convenient
- Provide crèche facilities or care facilities where necessary

We will look at new ways to allow people to get involved and will investigate opportunities for tenants to make their views known through our website or using social media

#### **5. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF OUR STRATEGY**

We recognise that people want to participate at different levels and in different ways; attar the process of engaging with tenants can take many forms. We aim to provide a range of opportunities to meet these aspirations for different levels of involvement by

- a. providing good clear information to tenants and other customers to ensure that they know what is happening, the services they can expect and their rights and responsibilities
- b. developing a range of consultation mechanisms to ensure that we find out what tenants think and taking their views into account
- c. developing mechanisms to allow those who are interested to be involved in the scrutiny of our performance
- d. providing the opportunities for tenants to have a direct role in making decisions through membership and representation on the management committee

#### **6. Communication with Tenants**

We understand that in order to allow tenants and other customers to make an informed choice we need to provide good quality information and advice. We will do this through the following means:

- An easy to understand Scottish Secure Tenancy Agreement
- New tenant pack
- Tenant Handbook
- Information leaflets
- Regular newsletters
- Annual Report
- Annual ARC report
- Website
- Annual statements of rent account
- Policies and procedures available on request
- Public meetings
- Local noticeboards
- Local press

We will provide written information in a clear and easy to understand format using plain language and where necessary provide information in alternative formats. We are members of Happy to Translate.

## **7. Consultation and obtaining feedback**

### **Seeking feedback**

We believe that tenants' views are important and we will use these to improve our service. We will provide the following opportunities

- Repair satisfaction slips
- New tenant surveys
- End of tenancy surveys
- 3 yearly tenant satisfaction surveys
- Complaints and feedback policy
- Focus groups

We will seek to continually improve how we gather feedback and tenants views and we will continue to develop different opportunities during the life of this strategy.

We are committed to providing feedback on how tenant's views and feedback are used to influence the decisions we make.

### **Consultation register**

We have a consultation register; we recognise that not all our tenants want to be consulted on all the changes we plan to make to our policy and procedures. We therefore have a consultation register made up of people who want the opportunity to get more involved in reviewing changes to our services. We will review this annually, asking them to highlight their main areas of interest and whether they want to be consulted by post or email. This will allow us to consult with tenants on issues that may interest them, in a way that suits them.

### **Tenants Groups**

We encourage the formation of formal tenants groups (the group must have a constitution and office bearers to be formal). As long as they support our tenants we will support them by

- providing practical help and support ( photocopying, admin, meeting room )
- delivering or arranging training
- Providing grant funding.

We have a duty to consult any registered tenants organisation (RTOs) on issues that affect them. The criteria for registration are found at appendix1.

While we encourage RTOs we appreciate that not everyone wants to get' formally' involved and for some smaller developments this would not be appropriate. For this reason we are happy to support and consult with non-registered and informal groups,

### **Tenant Forum**

We have a Tenants Forum which meets at least four times a year. It is open to all tenants and gives an opportunity for discussion and feedback on a range of housing issues. The current remit is found at appendix 2. It is likely that this role will expand over the next year as the Forum takes on a role in scrutiny of performance.

## **8. Tenant involvement in Scrutiny**

The introduction of the Charter requires landlords to involve tenants in the scrutiny of their performance against the Charter. There is no prescribed form about what this should involve but landlords are required to

- Agree their approach to self-assessment with tenants
- Publicise it to tenants
- Demonstrate how their approach is being implemented

Tenant scrutiny is new and initially the Tenants Forum will take on the role of a scrutiny panel. However, it is envisaged that the Association's approach will develop and change during the life of this strategy with new initiative being built into the annual action plans

## **9. Tenant membership**

Tenants can exercise further control by becoming members of the Association. We will encourage membership regularly through our newsletters and in addition invite all new tenants to join. As members, tenants can then become members of the Management Committee. Individual tenants who wish to explore this will be encouraged to discuss the issue with the Director and will be provided with advice and training.

## **10. Monitoring and Review**

A review of the whole strategy will be carried out after every three years although an Action Plan with Priority Actions and budget for the year ahead will be reviewed on annual basis.

Information will be recorded and annually publicised to tenants and the Association's Committee of Management on the processes of consultation and involvement undertaken during the year and their outcomes. This will include details of:

- Progress in implementing the priority actions set down within the Strategy.
- Number of meetings by type etc. held with tenants and numbers attending
- Other methods of participation e.g. questionnaires and numbers taking part.
- Changes in tenant share-holding membership of Rural Stirling Housing Association and attendance at the AGM.

## APPENDIX 1

### Criteria for Registration of Tenant Organisations

1. The organisation must have a publicly available written constitution that sets out:
  - its objectives and area of operation;
  - how people can become members of the organisation;
  - the way the committee will operate;
  - how people can become committee members/office bearers;
  - how the business of the organisation will be conducted;
  - how decisions will be reached democratically;
  - how funds will be managed;
  - arrangements for public meetings;
  - arrangements for an annual general meeting (AGM);
  - how changes can be made to the constitution; and
  - Its commitment to the promotion of equal opportunities.
  - Its commitment to the promotion of the housing and housing related interests of tenants.
  - The aim of this is to ensure that organisations have a structure that allows for election of office bearers, gives opportunities for members to express views and ensures that elected officers report to their members. This does not mean that the body has to be a formally incorporated body, such as an Industrial and Provident society. A simple constitution that spells out how the organisation will be accountable to members will suffice in many cases, but where an organisation has access to substantial funds it may be appropriate to look at more formal incorporation.
  - It is essential that landlords receive a copy of a tenant association's constitution as part of the registration process. Many landlords, who are working proactively to promote tenant participation, will have acceptable model policies that groups can adopt, if they wish. It is important for landlords to note that the constitution is a basis for registration. If the constitution does not fulfil the criteria for registration, the landlord can refuse to register but landlords should, in any event, work with prospective RTOs to help them meet the criteria for registration.
2. The organisation must have a committee that:
  - (after the first year) is elected at an AGM;
  - has at least three members;
  - can co-opt others onto the committee during the course of the year;
  - has elected office bearers;
  - can demonstrate that decisions are reached democratically; and
  - Promotes equal opportunities.
3. The organisation must operate within:



- a defined area which includes housing stock owned and managed by the landlord with whom it is seeking to register; or
  - Membership of the organisation and participation in its activities must be open to all eligible tenants within its defined area of operation.
4. The organisation must have appropriate accounting records and present an audited annual financial statement to the AGM.
  5. The organisation must demonstrate that it is committed to representing the interests of its members and that, when consulted by the registering landlord; it can represent the views of its members who are tenants of the registering landlord in its defined area of operation.
  6. Application material to be submitted by the tenant organisation to the landlord with whom it is seeking to register:
    - the written constitution;
    - names and contact details of committee members (identifying the office bearers); and
    - A description of the area of operation.
  7. A RTO can be removed from the Register in any of the following circumstances:
    - the tenants organisation no longer meets the registration criteria; or
    - the tenants organisation ceases to exist or does not operate; or
    - There is mutual agreement between the landlord and tenants organisation.
    - Removal from the Register should take place only after an agreed period of notice.
  8. A tenant organisation may appeal against a landlord's decision to:
    - not register the organisation; or
    - remove the organisation from the Register; or
    - Not remove the organisation from the Register.

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **PROPOSED REMIT FOR TENANT FORUM**

- Be open to all tenants interested in learning about and influencing how the Housing Association manages its housing and provides services to tenants.
- Be attended by tenants from as many of the Association's areas as possible and reflect the profile of tenants as a whole.
- Meet on a quarterly basis or more often as agreed.
- Receive information, reports and training from Association staff as required and within available resources.
- Be resourced in other ways to help ensure that meetings are well attended and effective.
- Act as the main sounding board for the development and review of the Tenant Participation Strategy.
- Give detailed consideration to proposed changes in housing management and maintenance policy and performance and help highlight priority areas for improvement.
- Input into copies of the Association's quarterly Newsletter, Tenants Handbook and other information provided to tenants.
- Develop arrangements and procedures to ensure that meetings are as relevant, interesting, productive and enjoyable as possible.