

## REPORT TO SOCIAL WORK AND HOUSING COMMITTEE – 31 MARCH 2016

### TENANT PARTICIPATION UPDATE

#### 1 Recommendations

The committee is recommended to:

- 1.1 **Acknowledge and comment on the current position with regard to Tenant Participation**
- 1.2 **Consider how Tenant Participation can be further developed**

#### 2 Background/Discussion

- 2.1 The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 required social landlords to have a Tenant Participation (TP) Strategy; to consult with tenants, and to have arrangements in place for a Register of Tenant Organisations (RTOs).
- 2.2 Since its inception in 1995/96, Aberdeenshire Council has actively promoted TP; initially, with the few tenants and groups who were involved with the former District Councils and subsequently across Aberdeenshire.
- 2.3 Following several abortive officer-led attempts to create a constituted core tenant group, and a failed attempt at a Tenant Federation, the Tenant Participation Promotion Team (TPPT) was formed in 2000 and has been operating successfully ever since. TPPT, consists of seven tenants who are elected on a rolling basis for a three year term of office.
- 2.4 TPPT is the umbrella group under which Tenant Working Groups link to the Housing service using the main housing areas i.e. Asset Management; Options & Homelessness; Planning for the Future and Tenancy Services (formerly Housing Finance and Tenancy Management). Tenants are also actively involved in the Tenant-Led Continuous Improvement (TLCi) Scrutiny group. In addition, TPPT edits and publishes a quarterly Tenants' Newsletter and holds an Annual Tenant Event.
- 2.5 Tenants influence the development of the Housing service through a number of other methods including;
  - Local Tenant Groups
  - Sheltered Housing Tenant Forum (quarterly meetings)
  - Local Tenant Voices
  - Interested Tenants
  - Ad-hoc Focus groups

- 2.6 The Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 established the Scottish Housing Regulator and further increased the legal requirement of landlords to engage with tenants and to meet the requirements detailed in the Scottish Social Housing Charter (the “Charter”). Tenant Scrutiny is now at the core of the Housing service and tenants must now be consulted on a range of matters such as Rent levels. This was introduced as a requirement of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. Aberdeenshire Council has consulted with tenants on rents every 3 years since the legislation was enacted. Last consultation was 2015 and next consultation due in 2018. This is over and above the requirements laid down in the Charter and any specific pieces of consultation/survey work undertaken (eg satisfaction surveys on Capital Projects (on which a report is to go to Committee in June 2016))

### **3 Current Position**

- 3.1 The number of tenants actively engaged in tenant participation is very low and there are specific groups of tenants that are not well represented e.g. young tenants and minority ethnic groups.
- 3.2 TP covers a broad spectrum of engagement and Housing use a range of methods such as supporting new groups; organising meetings; tenant surveys; choice of stock improvements etc. to determine the service provided to tenants. In addition, NETRALT (North East Tenants, Residents and Landlords Together), is a joint TP partnership initiative that involves staff and tenants to work with other social landlords and tenants. The Regulator has commented favourably on this way of working as a good practice model of TP
- 3.3 TPPT is normally well attended by its seven tenant members but some Working Groups are sometimes not well attended. TPPT edits the quarterly Tenants Newsletter drafted by Officers and sent to all Council tenants (survey results indicate that a high number of tenants are satisfied with the information in the Newsletter).
- 3.4 Tenants in Sheltered Housing are fairly well represented through the quarterly Sheltered Housing Tenant Forum (approximately 15 attendees) and ad-hoc meetings in complexes are usually well attended due in part to the ease of organising meetings in communal lounges.
- 3.5 There are currently only 4 Local Tenant Groups and one of these four is inactive. The four currently existing groups (plus TPPT) all have Registered Tenant Organisation (RTO) status.
- 3.6 Local Tenant Voices (LTVs) continue to play an important role. There are currently eight appointments, with another two in the immediate pipeline. Their role, in areas where there is no active local tenant group, is to liaise with fellow tenants and feedback views and to provide signposting information when tenants locally are unsure of who to approach about a particular matter. LTVs are provided with details of capital programme work in their area, so that they can liaise with their neighbours, and they assist the TLCi Scrutiny Group with Estate Walkabouts and Void Inspections.

## 4 Future Tenant Participation

- 4.1 A review of TP arrangements in Aberdeenshire will take place once a new permanent Head of Housing is appointed. TPPT members have been reviewing their own activities and some changes have already been implemented to the way Tenant/Officer Working Groups operate (example, trial merger of Housing Finance and Tenancy Management Working Groups into a Tenancy Services Group). TPPT has developed a far more active role for themselves and for the TLCi Scrutiny Group, taking into account the SHR's expectations that tenants will be directly involved in scrutinising the housing service being provided to tenants, applicants and other customers. Following a joint meeting between TPPT and the Housing Management Team in 2014, a Standard Operating Plan was drawn up detailing how the various groups would operate, bearing in mind workloads are different and that flexibility is required to allow tenants to get involved in a way they are comfortable with. Under TLCi, TPPT has been particularly successful at developing "Mystery Shopping" and specific projects, including "inspection of Void Houses to monitor the re-let standard". Recent initiatives include "coffee at the council" to promote TP. Some members of TPPT attend the annual CIH Scottish Conference and other conferences of relevance
- 4.2 In developing tenant involvement further, tenant representation on the Social Work & Housing Committee has been raised on a number of occasions in the past and tenant representatives were part of the New Housing Partnership Sub Committee when it was in existence around 1999 - 2001. Annual meetings between the Housing Management Team, TPPT and the SW & H Committee members had been discussed with the Head of Service, supportive of tenant representation at Committee. Ongoing governance issues will determine future direction, but there may be scope to develop effective joint working between TPPT and Committee members through "scrutiny" (for example through Charter/performance issues and HRA Guidance). TPPT has received awareness training on their tenant scrutiny role with regard to the standards and outcomes that tenants can expect from the Council as a landlord.
- 4.3 The Scottish Government's Tenant Priorities Team have also been promoting further tenant involvement in decisions regarding the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and further guidance on tenant involvement with the HRA is currently being developed via Scotland's Housing Network.
- 4.4 Increasing tenant participation presents a number of challenges for the Housing service;
- i) Apathy – an increasing unwillingness to participate in meetings, which is a growing trend and not specific to tenant participation
  - ii) Exclusion – minority ethnic groups and some protected characteristic groups do not engage officially with the Housing service
  - iii) Physical barriers – the large area that Aberdeenshire Council covers may deter tenants in more remote areas from travelling to events. In addition, some tenants and households encounter difficulties attending meetings due to family circumstances e.g. single parents with children.

- iv) Technological – tenants and people in general are more willing to engage using technology and the Housing Service only provides limited access at present e.g. On-line repair reporting. There are still a large number of tenants who are not On-line.

4.5 In order to facilitate increased tenant participation Housing is addressing these challenges;

- i) Tenants are encouraged to participate at a level that suits them and it is recognised that formally constituted tenant groups are not appealing to many tenants. Where tenants identify issues in their area then Ad-hoc Focus Groups addressing specific problems issues such as environmental concerns or neighbour problems will be meet. In addition, Housing will increase the information to tenants that demonstrates the changes to the service as a result of tenant involvement.
- ii) Housing has promoted the Council’s Equalities policy but more work needs to be done to engage with specific groups and raise awareness of the benefits of tenant participation. All communication with tenants includes the option for language translation for the main nationalities residing in the area. The Charter also obliges Housing to engage with “other customers” such as owners in mixed tenure blocks of flats and gypsy travellers and meetings have recently been held with these groups.
- iii) Housing held events with NETRALT in Aboyne and Peterhead over the last 18 months and we will continue to look for options to engage with tenants in all parts of Aberdeenshire.
- iv) Increasing the methods available to tenants to participate will continue to be developed, particularly aiming at younger tenants e.g. Facebook, Twitter etc. However, there are resource implications in providing these facilities in terms of hardware and software as well and staffing. Increasing the number of tenants with on-line access will also be a priority.

## **5 Equalities, Staffing and Financial Implications**

5.1 The Head of Finance, the Monitoring Officer within Corporate Services and the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development have been consulted on the contents of this report, and are in agreement with it.

5.2 As this report is for information only, no EIA is required

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Date: March 2016