



ALBYN HOUSING SOCIETY LTD

TITLE: STRATEGY FOR INVOLVING CUSTOMERS IN SERVICE DELIVERY

Authorised by Committee of Management	May 2009
Next Review Due By	May 2012
Staff Affected	All teams providing or consulting on services to tenants, applicants or community groups
Lead Officers	Policy: Housing & Communities Director Operation: Community Involvement Officer

Strategy for Involving Customers in Service Delivery

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INVOLVING CUSTOMERS IN SERVICE DELIVERY

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Foreword

We have been involving and engaging with you, our tenants and other customers for over 25 years. We aim to be leaders in our field, and to deliver the services you want us to. You are central to our business; and we are committed to making sure you all have an equal opportunity to change and improve the services you get from us.

This new strategy will help to make sure that everyone who wants to take part in what we do, and to influence the decisions we make and the way we work, has the opportunity to do so effectively.

It will cover how we plan to develop our services for involving customers, delivering good services to them, and promoting equality and diversity. We have made a deliberate choice to include all these threads in one document, as we believe they are intrinsically woven together, and form the back-cloth to everything we do. They are all, at the end of the day, about providing excellent services to our customers.

The Strategy remains a work in progress – it is a journey and not an end. Actions linked to it will continually develop and change over the next few years to fit your needs and the activities and services that we provide. We recognise that it needs to be flexible and adaptable and to include informal as well as formal working arrangements.

We welcome the opportunity to publish this strategy to reconfirm and enhance our commitment to participation with our customers and the communities that we work with.



Ella Macrae,
Chair of Committee of Management



Calum Macaulay
Chief Executive

28 May 2009

Section 1: How we have developed this strategy

In our last published strategy in 2004, we made a commitment to review it every three years. Review work began in 2006, with a Tenant Participation Audit carried out by consultants Housing Plus. The audit results were launched and discussed at our first Tenants' Conference in November 2006.

At that time, we had two separate working groups meeting: one to monitor and discuss implementation of our existing Tenant Participation Strategy; and the other to look at Equalities and Diversity. We also identified a need for a third group to look at Customer Service issues. We soon realised that the work of all three of these groups overlapped significantly and could not be looked at in isolation of each other. We concluded that there was a need to address our customer service and equalities responsibilities along side our customer involvement work. All previous groups were therefore disbanded, and a new, smaller working team was set up to take an overview of all these activities, and come up with one broad strategy to cover them all.

The new Customer Services Project Group was set up towards the end of 2007 to develop this strategy. It included staff members from the Housing, Maintenance and Corporate service areas and two tenant members – selected at random from our list of interested tenants who had identified a special interest in these particular topics through our resident satisfaction surveys. The group has met every 6 weeks. During this time, we have also worked with TIGHRA¹ to develop proposals for a new framework for tenants to be involved through regionally based area forums. This was in addition to the following consultations.

- Annual Resident satisfaction surveys, which include questions about involvement
- Consultation on different phases of the strategy with all our tenants individually through our 'Policy Bulletin' including:
 - o Equalities and Diversity Statement (Summer 2006)
 - o Tenant Conference format (Summer 2006)
 - o Tenant participation Structures (Spring 2007)
 - o Support to Participate (Autumn 2008)
 - o Local Volunteers (Autumn 2008 and Spring 2009)
 - o Advice and Information Remit (Autumn 2008)
 - o Service Standards (Autumn 2008 and Spring 2009)
- Meetings to discuss the proposals with our registered tenant groups in Milton and Invergordon.
- Two successful and well attended 'focus group' meetings with tenants in Inverness and East Ross to talk about how to take things forward, from which regional Area Forums have been developed.
- Meetings with staff groups, including an all staff Strategy Day
- Final discussion about the proposed strategy and action plan at our 2009 tenant conference, facilitated by TPAS² (Scotland)

¹ TIGHRA (Tenant Involvement in the Island, Grampian and Highland Rural Areas) is a membership organisation of landlords and tenants to promote and develop tenant participation in the north of Scotland

² TPAS (Tenant Participation Advisory Service)

Section 2: Links to other regulations, policies and services

New legislation about tenant participation was introduced by The Scottish Government in the *Housing (Scotland) Act 2001*, which is central to this strategy. It placed an obligation on social landlords to consult tenants on:

- The standard of service relating to housing management and repairs and maintenance
- All policies relating to housing management, repairs and maintenance, rent setting and collecting, tenant participation and any service or policy development that could directly affects our tenants.

We must consult with you both individually and in groups. We must also develop a strategy in consultation with you that sets out our plan for how we will work together with you to develop and improve our services.

The full version of this legislation can be found at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2002>, which you can get to from the Scottish Government link on our website.

In developing this strategy, we aim to link in with and take account of the following law, strategies, standards and policies:

Legislation

The Strategy also operates within a framework of all relevant legislation, which includes the following:

- Equal Pay Act 1970
- Sex Discrimination Act 1975
- Race Relations Act 1976
- Disability Discrimination Act 1995
- Human Rights Act 1998
- Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000
- The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001
- Disability Discrimination Act 2005
- The Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004
- The Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006

Standards

It complements and helps to deliver the following priorities of statutory organisations and best practice models:

- The Scottish Housing Regulator's Performance Standards
- The National Standards for Community Engagement
- The Scottish National Standards for Advice and Information
- TPAS (Scotland) Landlord Accreditation Scheme
- Communities Scotland's 'National Standards for Community Engagement'

- LGBT³ Housing Standards

Policies

The strategy is also supported by the following policies and procedures of our own organisation:

- Customer Service Charter (2009)
- Policy for the Registration of Groups; and for the Recognition of Informal Groups and Local Tenant Volunteers (2009)
- Housing Advice and Information Remit (2009)
- Policy for Supporting Customers and Communities to be Involved (2009)
- Guidance Notes on Clear Communications – understanding and being understood (2007)
- Equalities and Diversity Statement (2009)
- Service Promises (2009)

Membership and Affiliations

- Landlord membership of TIGHRA
- Landlord membership of TPAS
- Corporate Membership of The Plain English Campaign

Section 3: Progress since our last strategy

Our Tenant Participation Strategy published in 2004 identified five key aims, each with associated tasks. Our achievements against each of these aims are listed at Appendix 1. Our key achievements have been:

- Establishing a regular newsletter for tenants
- Developing an increased range of communication methods to meet individual customer needs
- Starting to achieve crystal marks for revised information
- New website
- Tenants included in working groups and focus groups for key policy reviews
- Staff and committee members trained on equalities issues
- Adoption of the National Standards for Community Engagement
- Broad tenant involvement in our strategy review
- Developing area forums and new involvement processes for groups of tenants
- Directly involving tenants in setting up partnering arrangements for major repairs contracts
- Developing a list of interested tenants for consultation on particular topics

³ LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender)

Section 4: Our Aims, Standards and Objectives

Our customers include people who live in our homes or neighbourhoods, or who have applied to do so.

Aims

Our key aims are:

- We will make sure all aspects of our everyday business are customer focused
- We will provide the highest possible standards of service within the resources available to us
- We will provide clear and open access for everybody who wants to have a say about what we do
- We will be accountable to our service users

Standards

To meet these aims, we will reach the following standards:

- We will routinely identify our customers and their needs, and then provide services that meet them
- We will ask for your views about our services on a regular basis
- Your feedback will be listened to, passed on to the right people, and taken into account when decisions are made
- We will make it simple for you to make comments and complaints to us
- We will provide you with the right information and advice when you need it
- Our staff will treat you with courtesy and respect
- We expect the same from you
- We will comply with all laws and best practices that are relevant to our services

These aims and standards form the basis of our ***Customer Service Charter***

Objectives

Our aims and standards will be achieved through the following objectives:

- **Involvement:** we will identify and involve our customers and partners who want to be involved
- **Support:** we will identify and work to overcome any barriers to being involved that our customers face
- **Planning:** we will make sure any consultation we do takes into account what information we need to find out and the resources available to get it.
- **Methods:** We will use flexible and adaptable methods to help people take part, and use methods that are appropriate both to the individual needs of customers and local circumstances
- **Joint Working:** We will actively encourage and support everybody taking part to work effectively together
- **Information:** We will make sure that the relevant information is made available to everyone who needs it
- **Capacity:** We will help everybody who is taking part to develop the skills, knowledge and confidence they need
- **Feedback:** We will let everyone affected know the outcome of any consultation we have carried out
- **Monitoring and Review:** We will monitor and review whether customers who have taken part have been able to influence the outcome of the decisions we make; and that we meets the standards we have set ourselves

Approach and Method

We will develop policies and procedures that meet our aims and standards.

We will develop an **Action Plan** and **Service Promises** based on our objectives to make sure that they are delivered and monitored

We will make sure that all of our staff and committee members are aware of their obligations, take responsibility for delivering them, and are provided with the necessary training and resources to do so

Section 5: How you can be involved

What

We **must by law** consult you on issues that directly affect you; specifically:

- rent setting and review;
- housing management, repairs and maintenance policies;
- and standards of service related to them.

Over the period of this strategy, we intend to use a range of methods to get tenants involved in having a say about our policies and service standards

We will issue an annual consultation calendar that clearly sets out the key policy areas to be consulted on during the year and the consultation methods to be used. This will be published in our newsletter each Spring. You will be given various options to take part in the review of these policies if you want to.

How (Structures)

We have put various options in place that allows everyone who wants to, to become involved. These may be added to over time, and currently include the following commitments from us:

- We will help **local tenant or resident groups** to form and to become formally constituted and 'registered' with us if they want to. (These are Registered Tenant Organisations or RTOs⁴). We recognise the independence of all resident and community based groups
- We will consult **Registered Tenant Organisations** formally through meetings and questionnaires. Tenant and resident groups who decide not to become registered will be included in these consultations on an equal basis wherever possible.
- We aim to meet with all groups at least annually to **review training needs** and to review local concerns and priorities.
- We will **attend any meeting** being held by a registered or non-registered group on request, providing at least two weeks notice is given of the meeting arrangements and of the details of any agenda items to be discussed.
- We will develop our **Register of Interested Tenants** - tenants will be able to tell us if they have a particular interest in one or more specific issue that

⁴ Registered Groups are resident or tenant groups that have become a Registered Tenant Organisation (RTO). The criteria and process for this are included in our Policy for the Registration of Groups as a separate document. The register is publicly available to view at our head office in Invergordon. Details from it are also included on our website. RTOs can also become part of a national consultation and participation framework run by the Scottish Government.

they would be interested in getting involved in more detail with (for example, house design, rents, anti-social behaviour, allocations, repairs issues etc) - This register will give us a pool of tenants with specific interests that we can use for more detailed consultation, to form one-off focus groups, or to identify volunteers for short term joint working groups. We will continue to collect the details of tenants interests through our regular resident satisfaction surveys, and also through targeted surveys and questionnaires from time to time. We will review the interests of tenants on the register on a regular basis to make sure they are relevant and up to date.

- **Area Forums** will be open to any tenants in the forum area to attend. The Area Forums (currently in Caithness and Sutherland; Ross-shire; Inverness and Nairn; Badenoch and Strathspey), will meet at least twice a year. Each meeting will have a main topic, and the tenants who go to them will be able to decide what the issues are that they want to discuss in their area. Relevant staff will attend to provide information and answer questions on the topic chosen, and also to help to organise and administer the meetings. Committee members will also go from time to time if the Forums want them to.
- **Policy Bulletins** will be our main means of consulting with tenants individually. It will be issued at least once a year. The policy bulletin will also be issued to registered groups to allow them to make a collective response.
- The Bulletin will be supplemented by **questionnaires** on specific topics or local issues as required
- **Local Tenant Contacts** may evolve in our smaller schemes where it will always be difficult for groups to form.
- We will arrange **tenant events such as conferences and open days** every two years where there is enough demand for them.
- We will support **joint events** such as meetings, conferences and training sessions for customers along with other social landlords in the Highlands wherever appropriate.
- We will develop methods of **informal consultation** through use of the internet, email and texting to encourage wider involvement wherever possible.
- We will use the Register of Interested Tenants and Area Forums to take less formal 'soundings' and for **feedback** about what would work better
- And we expect that the Area Forums will start to present issues for us to consider too once they start to get into the subjects that concern them in their own areas.
- We will carry out a regular **resident satisfaction survey** to check the satisfaction with our main landlord services at least once every three years

- We will carry out **targeted satisfaction surveys** on specific activities, such as allocations, repairs and improvements, new property developments and complaints, on an ongoing basis.
- In addition to all of the above, we will use a range of methods to **keep customers informed** about our activities, which will include:
 - New tenancy welcome packs
 - A Tenant's Handbook
 - An Owner's Handbook where we provide factoring services
 - Information Leaflets
 - Our Website
 - Newsletters (at least 2 per year)
 - Press releases
 - Annual reports
- We will **review** these methods of communicating and consulting on a regular basis through surveys and consultation processes

When (Timescales)

We will always give you enough time to comment and contribute to consultation processes on particular issues.

We will usually allow a period of at least **four weeks** before reviewing the responses for changes or development of policies and services that affect all tenants.

This period may be reduced to no less than **two weeks** for issues of particular local concern.

Outcomes and Feedback

We will make sure that the responses we receive are taken into account when decisions are made about policies that affect you.

We will also provide feedback on all consultation by the methods most appropriate, including:

- Policy Bulletin updates
- Newsletter articles
- Website
- Individual letters
- Annual reports

Section 6: Providing good advice and information

We provide advice and information to tenants, housing applicants, and in some circumstances to people referred to us from another organisation. Our aim is to make sure that these customers understand their housing rights, responsibilities and options. We will do this by providing advice and information about housing issues and providing practical assistance. This includes explaining decisions, writing letters and completing forms.

Case work will be carried out by telephone conversations; face to face at our offices; and where necessary by appointment at your own home. We will also provide written information in emails, letters, leaflets, handbooks and newsletters, and on our website.

We will work towards accreditation for the *Scottish Advice and Information Standards*, details of which are set out in our *Advice and Information Remit*. The standards will help us to:

- Make sure that we are providing clear and accurate information to our customers
- Identify gaps and to constantly improve the services to our customers
- Help us to be clear about our limitations and to develop our work in partnership with other 'expert' agencies where required

Section 7: Resources and Support

Financial Resources

When we prepare our annual budget, we will include enough resources to cover a range of activities. The budget will be based on what we spent the year before and any anticipated changes in for the following year. The budget will cover:

- The cost of meetings arranged by us, including hire of rooms and facilities and any catering
- Our publicity and postage costs for consultation and feedback
- Consultancy Fees –(for example: to provide access to independent advice, commissioning independent audits, research of needs assessments)
- Registration Fees – (for example: membership costs for external organisations or accreditation schemes)
- IT access and support for registered groups
- Staff costs, including designated staff and staff time to attend meetings and support engagement activities
- Start up and annual grants for groups*
- Travelling and other expenses for customers taking part in our meetings*
- Training costs for tenants to attend relevant courses and conferences*

The grant and specific expenses, allowances and other forms of support available to help individuals and groups to participate are set out in our Policy for *Supporting Customers and Communities to be Involved*. The rates for allowances* will be reviewed annually.

Supporting Groups

We will work with resident and tenants groups where we have houses to help them develop and thrive.

- We will provide start up grants to new groups
- We will provide annual grants based on the number of tenants represented
- We will provide assistance with the development of a committee, constitutions and governance frameworks
- We will carry out a financial audit of annual accounts for groups
- A staff member will attend meetings as required with reasonable notice to respond to specific issues, present information, discuss consultation issues, or any other topics as requested
- We will consult with groups on all major service delivery and policy reviews
- We will consult with groups on proposed annual rent and service charge increases
- We will support groups to publicise their meetings, activities and achievements through our newsletters, website and press releases
- We will provide new tenants with details of groups in their area and encourage them to take up membership
- We will provide access to ICT equipment for groups for the purpose of producing documents and internet research related to community based activities
- We will continue to encourage and support new groups to emerge

Section 8: Training and Awareness

We are committed to making sure that customers, committee members and staff have the knowledge, skills and relevant resources to allow them to get involved.

The contents of this strategy will be part of our planned induction programme for all new staff and committee members. We will also assess gaps and training needs through our Performance and Annual reviews on an annual basis, and training plans will be developed to meet identified needs.

We will help groups to carry out training needs assessments for their own members at least every two years, and will support them in arranging training programmes as required.

Wherever possible and appropriate, we will hold joint training sessions that involve staff, committee members and customers learning together to get best value and to develop joint working.

Section 9: Equalities and Diversity

We take our responsibility to promote diversity and to practice equality seriously. This is supported by our *Equalities and Diversity Statement*.

We will do as much as possible to make sure that anyone who wants to can become involved in what we do, and that all customers have the same access to all of our services.

We will do this by:

- Holding meetings and events in places that you can get access to
- Presenting information in a clear way that is easy to read and understand
- Using a variety of ways to consult and engage with you
- Provide information in alternative formats on request
- Translating information into other languages or having interpreters available on request
- Providing direct support to help people who have caring responsibilities or support needs to become involved
- Actively encouraging traditionally excluded groups to become involved
- Carrying out 'customer profile' research on a regular basis so that we can make sure we know our customers needs and that we are delivering services that meet them
- Making sure that any community based groups we work with promote equality and diversity in their own activities

We will make sure that the effects of our practices do not discriminate against anyone. If discrimination does occur, we will take immediate action to stop it; and if we need to we will take legal action to make sure it does not happen again. We will monitor delivery of our services; and the types of complaints received and action taken to resolve them so that we can identify discrimination and tackle it effectively.

We will also actively encourage groups that are under represented in our activities to take advantage of opportunities to become involved.

Section 10: Monitoring, Reporting and Review

Responsibility for Delivery

We do not believe that any of the core elements of this strategy (customer services, customer involvement or equalities and diversity issues) are 'add on' activities. They are a core focus of all our service delivery activities and an everyday part of what we do. And so all staff involved in delivering services to you have a responsibility for delivering this strategy.

The lead responsibility lies with the Housing and Communities Director, supported by the Community Involvement Officer. These staff will be primarily responsible for the delivery and overview of this strategy.

Reaching High Standards

We aim to provide the best possible customer service at all times.

To help us achieve these standards, we have set ourselves service standards in eight key areas. These are our '***Service Promises***'. We will monitor these regularly to make sure we are taking them into account in our day to day activities.

We have formally adopted the ***National Engagement Standards*** to guide this strategy and our activities involving you. We are also working towards accreditation for the following nationally recognised standards:

- The Scottish National Standards for Advice and Information
- TPAS (Scotland) Landlord Accreditation Scheme

Monitoring

A range of methods will be used to monitor the strategy action plan which will include:

- A regular Customer Satisfaction Survey
- A six-monthly monitoring group, including representatives from the key service delivery teams, and tenants
- Consultation with tenants through surveys, focus groups, area forums, and registered groups

Reporting

Progress will be reported to our Committee of Management annually and published in our Annual Report, and will include

- What engagement has taken place
- What arrangements were made to encourage participation and maximise involvement
- What was the outcome of any engagement

Strategy for Involving Customers in Service Delivery

- What feedback has been given
- What has it cost
- Levels of customer satisfaction with our services as a landlord generally, and our progress in engaging with them
- Progress against the action plan targets included with this strategy

Key achievements will also be reported in our newsletter and other media.

Continuous Review

This strategy is a working document, and will be subject to continuous review to make sure it is meeting its goals. We will review this Strategy and its associated action plan in full no less than every three years



Appendix 1

Progress on Aims included in our Tenant Participation Strategy (2004)

Aim	Outcome
<p>1. We will ensure open, accessible and meaningful consultation with all stakeholders on relevant issues</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We become corporate members of the Plain English Society & trained all staff in using clear language. - We have developed Good Communications Guidance for all staff - We have routinely checked that information is useful and relevant through rolling resident satisfaction surveys and policy bulletins <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Key policy statements have been checked and accredited with Crystal Marks as they have been developed or reviewed - A list of all available leaflets and sources of information available has been compiled - A clear corporate format and logo has been developed - Our website has been reviewed and updated - A multi-team newsletter editorial group has been formed, and newsletters published at least twice a year, including articles from resident's groups - Policy Bulletins have been issued at least once a year - Focus groups have been run on customer satisfaction in East Ross, housing support plans, resident satisfaction for supported tenants, tenant participation structures - We have set up a contract arrangement for the availability of advice and translation services, and produced a multi-language leaflet to promote the availability of them - We have identified services available to help us deliver services to customers with disabilities or other special needs as required and made all staff aware of their availability - We are working towards accreditation for the National Advice and Information Standards - We have developed partnering arrangements including contractors, staff and tenants for our major improvements contracts for kitchen and bathroom replacements - We have included tenants in working groups and focus groups for policy review and development for Customer Services, and for Debt Prevention and Recovery - We have reviewed our Equalities and Diversity policy statement and achieved a Plain English Crystal Mark for it - We have reviewed Comments and Complaints policy and achieved a Plain English Crystal Mark for it
<p>2. We will ensure appropriate training is available for all parties to our participation processes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Staff and committee members have received joint training on Equalities and Diversity issues - Tenant participation is included in the induction programme for all new staff and committee members - Training has been provided on the following for staff: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Translation and Interpretation Services o Equality and Diversity Awareness o National Engagement Standards o LGBT Standards o Handling complaints and abusive behaviour

Strategy for Involving Customers in Service Delivery

<p>3. We will integrate tenant participation into the day-to-day running of the society at all levels</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We make a strong commitment to tenant participation in our Internal Management plan - Tenant Participation and the outcomes of it are included as a standard item in all our committee decision making papers - Tenant Participation is regularly promoted through our newsletters, website, publicity and daily interaction with tenants - Places for tenant members are reserved on our Committee of Management - A membership form for the Society is included in all new tenancy packs - The accessibility of meeting venues is recorded on a central database - We continue our landlord membership of TIGHRA and TPAS - We have adopted the National Standards of Community Engagement to work towards
<p>4. We will ensure that the appropriate resources are available to deliver these aims</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Our annual budget includes an allowance for specific tenant participation activities based on previous and anticipated activities
<p>5. We will ensure that this strategy and progress towards achieving the aims are monitored and reviewed on an on-going basis</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Our strategy has been routinely monitored, and a review commenced - Tenants have been extensively consulted on particular aspects of the strategy as they have developed - An external audit of our tenant participation practices has been commissioned every 3 years - A rolling resident satisfaction survey has been commissioned every 3 years and carried out on a phased annual basis - A regular steering group has met to review, monitor and develop our participation activities