



Tenant Conference Success

On Friday 3 November we had our first ever conference for tenants at the Ramada Jarvis hotel, overlooking the River Ness in Inverness. Everyone who rents a house from us got an invitation and we were delighted to get tenants coming to join us for the day from as far afield as Nethybridge in the south, Poolewe in the West and Milton to the North.

Tenants came to hear what the results were from our recent Tenant Participation audit and to give us their ideas about how we should take forward our plans for involving you in the decisions we make over the next few years.

Feedback from before the conference also told us that tenants would particularly like to know more about how to deal with anti-social behaviour, about repairs and about rents. And so everyone got the chance to hear short information sessions about these after lunch. Despite the super lunch, everyone still had enough energy to ask lots of good questions and to make some very useful suggestions about how we could improve things in the future.

During the breaks tenants got the chance to meet each other and staff from all our service areas, and find out more about each other's areas. We also had a good range of information

stalls from Albyn, Highland Community Mediation, TPAS, TIGHRA, Highland Social Enterprises and the Highland Carers Project.

Feedback from the evaluation forms showed that everyone found the sessions interesting, and the overall reaction to the conference was very good. Delegates found the information they had received good and all who answered said they would probably come to a similar event again. We have already been given some good suggestions for topics for the next event!

Thanks go to everyone who contributed to the discussions on the day – Lesley Baird from TPAS Scotland, Bill Maclean from The Highland Council's anti-social behaviour investigation unit, Helen Barton, Jim Banks and Robin Nairn from Albyn. Thanks also to our main sponsors, Robertsons Construction, who contributed a significant donation towards our running costs; and to all the contractors and suppliers who donated prizes for our raffle – in particular Jacobs Babbie engineers, LDN Architects, and The Torrence Partnership. But most of all, thanks to all our tenants from across the Highlands who came and joined in the day and made it such a success – and we really look forward to seeing you all again at the next one!

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Season's Greetings

A Very Happy Christmas and New Year to all our readers!

By the time you read this, it may all be over and not just the turkey that was well and truly stuffed! All the same, we hope that you and yours have a great festive season and wish you all health and happiness for the coming year.

Once again, we have an edition packed with all sorts of information for you. We hope you enjoy it and look forward to keeping you up to date in 2007.

If there is anything that you would particularly like to know about in our 2007 editions, please let any of our staff know and they will pass it on to the editorial team. Or just email us at office@albynhousing.org.uk

Invergordon Office Improvements - Phase 1 Complete



Phase 1 of our project to upgrade our Head Office at Invergordon is now complete and is occupied by staff from the Property Maintenance and Housing and Community Services Departments.

The new extension gives us much-needed additional space for the number of staff that we now have/employ. Staff numbers have grown in the last two years because of the greatly increased level of business that we are involved in. Our improvements have been assisted by a generous grant from Highlands and Islands Enterprise (Inverness and East Highland) to help us in that growing process.

The project includes the stunning mural by Tracey Shough, who was helped by local school pupils. It illustrates the natural heritage of the Cromarty Firth.

Phase 2 of the office project is now in progress, and the whole building will be complete by the summer of 2007. Work involving the front offices of the building will start in the New Year and, inevitably, there will be some disruption to our services during that time, especially when the reception area is tackled early in the New Year. You may find it easier to contact us by 'phone or email rather than calling in to see us for a while. But we and our Contractors will do everything we can to keep any inconvenience to a minimum. The end design will give us much better modern conditions for staff and customers, including visitors with disabilities



Winter Opening Times

The opening hours in both of our offices are 9.00 – 5.00 Monday to Friday. There may be occasions when the offices are closed over lunch. We aim to keep these to a minimum and always put notices on the office doors if we have to do this.

A Day in the Life of a Property Maintenance Officer...

8.05 am set off in the car from home, heading for the office this morning. Still a bit confused, tired and wondering why someone would phone the emergency repairs line at 2.15 am to report that their storage heater in the hallway is not working. Had to advise the tenant that this was not an emergency and would be dealt with in normal office hours. Anyway, on the bright side, it was not a fire or a real emergency. Yawn! Yawn!

Lots of paperwork to catch up on today.

8.20 am The Contracts Manager for one of our painting contractors phones returning my call from last night. They are painting 11 schemes for us this year. We asked for prices in March. We discuss the painting and agree to meet later today at 4.30 pm at the scheme in Smithton.

8.50 am office to **1.00 pm** Log onto computer system and start inputting various jobs picked up on my visits yesterday. There are trees to be trimmed/lobbed at a scheme in Inverness. A new ceiling is needed to a flat in Inverness because of a leak from the flat above. The tenant works night shift so I will need to make sure that the contractor makes special arrangements for getting in. (A cup of coffee arrives and it's Ken the Maintenance Officer's usual – like black tar, drinkable though and certain to keep me awake!). The day's mail arrives, and amongst this there is a letter regarding an area of communal land that an owner occupier wants to buy from the us. Send a reply and a letter to the District Valuer asking for a valuation of the area in question. The phone rings; it's a tenant reporting a leaking hot water tank. It seems to have been leaking for a while. Organise a plumber to go as soon as possible today and ask him to report back to me once he's been. A colleague from Housing Services calls to see me at my desk asking about a house that became empty recently. I confirm that it's ok to relet and where keys can be collected from. I advise that there are still

small repair items to be done but that these can be carried out when the new tenant is in the property. I take the new tenant's phone number to arrange access for this.

I get a phone call from reception asking me to come through to see a representative from one of our tenant groups about a problem in a house where the kitchen is being replaced. I agree to visit the house later.

Tender prices need to be opened for some medical adaptations (such as level access showers, ramps and alterations). I arrange to get the special tender book from the safe and for my Manager to join me as a witness. We open the tenders and prepare a report for approval.

Lunch time – voicemail on, and over to Harry Gows for a roll and some soup, and time for a quick read of today's paper.

After lunch, I travel through to Inverness, after inspecting the kitchen job at Invergordon and dropping off keys to be cut in Alness. I meet a sharing owner about the long term water leak that was reported earlier. This is not going to be such a simple job. The floor will need to be renewed in the bathroom and below the bath. I agree access arrangement and organise the contractors by phone. Whilst on site, I have a look around the scheme, the landscaping looks to be in good condition. I take note of some slats that are missing from a fence. Meanwhile another sharing owner points to all the rubbish on the path beside our scheme. This is not Albyn's land, so it is difficult to sort out.

Arrive, as arranged, with a tenant to inspect their property before the end of their tenancy. I tell the tenant what work they will need to carry out before they go. I note some standard repairs at the same time. Time to meet painting contractor as arranged. We inspect two schemes that are a short drive apart and we agree that he will see to the various things I have pointed out to him. I will need to keep an eye on this.

Nearly home time. I must deliver some keys into our Church Street office in Inverness and try to avoid getting a parking ticket in the process!

Just before going home, I went door knocking to five tenants who have not given us access to carry out a service to their gas boilers – it never ceases to amaze me why some tenants will not make these arrangements to have their gas boiler serviced – don't they realise that this simple job could save lives!

Ah well that's the end of another day, never did get all my paperwork done but there's always tomorrow!

Summer Fundraiser

Albyn staff once again came away wet but proud from the annual Invergordon Raft Race. The race is held in August each year to raise money for the Invergordon lifeboat – a cause we are always happy to support.

Our fancy dress theme this year was 'Pirates of the Caribbean'. Johnny Depp sadly failed to show, but Captain Jack Sparrow (Mairi Dymond) led the team to 2nd place overall, First prize for fancy dress, and highest fundraisers – again! Thanks to all of you who supported us again with sponsorship and loud cheers from the shore!

Our next fundraising effort will be at our Christmas Party in December – the winning team will get to choose the charity.





Love your neighbour?

Between June and September this year, our Housing Officers dealt with over 70 different complaints from tenants about their neighbours and were keeping an eye on nearly as many again. A lot of these complaints are about things that cause a nuisance rather than serious anti-social behaviour. Nevertheless, they are important for the person that is being affected, and officers can routinely spend about a third of their time in trying to help people to sort things out.

As a tenant, there is a lot that you can do to make sure that other people do not have to make complaints; or to make sure that things do not get out of hand when things are not going so well. You are responsible for your home and your neighbourhood, and for being a good neighbour to other residents in your area. There is a lot of good advice in your tenants' handbook about the sorts of things you can do to avoid disputes.

→ Keep your pets under reasonable control and look after them properly so that they do not cause a nuisance to your neighbours

- Park thoughtfully and avoid parking in a spot that could cause a problem or annoyance to other people
- Encourage your children to use designated play areas where they are available and make sure you know where they are and that they are not causing a nuisance
- If you share common areas with other neighbours, please respect their privacy and help to keep the area clean and tidy for everyone to enjoy
- Make sure all your rubbish is securely in a bin and that your bin is put away after it has been emptied. If you have bulky rubbish to get rid of, contact your local council office to arrange this – do not just leave it out on the street
- If you have a garden, keep it tidy and weed free
- Noise is a fact of everyday life, but most of our complaints are about it, and most could be avoided by a little consideration for others. Think before you start noisy

housework or DIY, or before you have a party. Will it disturb your neighbours? Have you warned them in advance?

Neighbour problems cover a wide range of issues and we work hard to help you to deal with them. As a first step, we always encourage you to try and sort it out informally. Does your neighbour know that they are doing something to disturb you? Have you had a word with them in a friendly way to let them know? If this has not worked, or if you need some help, you can contact us at the office. Your Housing Officer may be able to give you some advice or to help you to arrange some mediation between you and your neighbour.

If the problem is too serious to deal with informally, contact us and we will try to help you sort something out. If there is any possibility of criminal activity being involved, or if you might be at any risk, contact the police straight away for help, and let us know what has happened as soon as you can.

Common Housing Register

Over the past 2 years, we have been working in partnership with 10 other Housing Associations in the Highlands and The Highland Council to develop a Highland Common Housing Register.

A Common Housing Register is simply a shared list of people looking for housing. It means that people will only need to fill in one application form to apply for all the social rented houses in the Highlands owned by the landlords taking part. This should make it easier for people to apply for the type of house they need with more landlords at once.

As part of this Common Housing Register, we have started to develop one shared allocation policy. This policy aims to:

→ be simple to operate and understand

- take into account different communities local housing needs
- take into account our legal responsibilities including those to address homelessness
- meet the high quality standards that are set by our regulators and expected by the public.

All the housing associations and the council already have to work to the same rules and regulations about how we decide who gets our houses. We hope that all of us will therefore be able to use the same policy to shortlist applicants and allocate our houses. If they want, each landlord can then re-prioritise these shortlisted applicants by using their own allocation policy.

The Common Housing Register group are carrying out a wide consultation to make sure that the proposed policy helps us to best meet people's needs whilst helping us to manage the shortage of affordable housing that many of our communities are facing.

You can also email us your comments or complete the feedback form on The Highland Council's website at www.highland.gov.uk/livinghere/housing/

Once the Common Housing Register group have considered everyone's comments, we will make any changes needed to the policy, and each organisation will be asked to agree it. After this we will continue to work towards delivering the Common Housing Register (for example, by getting the computer systems in place). We hope that the new system will be in place within the next 2 years.

Would you be interested in taking part in a small group to discuss the draft policy or how the new housing application process should work? If so, please contact any member of the **allocations team** at Albyn on **0845-1301017**; or **Joan Mackay** at The Highland Council on **01349-886616**; or email **Joan.Mackay3@highland.gov.uk**.

Homestake Makes Nicky's Dream Come True



Nicky Cavanagh had spent 2 years looking for a house that she could afford in the Alness area. She was delighted when she heard of her successful application for a Homestake house at our Orchard development in town. "I can't believe I now own my own home!" Nicky enthused. "I applied for a Homestake property in early 2006 and couldn't believe it when I received a letter saying my application was successful. As a first time buyer, I just couldn't compete with the rising house prices and with other buyers. To the delight of both myself and my parents, who have been waiting for me to move out, I am now totally independent and moving into my own house has been a dream come true."

The Homestake scheme allows people on lower incomes, particularly first time buyers and existing Council and Albyn tenants, access to high quality new houses by allowing them to just buy a share of the equity at between 60% and 80% of the total value of the house.

For example, our next project to be completed at Academy Lane in Alness will have 2 bedroom flats for sale at around £84,000. Someone buying a 60% equity share would need to have a minimum household income of around £16,800. For existing Council and Albyn tenants, this equity stake can be as low as 51% of the house value, which means you would need a minimum household income of just over £14,000 to pay for a mortgage of about £43,000.

As well as the Academy Lane project in Alness, by the summer of 2007 we will also have Homestake properties available at Dalfaber, Aviemore; Dell of Inshes, Inverness; Kingussie and Cromarty. Anyone who would like to know more about any of these exciting low-cost home ownership opportunities should contact Kim MacGregor of Homestake Highland on **01349-855991** or email: enquiries@homestakehighland.com

Successful Open Day for Completion of Armadale Houses

The ribbon is cut at Kitty's Pass Armadale



Mr Neil MacKay, who is the oldest resident of the township of Armadale near Bettyhill in Sutherland, welcomed the completion of two houses in the village at our recent Open Day. In a few words of welcome, Mr MacKay stressed the importance of new housing to allow the village to grow and prosper. He said; "We have to thank the Armadale community for working together with Albyn to produce these houses which will be a community asset for many years to come". Mr MacKay and new tenant, Mrs Cathy Munro, cut a ribbon to mark the occasion. Jim Oag, Chairman of the Committee of Management, was on hand for the ceremony. He commented on the quality of the development and thanked the Community representatives and the contractors, M M Miller, and all the consultants, for their contribution to the project.

Sutherland continues to enjoy additional housing investment thanks to the increase in funding made available by the Community Ownership programme as shown by the recent handover of 8 new homes at Inverpark, Lochinver. According to Helen Mackie, the Development Officer who oversaw the project for Albyn, it wasn't easy but we got there! Future Sutherland projects are planned in Dornoch and Golspie beginning with new homes for rent and low cost home ownership at Sutherland Road, Dornoch in 2007.

Other key events for Development include the completion in November of Phase 1 of our sustainable design project in Aviemore including the exciting wood chip district heating scheme, of which more in a future edition. Communities Scotland is currently reviewing its Sustainable Design Guide to be published in the New Year which includes two Albyn projects (Applecross and Aviemore North) as examples of good practice in the case study section.



New Development at Scourie, Sutherland.

Holiday Period Office and Repairs Arrangements

Opening Times

Our office opening hours in both of our offices are 9.00 – 5.00 Monday to Friday. There may be occasion when the offices are closed over lunch. We aim to keep these to a minimum and always put notices on the office doors if we have to do this.

Closures

We are closed for the afternoon on Friday 15 December.

Our offices will close for the holiday period at 12 noon on Friday 22 December. We re-open at 9am on Thursday January 4, 2007.

Emergency Repairs

During the periods when our offices are closed, we will only deal with emergency repairs. **Our emergency repairs number is 0845-130-9995.**

- Select Option 1 to leave a message with the maintenance officer on duty if you need an emergency repair
- Select Option 2 if you have any other repair and you can leave a message that we will deal with as soon as the office is open again.

The emergency repair service is available during times that our office is closed for use in **emergencies**, such as:

- Your home is not secure – windows may need to be temporarily boarded up or locks made fast
- Your home has to be made safe after fire, flood or storm damage because there is a danger of an accident being caused if it is not
- We need to prevent further damage after flooding, burst pipes or serious roof leaks
- You have completely lost your heating or power supply to the whole house (other than through not topping up credit meters)

If an emergency repair is carried out, it may only be of a temporary nature, with a more permanent repair carried out at a later date.



Problem Corner – your questions answered!

My children have recently left home and I would like to transfer from our three bedroom house to a smaller size how would we go about doing this?

You need to complete a transfer form so that we know where you want to move to and why. As you are moving down to a smaller house, you will be get some points for having more rooms than you need just now. You will then go on our housing list and, when a suitable house becomes empty, we will contact you if you are at the top of the list.

I heard that you do mutual exchanges and was interested in moving from Alness to Inverness, how can I go about this?

You can contact our Invergordon office and put a card on our mutual exchange board, with your contact details, information on your home and what you are looking for in return. Or you can call in and look at the board to see what other exchange adverts are up. A copy of the list is also kept at our housing support office in Inverness. Local shops and newspapers can also be useful places to look. Remember, if you find someone to do an exchange with, you must let us know and get permission first.

What do I need to do about getting an inspection done of my house before I move away?

Contact one of our Property Maintenance team on 0845-130-9995. They will arrange an appointment with you for one of our Property Maintenance Officers to come and carry out the inspection.

A friend or family member has asked me to come in and ask about their housing application for them.

We look after the information we have about all our tenants and applicants very carefully. We will not discuss it with anyone else, unless they have given us a letter of permission agreeing that we can speak to somebody else on their

behalf. So we will only be able to share some information with you if we know that you are the person we have been given permission to speak to.

These are typical questions that come to our reception staff every day. We hope we have given you the answers you need. Do you have a question for our Problem Corner? If so, please hand it to any member of staff, or email the newsletter team at Office@albynhousing.org.uk

Yearly Reminders

Since September 2002, the Scottish Executive have introduced a number of schemes for all housing association and local authority tenants in Scotland with a Scottish secure tenancy agreement. We must remind you each year of what these schemes are.

Compensation for Alterations

At the end of your tenancy, you may be eligible for compensation for certain improvements to the house that you have carried out yourself. To apply for compensation you must write to us (up to 4 weeks before you leave your tenancy, or within 3 weeks of leaving it) with copies of invoices, details of when we gave approval for the alteration and when the we were told that the improvement was completed. We will inspect the alteration. If the work qualifies for compensation under the scheme, you may receive a payment of between £100 and £4,000. The exact amount will depend on what the improvement is and how long ago it was carried out. You must be leaving your home to qualify for any payment.

Right to Repair

From September 2002 Scottish secure tenants have had the right to have small urgent repairs carried out by their landlords within a given

timescale. The Right to Repair scheme applies to all tenants of housing associations such as Albyn Housing Society.

The scheme covers certain repairs up to the value of £350. They include: unsafe power sockets; loss or part loss of electric power, gas or water supply; blocked flue to an open fire or boiler; insecure external windows, doors or locks; loss of heating if there is no alternative supply; toilets which do not flush (if no other available in house); blocked sink, bath or basin; leaks or flooding from water pipes, tank or cistern; and rotten timber flooring.

Right to Buy

Very few Albyn tenants will have a right to buy a home that is rented from us.

Tenants who have the right to buy will previously have had a secure tenancy. Your tenancy with us must have started before 15 January 1989, or you must have been a tenant whose home was transferred from the ownership of Scottish Homes to Albyn Housing Society through the Stock Transfer process **and** you were the tenant at the time of the stock transfer. If either of these situations applies, you will have a "preserved right to buy". However you will lose this right if you move into another property or carry out a mutual exchange.

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 made some changes to the right to buy rules, and extended the right to buy to some tenants of Housing Associations in Scotland. But because Albyn Housing Society is a registered Scottish charity, we are currently exempt from this change.

Full details about any of these schemes are available in your new tenancy pack, your tenants' handbook, from our office in Invergordon or directly from the Scottish Executive website.



Newsletter Quiz

A lot of you seemed to enjoy this new feature in our last newsletter. Our lucky winner was Irene Wade from Kincaig, who chose to get a voucher to spend in the Co-op. We hope you bought yourself a lovely treat Mrs Wade!

Why not have a go yourself? The answers to all the questions can be found in the different articles in this newsletter. Send your answers to us by the end of January, and we will make a draw from all the correct answers. **The winner will get a voucher for £25 for a store of their choice** – so don't forget to include your name and contact details when you send your answer in!

1. Where was our first Tenant's Conference held?
2. What time does our office open in the morning?
3. How much is a 2-bedroom flat at Academy Lane in Alness worth?
4. Who played the role of Jack Sparrow in the raft race?
5. How many nuisance complaints did our Housing Officers deal with between June and September 2006?
6. Who was the artist for our new mural?
7. Who makes the strong coffee in the Property Maintenance team?
8. How many housing associations are helping to develop a Common Housing Register?
9. Where will you find our Exchange Board?
10. What is the telephone number for an emergency repair?

Talking Many Languages

At the 2001 Scottish Census, the proportion of people from ethnic minorities within the total population of the Highlands was very low – less than 1%. However the situation is changing very quickly, influenced by the area's economic growth and by broader government policies.

Within the last year or so, some parts of our area have seen rapid changes. It is becoming increasingly common that people are in contact with us who do not speak English fluently or as their main language. (56 first languages other than English or Gaelic are currently spoken in schools across Highlands, for example.)

Albyn have responded to this by joining two important services that can help us to get access to interpretation and translation services quickly when the need arises.

We can now arrange for interpreters in face to face meetings and interviews with housing applicants and tenants through Global Language Services Limited, who operate across Scotland with a Highland office based in Nairn. If we need help immediately or have someone on the telephone, we can also use the telephone-based National Interpretation Service.

These new services were launched at a training day for all our staff and committee

members at the end of October, and the service was immediately in use. Housing and Community Services Director, Helen Barton, said 'we were delighted that by 10am the day after staff had been told about the new service, one of our Officers had booked an interpreter appointment with an applicant that she needed to interview about her housing situation. It was so easy to use and will make a big difference to both our staff and to our customers. There is no cost for our applicants or tenants to use the service. It means that they will not have to rely on friends or family members to interpret sometimes very sensitive information for them. Our staff will also be sure that they are able to understand what people want us to know, and also that they understand what we need to ask or tell them. We really look forward to this new service going from strength to strength.'

The interpretation and translation service is just one example of how we are working to make the way we communicate with our customers more effective. We are also starting to find ways to make our information available in different formats for people who can not see or hear well. We are always looking for ways to improve. If you have any suggestions, please contact any member or staff or your local residents group with your ideas.

Office opening hours: Mon - Fri 9am - 5pm

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www.albynhousing.org.uk

Albyn Housing Society is a Scottish charity

If you need this newsletter or any other information from us in large print, on tape, or in any other format, please let any of our housing staff know.

