



ALBYN HOUSING SOCIETY LTD

TITLE: CUSTOMER INVOLVEMENT STRATEGY

the Board	September 2013
Next Review Due By	2018
Staff Affected	All teams providing or consulting on services to tenants, applicants or community groups
Lead Officers	Policy: Customer Services Director Operation: Communities staff

Customer Involvement Strategy

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INVOLVING CUSTOMERS IN SERVICE DELIVERY

Contents

		Page
	Foreword	1
Section 1	How we have developed this strategy	2
Section 2	Links to other policies and regulations	3
Section 3	Progress since last strategy	4
Section 4	Our Strategy aims, standards and objectives	5
Section 5	How customers can be involved	7
Section 6	Providing good advice and information	10
Section 7	Resources and support	11
Section 8	Staff awareness and training	12
Section 9	Equalities and diversity	13
Section 10	Monitoring and review	14
	Appendices	
Appendix A	Outcomes since last Strategy	I
	Implementation Plan	

Foreword

We have been involving and engaging with you, our tenants and other customers for nearly 30 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.

The Strategy continues to be 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.

The excellent work of our Strategy Steering group has taken place at a time of huge change across the social housing sector. They have made sure we are not just keeping up but ahead of the game. With the involvement of our residents, we know that we will continue to be an organisation that can be flexible enough to adapt to change and to continuously improve the services we deliver to customers at very difficult times.

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

Douglas Russell
Chair of The Board

Calum Macaulay
Chief Executive

September 2013

Section 1: How we have developed this strategy

This is our third strategy in which we set our plans for involving customers in the decisions we make about our landlord activities. It covers how we plan to develop our services for involving those customers who want a say in the decisions we make about our landlord services, delivering good services to customers, 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.

A new Customer Involvement Strategy monitoring group was set up towards in 2009 to take forward the actions plan. It includes staff members from the all our service teams and three tenant members – selected from our list of interested tenants who had identified a special interest in these particular issue through our resident satisfaction surveys. The group has met every few months over the last 3 years to review and develop new activities. The joint working between tenants and operational staff has been so successful that in 2011 they won the highly coveted 'Group of the Year' award at the national TPAS conference.

The group have worked together with colleagues and consulted with other residents on a wide variety of activities. They have made sure that existing good practices have become firmly bedded in to everything that we do, and have also taken forward some new innovative approaches. Some of these activities are outlined in Appendix A of this report.

- Annual Resident satisfaction surveys, which include questions about how residents prefer to become involved and to get feedback from us
- Consultation on different phases of the strategy with all our tenants individually through our 'Policy Bulletin' surveys.
- Meetings to discuss the proposals with our registered tenant groups in Milton and Invergordon.
- Informal consultations with emerging unregistered groups and local volunteers
- 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 all staff briefing and discussion sessions

Section 2: Links to other regulations, policies and services

Legislation about tenant participation was introduced by The Scottish Government in the *Housing (Scotland) Act 2001*, which is central to this strategy. It places 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 operates within a framework of all relevant legislation, which is not limited to but includes the following:

- Human Rights Act 1998
- The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001
- The Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004
- The Equality Act 2010

Standards

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

- The Scottish Social Housing Charter
- The Scottish Housing Regulator – Consultation and Involvement Strategy 2012-15
- The Scottish National Standards for Community Engagement
- The Scottish National Standards for Advice and Information
- TPAS (Scotland) Landlord Accreditation Scheme
- LGBT¹ Housing Standards

Policies

¹ LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender)

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

- Customer Service Charter and Service Promises (2009)
- Policy for the Registration of Groups; and for the Recognition of Informal Groups and Local Tenant Volunteers (2009)
- Housing Advice and Information Remit (2013)
- Guidance Notes on Clear Communications – understanding and being understood (2013)
- Equalities and Diversity Statement (2009)
- Practical Support for Customer Engagement policy & procedures (2012)
- Successful Tenancies Strategy (2010)
- Supporting Communities Strategy (2012)
- Unacceptable Actions Policy (2012)

Section 3: Progress since our last strategy

Our last Strategy for Involving Customers published in 2009 identified four key aims, each with associated standards and objectives. Our achievements against each of these aims are listed at **Appendix 1**. Our key achievements have been:

- We are developing interest in new groups and tenant volunteers across our area
- We have updated and developed social media through our website, Facebook and twitter
- Our tenant handbook and new tenancy information packs have been comprehensively reviewed and updated
- We have received accreditation awards for the Scottish Information and Advice Standards, and for Landlord Accreditation with TPAS
- We are actively developing joint groups and activities with other local groups and social landlords

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 who want to have a say in what we do and how we do it
- **Support:** we will identify and work to overcome any barriers that our customers face to being involved
- **Planning:** we will take into account what information we need to find out and the resources available to us when we carry out any consultation..
- **Methods:** We will use a range of consultation methods that are flexible and adaptable enough to help people take part, and will 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 together effectively
- **Information:** We will make sure that 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 how any consultation has influenced the outcome of the decisions we make; and that we meet 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 **Charter Priorities** based on our objectives to make sure that they are delivered and monitored

We will make sure that all of our staff and Board 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 publish 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. 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:

- Anyone can apply to become a **member** of Albyn Housing Society, which entitles them to take part in elections or be nominated for places on our Board. The Board is our governing body and has overall responsibility for how our business is run.
- 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 RTOs²). We recognise the independence of all resident and community based groups
- We will consult **Registered Tenant Organisations** formally through a combination of 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 contact all groups at least annually to **review training needs** and to review their local concerns and priorities.

² 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.

- 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 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.
- **Local Tenant Contacts** will be supported in our smaller schemes where it will always be difficult for groups to form.
- **Local Meetings** will be held on issues of particular local interest as and when required. These may be held jointly with other social landlords or community based groups where it is practical to do so. Our Board members may also attend from time to time.
- We will arrange general **tenant events** that are not area specific (such as special events and open days) from time to time 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 or community based groups in the Highlands wherever appropriate.
- Our staff members will set up regular **surgeries** when they will be routinely visiting an area to meet tenants and discuss individual issues where there is sufficient local demand
- **Policy Bulletins** will be our main means of consulting with tenants individually with topical surveys. A policy bulletin will be issued at least once a year, which will be electronically wherever possible. It 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
- We will develop methods of **informal consultation** through use of the internet, social media sites, email and texting to encourage wider involvement wherever possible.

Customer Involvement Strategy

- We will use the Register of Interested Tenants and Area Forums to take less formal 'soundings' and to organise focus groups or customer panels for **feedback** about what would work better
- 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, and new property developments on an on-going 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 **eight 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 other people living in communities where we own or plan to develop housing stock. 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 and social media sites.

We will work to keep our 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, or research of needs assessments where they are needed)
- 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 of **Practical Support for Customer Engagement**. 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 according to the number of Albyn tenants represented.
- We will provide annual grants to existing groups based on the number of Albyn tenants represented
- We will provide assistance with the development of a committee, constitutions and governance frameworks
- We will check the annual accounts for groups so that we know that any funding provided by us has been used and on the appropriate activities before any new grants are paid
- 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 concerning their homes or tenancies
- 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, social media sites and press releases as appropriate
- We will provide new tenants with details of groups in their area and encourage them to take up membership
- We will support 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 and tenant volunteers 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 annual appraisal reviews, and training plans will be developed to meet identified needs on a group or individual basis as required.

We will help groups to carry out training needs assessments for their own members on a regular basis, and will support them in arranging training programmes as required.

Where appropriate, we will hold joint training sessions that involve staff, Board 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 assistance 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 these services to you have a responsibility for delivering this strategy.

The lead responsibility lies with the Customer Services Director, supported by our Communities team. 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 that are aligned to the Scottish Social Housing Charter. . These are our '**Service Standards**'. We will consult with tenants to agree priorities and to agree the best methods of Tenant Scrutiny to monitor them regularly and 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 have also achieved 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 regular monitoring group, including representatives from the key service delivery teams, and tenants
- Consultation with tenants through surveys, focus groups, area forums, and registered groups
- Regular feedback on customer involvement activities to our Performance Committee
- Designated tenant places on our Performance Committee

Reporting

Progress will be reported to our Board annually and published in our Annual Report, and will include

Customer Involvement Strategy

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

Summary of our Progress on Aims included in our Strategy for Involving Customers (2009 - 12)

Our Objectives	Our Outcomes
<p>Involvement We will identify and involve our customers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Residents involved in Partnering Contracts for stock improvements - Customer Profiling report completed and now updated annually - Resident Survey feedback from comprehensive survey in 2012 alongside rolling mini-surveys throughout the period - Policy Update bulletins & TP Questionnaires issued 2 to 3 times each year* - Area forums held twice a year in 3 regions - Tenant calendar produced with Art competition for primary schools
<p>Support We will work to overcome any barriers to being involved</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social Media – Facebook and twitter are both active - Electronic Surveys – RSS only - Website – updated and interactive - regular use of deaf interpreter and language interpretation services - UH has been improved to help identify customers who require large print
<p>Planning We will take into account what information we need from our consultation and the resources available to us</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Feedback from Policy bulletin questionnaires and Resident Satisfaction surveys is reported to our Board and taken into account in recommendations and decisions made
<p>Methods We will use a range of consultation methods that are appropriate to individual needs and local circumstances</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mystery Shopper & Scrutiny for improvement – this is being discussed with other local social landlords - 2 formal resident groups supported - 6 informal resident groups supported - Local volunteers, identified 2, initial training done - contact details on UH are now in the correct place and format to allow texting / e-mailing to be used effectively
<p>Joint Working We will encourage and support effective joint working</p>	<p>Pulteneytown People's Project- Ormlie Forum</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Joint resident Forum with Cairn HA in Badenoch & Strathspey - NHS – Healthy Eating and Keep Well campaigns - Housing Options / HHR - Partnering Contracts - TPAS Group of the Year award 2011 - Welfare reform info sessions with Highland Council & Cairn HA - Joint residents group being developed in Merkinch

Customer Involvement Strategy

<p>Information We will make relevant information available to whoever needs it</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Abbreviated strategy available - crystal mark no longer required for all publications - Updated Tenant Handbook - Updated New Tenant Information Pack - Updated Registered Tenant Organisation pack - new tenant DVD being investigated - website updated and re-launched - Information packs for Local Tenant Volunteers developed
<p>Capacity We will help customers to develop their skills, knowledge and confidence to get involved</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Managing Anti-Social Behaviour training for registered groups - Staff and tenants supported to attend TPAS and TIS conferences - Exploring a housing qualification for residents with TPAS
<p>Feedback We will let customers know the outcome of consultation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Policy updates, newsletters, annual reports - Facebook, website
<p>Monitoring We will monitor how consultation has influenced our decisions and whether our standards are being met</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accreditation schemes for TPAS Landlord Participation and Information and Advice Standards - CISMG (Customer Involvement Strategy Monitoring Group) has met regularly throughout the period - 2 tenant places designated on our Performance Committee

* Issues consulted on through our Policy Bulletin surveys since our last strategy have included:

- Our tenant handbook, new tenancy information packs, important issues for newsletters and our website information; how we carry out resident satisfaction surveys; and consultation timescales
- How you want to be involved in our decisions, what practical support we can provide to do this; and the Scottish Social Housing Charter
- Reviewing our customer services
- Equalities and diversity; Open-ness and confidentiality; Sustainability
- Policies and Strategies for Anti-social behaviour; Managing housing debts; Keeping pets; and achieving Successful Tenancies
- Procedures for managing a range of day to day activities, including: tenant alterations and improvements; redecoration and disturbance allowances after contracts; rechargeable repairs; tenancy abandonment