

# Tenant Participation Policy

## 1 General introduction

- 1.1 The Council's commitment to Tenant Participation is stated in the list of Housing Service Goals approved by Housing Committee on 14 August 1996. The Highland Council recognises the need to work in partnership with its tenants to achieve quality and value for money in Housing Services.
- 1.2 The concept of "Best Value" will only be achieved by continual development of Tenant Participation.
- 1.3 This policy is a statement of how the Council intends to:
- Create opportunities for tenants to be involved in Council decisions which affect them.
  - Create opportunities for Tenants to be involved in Policy and Practice development.
  - Recognise, support and assist Tenants groups and representatives
- 1.4 In the development of this statement a good deal of emphasis has been placed on the need for a sense of "ownership" of the policy amongst tenants. Much of what is contained has therefore been drawn from discussions with tenant representatives.

## 2 The purpose of Tenant Participation

- 2.1 The Highland Council is committed to meeting the Governments requirements under Best Value. The general purpose of Tenant Participation is therefore to maintain the four principles of:
- Accountability
  - Transparency
  - Continuous improvement
  - Ownership
- 2.2 The success of any Tenant Participation activity will be judged by how it contributes to these principles. The Highland Council also consider the following to be specific purposes of participation:
- To create awareness amongst tenants of the options for, and constraints on, providing and improving services.
  - To aim to ensure that services affecting tenants meet their expectations, and are value for money.
  - To generate confidence in the Housing Service.
  - To assist in ensuring consistency of services to all tenants.
  - To assist in meeting the Highland Council Goal of creating opportunities for people to participate in the life, development and care of their communities.

### **3 Service areas included**

- 3.1 The Highland Council recognises that the scope of participation should cover all services received by tenants, not merely those which are charged to the Housing Revenue Account. However, priority will be given to the following:
- Repairs and maintenance, including planned maintenance, cyclic maintenance and contract preparation
  - The Allocation of Council Housing
  - Improvements/modernisation of Council Housing
  - Rent setting
  - Housing Benefit
  - Control of Anti Social behaviour
  - Environmental issues
  - Community facilities
  - Capital programme
  - Communications (including lease, tenants handbook)
- 3.2 The level of importance of each service will be agreed and continually reviewed by a consultation process involving a group representing Highland tenants as a whole.
- 3.3 The extent of the service subject to participation may be affected by issues such as confidentiality and legal responsibilities.

### **4 Levels of Participation**

- 4.1 The Council accepts that effective participation will only be achieved by recognising at least three levels at which tenants may be involved, each one representing an increase in the amount of tenant influence.
1. Giving information - in either verbal or written form, but without any opportunity for feedback/comment, for example information on benefits.
  2. Consultation and dialogue - creating opportunities for tenants to give views prior to decisions being taken, for example policy development such as a revised lease.
  3. Negotiation - reaching decisions by agreement with tenants, for example on the extent and types of housing improvements.
- 4.2 The initial stages of any participation process will involve establishing at what "level" participation needs to take place for the service area under consideration. This will be determined by what problems are perceived with the service, or by the demands of new legislation or new initiatives.

### **5 The Processes of Participation**

- 5.1 The main obstacle to effective Tenant Participation in The Highland Council is the distribution of tenants over a large area. This reduces the opportunities for personal contact and hampers the formation of tenants and residents groups.
- 5.2 The Council also recognise that not all the former districts had well developed processes for participation and consequently some areas are at a disadvantage in terms of their development of participation activities.
- 5.3 The Council will strive to overcome this by promoting and supporting processes which will strengthen existing structures and set up new ones. In particular the Council will encourage links between areas and promote The Highland Council identity.

5.4 Processes will be encouraged and supported which increase and improve tenant awareness and which provide opportunities for tenants to represent their views at all levels of the service.

5.5 The Council recognises three types or category of process:

- Processes for ensuring tenants receive all relevant information on the service
- Processes for consulting and negotiating service standards
- Processes for supervising and monitoring services
  
- Ensuring tenants receive all relevant information on the service will include:
  - Producing a “Plain English” lease for implementation in 1999
  - Issuing a handbook to every tenant by April 1999
  - Distributing two newsletters each year to all tenants
  
- Consulting and negotiating on service standards will include:
  - Working with Tenants/residents associations
  - Working with “Tenant Information Volunteers”
  - Working with “Focus Groups”
  - Conferences/workshops
  
- Supervising and monitoring services will include:
  - Postal surveys
  - Customer satisfaction forms
  - "On the spot" or “exit” surveys

5.6 A vital aspect of any process is that those taking part are kept informed of the outcome of the process, so that there is a true sense of involvement.

5.7 The Council will establish and support a Highland Tenants Consultation Group which will meet six times each year. Membership of this group will be open to any recognised tenant representative. (see 3.6) The overall aims of this group will be:

- To provide an opportunity for tenants from different areas to meet on a regular basis and therefore to strengthen the Highland identity
- To assist in co-ordinating other participation processes
- To represent the views of Highland tenants on policy matters through the management structure of the housing service

## **6 Recognition of Tenants Groups and Representatives**

6.1 Tenants or Residents groups will be officially recognised by the Council if they meet the following criteria:

- Written constitution approved by the relevant Area Housing Manager and formally adopted at a public meeting
- Has committee/office bearers elected at public meeting
- Able to demonstrate that it represents the area
- Provides minutes of AGM and audited accounts

6.2 Individual representatives will be recognised by undergoing training as a “Tenant Information Volunteer”.

- 6.3 However, in those areas which are in the early stages of development the Council accept that formal criteria will be a disincentive to tenants who may otherwise be interested in representation. The Council recognise that lack of confidence is a major factor in preventing tenants entering the participation process. Therefore, Area Housing managers will have discretion to waive these conditions temporarily if it would further the development of participation in their area.

## **7 Structures**

- 7.1 The Council recognises the need for an organisational structure which provides tenants with opportunities to represent their views at different levels. In other words there must be scope for participation in Highland wide policy issues as well as local matters.
- 7.2 An officer working group comprising representatives from all eight areas will be established, reporting to the Housing Management Team. The working group's overall remit will be to seek maximum involvement of tenants in the Best Value process.
- 7.3 The Council will maintain a decentralised management structure to ensure the service remains as accessible as possible. Each area will have a named contact officer for Tenant Participation and these will be made known to tenants.
- 7.4 The Highland Tenants Consultation Group (see para 5.7) will be recognised within the management structure of the housing service, reporting to the officer working group.

## **8 Roles of Members, housing staff etc.**

- 8.1 Effective tenant participation demands commitment from tenants, elected members and officers.
- 8.2 However, having regard to the heavy responsibilities placed on members of The Highland Council they must be allowed to have regard to their own priorities in determining their level of involvement. Members will therefore be informed of participation developments and initiatives, particularly those relevant to their area, with invitations to discussions, meetings etc. being extended.
- 8.3 All officers within the housing service will regard the promotion of tenant participation as an integral part of their work, and specifically:
- All persons employed by the Housing Service will be made aware of the need for tenants views, suggestions and complaints to be recorded and brought to the attention of a member of the officer working group.
  - Relevant staff will maintain regular contact with recognised tenants groups/representatives and will attend meetings as reasonably required.
  - On request, officers will provide advice and support as necessary on forming a representative group or becoming an individual representative, to tenants. This will include advice and assistance on applying for financial help.

## **9 Role of other organisations**

- 9.1 The Council recognises that there are a number of other organisations who have a role to play in the participation process.
- 9.2 National organisations:
- Scottish Tenants Organisation

- TPAS (Tenant Participation Advisory Service)
- TIS (Tenants Information Service)

The Council will use these organisations as a means of obtaining advice, expertise and training as necessary, and for information sharing.

### 9.3 Local organisations:

- TIGHRA (Tenant involvement in the Islands, Grampian and Highland Rural Areas)
- Community Councils
- Community Enterprise Groups

The Council will establish a formal relationship with TIGHRA owing to their experience and skill in developing participation in rural areas. TIGHRA will be included in the membership of both the Tenants Consultation Group and the Tenant Participation Working Group.

## **10 Treatment of other residents, owners, leaseholders etc.**

- 10.1 The Council will not exclude organisations from the participation process simply because their membership includes non-council tenants. If an organisation includes acting in the best interests of council tenants within its objectives, it will be recognised (subject to other criteria see para 6.1)
- 10.2 When consulting with such organisations, however, the Council will take into account the need to give priority to tenants views when considering Housing Revenue issues.
- 10.3 Participation will include individual former tenants who have exercised their right to buy and other private occupiers, where such residents are affected by housing service issues.

## **11 Resources/support**

- 11.1 The Council recognise that a significant obstacle to the formation of new tenants groups will be access to funding, and that even established groups/representatives will from time to time need financial assistance. The Council will therefore provide a budget from which grants may be issued to assist recognised groups. Examples of expenses for which grants may be issued are:
- "Start up" funding for new associations, to cover the initial cost of equipment, stationery, literature, publicity, etc.
  - Transport costs
  - Meeting venue costs
  - Training costs
- 11.2 Applications for funding will be subject to approval by the Tenant Participation Working Group who will have regard to the need to promote and sustain activity in areas where organised participation has been limited. It is expected that budgets will be devolved in the long term, as participation develops in these areas.
- 11.3 In addition, assistance "in kind" may be offered by area offices, such as photocopying, typing, etc.

## **12 Training**

- 12.1 The Council consider training to be an essential part of developing Tenant Participation. It is vital that representatives are equipped to enter into informed discussions.

- 12.2 The Council will therefore provide a budget which may be used to provide or subsidise training.
- 12.3 Training needs will be identified by the Tenants Consultation Group and expenditure approved by the Tenant Participation Working Group. Examples of subject areas which will be considered are:
- Council functions and organisation
  - Policies and procedures
  - Setting up an association
  - Organising meetings
  - Communications skills
- 12.4 The Council will maintain links with other organisations (eg. TIS, TPAS) who are able to offer training, and will ensure that Highland tenants have access to national training events.
- 12.5 The Council will also support tenant representatives who wish to apply for the Chartered Institute of Housing National Certificate in Tenant Participation by distance learning. Support may include paying all or part of the course fees.

### **13 Equality of opportunity**

- 13.1 The Council will encourage and promote active measures to ensure, as far as possible, that no group is disadvantaged in the participation process owing to disability, age, ethnic origin, sexual orientation etc. This would include:
- Location and timing of meetings
  - Meeting venues being barrier-free
  - Creche facilities
  - Availability of information in community languages, audio tape, etc. where required.
- 13.2 The Council will also encourage recognised associations to consider including a statement on equal opportunities in their constitutions.

### **14 Policy Review**

- 14.1 A vital provision within any policy is the process for reviewing and updating. This is particularly important in terms of developing the Council's approach to Best Value. As part of the strong customer focus our policy on working with tenants must be responsive and dynamic.
- 14.2 The Council accept that the sense of tenant ownership of the policy would be enhanced by a strong element of tenant responsibility in the review process.