

# Housing Services

## Service Overview

Community Services is responsible for the delivery of the Council's statutory housing functions. The Council landlord functions are funded within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). This is a "ring fenced" account within which income from rents and other charges are used to fund expenditure on housing management, repairs and maintenance and loan charges.

The main activities involved in the Council's landlord role, and funded within the Housing Revenue Account are:

- Housing / estates management
- Allocating houses
- Rent collection
- Rent arrears
- Repairs and maintenance
- Sheltered Housing wardens
- Tenant Participation

In order to maximise income to the HRA rent must be collected efficiently, including minimising the amount of time our properties are empty, and arrears managed appropriately.

Welfare Reform has had an adverse impact on many housing tenants and their ability to pay their rent. The impact of the under-occupancy rules have been mitigated by the use of Discretionary Housing Payment; however this has placed an additional burden on the Service, and there are risks to future Housing Revenue income associated with ongoing changes to the welfare system. Universal Credit has been rolled out in Highland – the first Scottish Local Authority Area to be impacted by this new benefit. This has impacted on rent arrears levels and we are working closely with Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and other partners to understand and mitigate impacts.

Work is continuing to bring all council houses up to the Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS). At present we expect all work to be complete during 2015. The major challenge has been to reach compliance with the energy efficiency criteria of the SHQS. A major part of this has been our investment in renewable heating technology in off-gas rural areas where delivery of works has considerable challenges. Looking beyond next year we need to develop a new approach to resource planning, programming and management of Housing Revenue Account capital investment.

## Council Performance

The Council has been extremely successful at reducing HRA costs and minimising Council house rent increases. This year the Council has the 11th highest average weekly rent nationally, compared to 3rd highest in 2011/12, and applied the second lowest average weekly rent increase for 2014/15.

Our rent collection rate is one of the best in Scotland and we have rent arrears targets in place to continue to improve our performance; we have reduced the amount of rent lost through properties being empty from 1.49% of the rent collected to 0.97%.

We have reduced the time taken to relet empty properties from 43 days to 39 days in 2014/15 and have reviewed and updated processes to continue to improve performance.

There are new Scottish Social Housing Charter indicators relating to repairs performance. Our average time

to complete non-emergency repairs in 2013/14 was 8.7 days which is a good performance considering the geographical size of the area.

Our overall SHQS compliance for 2013/14 is 70.2%. A further 8.4% of our overall stock has been designated as exempt using Scottish Housing Regulator guidance. The current HRA Capital Programme is targeting all remaining houses which do not meet the SHQS. The vast majority of the programmed works is for heating replacements to improve the SAP energy efficiency rating of our stock of which 75.7% is compliant.

#### What the Council is doing to improve services

The Council employed an additional 2 Housing Management Officers in 2013/14 in order to help with the expected increase in rent arrears prevention work. We also increased our bad debt provision in view of an expected increase in rent arrears, and introduced changes to our rent arrears and housing allocations policies aimed at mitigating the impact of Welfare Reform. This will continue to be a priority area of work in 2014/15.

Work is underway to review service delivery and achieve improvements on re-letting empty homes and in arrangements for carrying out day to day repairs.

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#### How the public can get involved

We are reviewing our existing Tenant and Customer Engagement Strategy in line with the Scottish Social Housing Charter and aim to widen tenant engagement in setting and monitoring service standards

We are working with tenants to develop a "Highland Housing Charter" setting out our service standard and how we will involve tenants and other customers in measuring and reporting against these standards.

Theme	Indicator Code	SPI - Benchmark	FY 12/13	12/13 Rank	FY 13/14	13/14 Rank
Housing Services	HSN1	Gross rent arrears as % of rent due - HSN1	n/a	n/a	4.4%	7
	HSN2	% rent loss through voids - HSN2	2.0%	22	1.2%	13
	HSN3	SHQS - % total meeting SHQS - HSN3/SHR7	70.2	22	70.2	25
	HSN4	Average time to complete non-emergency repairs (days) SHR12/HSN4	n/a	n/a	8.7	11
	HSN5	% properties at or above NHER or SAP ratings HSN5/SHR8	80%	20	75.7%	25

For more information about our service plan and performance or further information on getting involved in helping to improve our services, please contact us on:

**01349 886606**

Or contact us by email: [www.highland.gov.uk](http://www.highland.gov.uk)