

Agenda Item	5
Report No	HP/14/21

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Housing and Property Committee

Date: 30 September 2021

Report Title: Annual Assurance Statement to the Scottish Housing Regulator

Report By: Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides the Council's Annual Assurance Statement for the calendar year 2021 to the Scottish Housing Regulator.

2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to: -

- **Approve** the Annual Assurance Statement for 2021 detailed at **Appendix 1** of this report.

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** - There are no resource implications arising from this report.
- 3.2 **Legal** - There are no legal implications arising from this report. Submitting a Committee-approved Annual Assurance Statement to the Scottish Housing Regulator is a regulatory requirement.
- 3.3 **Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural)** - There are no equality implications arising from this report.
- 3.4 **Climate Change** - There are no climate change implications arising from this report.
- 3.5 **Risk** - Risk is managed through regular review and reporting to allow corrective action to be taken if necessary.

3.6 **Gaelic** - There are no Gaelic implications arising from this report.

4 Background

4.1 The Scottish Social Housing Charter (SSHC) was established in April 2012 and sets out the standards and outcomes that service users such as tenants, homeless people and Gypsy/Travellers can expect from social housing providers. As part of the regulation process, the Scottish Housing Regulator requires social landlords to provide it with an annual performance return, focused on the outcomes of the Charter.

4.2 In February 2019, the Scottish Housing Regulator published a new Regulatory Framework and associated guidance setting out how it would regulate social housing providers and its reporting requirements for the next 5 years. This Framework introduced a new requirement for landlords to provide an Annual Assurance Statement by the end of October each year, starting in October 2019.

4.3 The Regulator will use the Assurance Statements alongside the existing Annual Return on the Charter to guide its engagement with landlords and assist in the production of its Annual Engagement Plans for each landlord.

4.4 The Regulator verified the Council's Annual Return of Charter in August 2021 and the Highland Landlord Report, including the Engagement Plan, is available at:

<https://www.housingregulator.gov.scot/landlord-performance/landlords/highland-council>

4.4 The Regulator requires that the assurance statement for local authorities is approved by the appropriate Council Committee and signed by the Committee Chair before submission.

5 Highland's Annual Assurance Statement 2021

5.1 The Council's draft Annual Assurance Statement for 2021 is attached as **Appendix 1** and is in line with the recommended Regulator guidance.

5.2 We have discussed the content of the Statement with the Highland Tenant Forum on 4 August 2021. The draft Statement was approved at the Tenant Forum.

5.3 It is anticipated that when further guidance is available, the format of this consultation may need to be adapted for future years.

6 Related Regulatory Reports

6.1 The Annual Assurance Statement should be viewed in the context of the Scottish Housing Regulator's Engagement Plan and the Annual Report on the Scottish Social Housing Charter.

6.2 The Scottish Housing Regulator has advised all local authorities that homelessness and Gypsy / Traveller site management feature in all individual Engagement Plans to reflect the strategic importance of these issues to the Scottish Government rather than reflecting any specific concerns regarding the Council.

6.3 We are continuing to provide monthly updates to the Regulator on the Engagement Plan.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property

Date: 13 September 2021

Author: Brian Cameron, Housing Policy & Investment Manager

Background Papers: Scottish Housing Regulator: Statutory Guidance on the Annual Assurance Statement (updated April 2019)

Annual Assurance Statement 2021

Legislative compliance

We can confirm that Highland Council achieves all the following standards and outcomes for tenants, people who are homeless and others who use our services: -

- All relevant regulatory requirements set out in Chapter 3 of the Regulatory Framework.
- All relevant standards and outcomes in the Scottish Social Housing Charter.
- Return on the Energy Efficiency Standard for Social Housing; and
- All relevant legislative duties.

Further to this, we can confirm that there were no health & safety breaches in 2020-21 resulting in intervention by the Health & Safety Executive.

Our compliance with the annual gas servicing requirements specified in the Framework was 97.8% for 2020-21. The figure reflects 184 properties which Highland was unable to carry out the annual gas service as a result of national safety guidelines regarding the coronavirus pandemic. All of these properties have now received an annual service. Highland also complies with the Gas Safety Advice recommendations issued by the Scottish Housing Regulator to all social landlords on 3 September 2021.

Highland is progressing works to comply with the new legislation concerning the standards of fire and smoke alarms. Highland anticipates full compliance with the new standards before the compliance date in 2022.

Committee Reporting

We can confirm the following reporting structure within the Council: -

- Each of the 11 Area Committees receives quarterly or bi-annual housing performance reports and also reports on request of the Area Chair/Members; reporting has been adapted since April 2021 to accommodate the revised Area Committee structure in Ross-shire.
- The Council's Housing & Property Committee receives quarterly performance reports on key performance indicators and monitoring reports on other housing policy issues; the new Committee has been active since January 2020.
- Quarterly financial reports on spend against the Housing Revenue Account, non-Housing Revenue Account housing expenditure and Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme are submitted to the Housing & Property Committee.
- Reports are submitted annually (or on request of Members) to the Housing and Property Committee on the subjects of the Highland Housing Register; the Council's Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan; and the Annual Assurance Statement.
- Reports relating to housing services will also be subject to full Council and the Council's Audit and Scrutiny Committee as appropriate; and

- Council Members and tenant representatives will also meet during the year to identify policy review issues as appropriate. For example, a Member Seminar was held in April 2021 to discuss homelessness and adult social care issues.

The Area and Strategic Committee reporting is based almost exclusively on the performance indicators as established by the Scottish Housing Regulator in its Charter and by the Scottish Government in its Quarterly Homelessness Return.

From October 2018 there have been tenant-nominated tenant representatives at Strategic Committee and at the associated Member Seminars. A review of the tenant representative remit has commenced in August 2021.

Equalities and human rights

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has delayed the production of Regulator guidance intended to support landlords in their work to comply with equalities and human rights requirements.

Ahead of the guidance, Highland has reviewed our approach to the collection of equalities information and is confident that actions can be taken in 2021 and 2022 to ensure compliance with the requirements. Highland is also reviewing how we can adopt a human rights approach across various work remits.

Annual Customer Report for Tenants

The annual report for tenants was provided to tenants in September 2021 as required by the Scottish Housing Regulator. This included key performance information which is of interest to tenants.

As part of this annual process the Council asked the views of tenant representatives ahead of publication and their views were considered in producing the final document.

Customer Satisfaction Survey

The Council is required to undertake a comprehensive tenants' satisfaction survey every 3 years. The 2021 survey was completed in Spring 2021 and 1,001 tenants provided survey responses.

The overall feedback was encouraging and was reported as part of the Annual Return of the Charter. The feedback has been provided to tenants and discussion has taken place with tenants as to how to address issues raised within the survey responses.

A range of other customer satisfaction surveys are in place across the Service in order to assess the quality of the service on an ongoing basis. These include: -

- New tenants' survey regarding the quality of home and service.
- Repairs Satisfaction survey.
- Capital Improvements satisfaction survey; and
- Homelessness service questionnaire

Other forms of tenant feedback include but are not limited to the following: -

- Homelessness client group

- Young tenants focus group
- Tenant Scrutiny Panel
- Tenant involvement in the Trades Redesign
- Gypsy/Traveller client group
- Rate your Estate inspections.

The Council has been participating in the Scottish Government's Next Steps Programme and tenants have been actively involved in drafting a Tenant Participation Action Plan which will be incorporated into the review of the Tenant Participation Strategy in 2021. The Tenant Participation Advisory Service has commended Highland staff and tenants for their ability to work together to identify how tenant participation can be progressed in Highland.

Highland Council have been instrumental in setting up a group called Northern Tenants Partnership. This is a group made up of officers and tenants / residents from most of the social housing landlords in the North of Scotland. The group meet quarterly and their objective is to work together to improve tenant participation, discuss common issues, share good practice and carry out joint training.

Scottish Housing Regulator's Engagement Plan

The Scottish Housing Regulator's Engagement Plan has highlighted two key issues where they indicated they wished to engage with the Council. Highland must:

- provide the Regulator with information required in relation to our homelessness services.
- provide the Regulator with bi-monthly reports showing progress in meeting all fire safety obligations for our Gypsy/Traveller sites; and
- confirm that its Gypsy/Traveller sites comply with all fire safety obligations as soon as possible.

Discussion on Highland's homelessness services will be connected to the rapid Rehousing Transition Plan, which Highland submitted to The Scottish Government in June 2021.

An internal officer group has been established to progress the fire safety works on the Gypsy/Traveller sites. These works will be carried out in liaison with Scottish Government funding for other improvement works and following engagement with the residents. The Scottish Government attended the Longman Site on 9 September and indicated that they were pleased with the positive engagement with residents.

Highland has also been submitting monthly reports to the Regulator since June 2020 which detail performance against key housing issues during the pandemic.