



West
Dunbartonshire
COUNCIL



Tenant Communication Strategy

July 2014

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Introduction

This Communication Strategy sets out the ways in which the Council will communicate and feedback to its tenants and tenant organisations. It identifies the standards and methods we will use to provide information, the types of information we will provide and how we will provide feedback. Good communication and feedback is the responsibility of all staff; each housing service area will meet the standards outlined in this document.

The Communication Strategy applies to all tenants, including those living on our travelling people site, those in sheltered housing and those living in our other supported or temporary accommodation. It also applies to tenants who have registered with us their particular interest in being involved in consultation and to tenant organisations such as tenants' and residents' associations and Federations of tenants' and residents' associations.

Background

An independent review of tenant participation carried out between November 2008 and March 2009 identified a need to improve communication with and feedback to our tenants. The findings of the review were incorporated into the Council's Tenant Participation Strategy 2009-2012 and a commitment to developing a Tenants' Communication Strategy with the Federations was given. During the development of the Council's new Tenant Participation Strategy 'Involving You 2013-16' it was agreed that the Communication Strategy should be reviewed.

This revised Communication Strategy takes account of the new Tenant Participation Strategy and information requirements set out as part of the Scottish Social Housing Charter. Previous references to information requirements as part of a stock transfer have been removed.

Key principles

The Tenants' Communication Strategy adopts key principles endorsed by the Council and the West Dunbartonshire Tenants and Residents Organisations (WDTRO) including

Trust, respect and partnership

It is important that tenants, Councillors and Council staff trust and respect each other and work together in partnership to improve housing services and conditions.

Sharing information, ideas and power

Everyone involved in tenant participation will share information and ideas. It is important that we have a shared understanding of the issues so that we can work towards a joint solution to take these forward.

Setting the agenda together

Tenants and the Council will jointly agree the tenant participation agenda. We will make sure that everyone has the information they need to consider issues properly. We will provide information that is clear and easy to understand and is available in a variety of formats.

Allowing time to consider issues properly

We will share information in a way that allows everyone time to make an informed decision. Individual tenants, and tenants and residents groups, will have enough time to work out a common view before they meet Council representatives.



Openness and Accountability in Decision Making

We will make decisions in a way that is open, clear and accountable. We will provide feedback following all consultations.

Recognition for tenants' organisations

The Council recognises that individual tenants and residents groups are independent and autonomous organisations that provide a valuable role in shaping housing services.

Good working relationships

The Council will build good working relationships with individual tenants, and tenants and residents groups. These relationships require to be flexible to meet local needs and circumstances.

Providing resources for tenants and residents groups

The Council will provide adequate resources, support and training to assist tenants and residents groups to operate effectively.

Including people

We will take account of equal opportunities legislation and good practice. We will promote inclusive approaches and work in ways that are appropriate to different people and differing needs within our communities.

Involving You 2013-16 (Tenant Participation Strategy)

Involving You 2013-16 sets out our commitment to developing effective consultation and participation so that by working with our tenants we can continuously improve housing conditions and services. The Strategy ensures that we can demonstrate we are delivering real outcomes for our tenants and other service users as part of the new Scottish Social Housing Charter and tells you how we will achieve good tenant participation in housing services.

Development of the Tenants' Communication Strategy

Tenants and Residents Associations from across West Dunbartonshire Council came together to develop the Tenants' Communication Strategy in August 2010. As part of its review the strategy was re-issued to tenants in April 2014 for consultation:

Standards and methods of information provision

We will use a range of methods to provide information to tenants and tenant organisations. This includes written and electronic communication as well as making personal contact. We will adhere to the following communication standards.



Standards

We will ensure that the information provided to our tenants and tenant organisations:

- is accurate and up to date,
- is in plain English and free of jargon,
- can be made available in alternative formats,
- takes account of feedback about what people want and
- where information is provided as part of a consultation we will ensure that tenants and tenants organisations have time to absorb this information, to form a view and respond (see good practice in consultation).

Many people face barriers to communication because of language or disability. We will use a variety of methods to ensure that our communication methods are accessible. All our contact will comply with 'Communicating Effectively', the Council's guidelines for communicating with people from ethnic minorities and with disabled people. This is available on the Council's website:

https://www.west-dunbarton.gov.uk/media/737636/communicating_effectively.pdf

We will use the Housing and Community Safety Publication Standard to ensure that our publications are accessible and in Plain English. However as a general rule our publications will include the following formats as standard.

- statement regarding providing translated materials in community languages;
- large print versions
- Other formats which will be produced when requested



A guide for communication with people from minority ethnic groups and with disabled people

- audio versions
- translation of specific documents into community languages
- braille

When writing to you, if you request it, we will:

- write to you in large print, or communicate with you using computer disc or tape
- translate documents or summaries of documents into braille and a number of community languages
- At consultation events or meetings with us, if you request it, we will
- provide loop systems and other communication aids
- provide sign language interpreters or community language interpreters

Methods

Letters and emails

When writing we will adhere to the guidelines set out in our Customer Charter – Our customers are at the heart of everything we do. This includes attempting to fully respond to your queries in 10 working days – if we cannot do this, we will contact you and tell you why and who is dealing with your query, and when you can expect a full response.

Information leaflets and factsheets

We may use information leaflets or factsheets to provide you with information; these will meet our accessibility standards.



The 'Housing News' is used by the Council to provide information and housing services and development to all its tenants. It is used in together with other means of communication, to notify tenants in advance and provide information on forthcoming tenant consultation and participation opportunities which may affect them. It is also used to provide tenants with feedback about consultation and information about how housing services is performing.

- We publish the Housing News four times a year.
- Copies of the Housing News is made available to all tenant organisations and members of our tenant scrutiny panel
- If there is an appetite amongst our tenant organisations a 'Tenant Participation' page can be set aside to promote their work and views of the tenant movement in West Dunbartonshire. Articles from tenant organisations are welcomed by the Council.

Annual Performance Report

From October 2014, and each year thereafter, the Council will distribute an annual performance report aimed at tenants and other customers. The report will outline the Council's assessment of how housing services is performing and will be developed in consultation with tenants.

'Housing Info' – Text Messaging Service

The Council promotes the use of a text messaging service to tenants. This is used to provide tenants with useful information about events, reminders to attend meetings or to ask tenants their views about housing services.

Website

We will review and improve upon the provision of information made via the Council's website, ensuring that useful, accurate and up-to-date information is available. We will invite tenant organisations to provide details of the information they would like to see on the website.

Conferences, open days and exhibitions

Where appropriate we will use conferences, open days and exhibitions to provide tenants with information, to obtain their views and to provide feedback. Crèche facilities, interpreting services and other support services will be made available on request. All meetings will be held in fully accessible venues. We will arrange these events on days and at times which maximise people's opportunity to attend.



Tenant organisation meetings

To invite Council officers to a meeting, tenant organisations should contact services directly providing information about the meeting (time, place and purpose of the meeting) and detailing the issues which the organisation would like to raise.

Requests to attend a meeting should be made to the Council ten working days in advance of the meeting. Council officers will respond to the request within 5 working days of receiving it. Every effort will be made to ensure that a Council officer attends. If an officer cannot attend and another cannot go in their place, we will tell you why and provide a response to the issues or questions raised by your group.

Community Premises – Housing Officer Surgeries

Where tenant organisations have their own community premises Housing Officers will be available at a mutually agreed day and time to regularly provide surgeries. The surgeries can be used to take up estate management issues raised by individual tenants and to provide information to tenants. Both the tenant organisation and the Housing Officer will monitor the effectiveness of the surgery.

Scrutiny

Working with tenants the Council will develop opportunities for tenants to get involved in the scrutiny of its housing services, for example a scrutiny panel, tenant-led inspections and mystery shopping.



Working Groups

Regular meetings take place with members of the West Dunbartonshire Tenants and Residents Organisation (WDTRO). These liaison meetings ensure that tenants have direct access to elected members and senior staff and with decision making authority.

From time to time the Council will invite tenants to get involved in working groups to review or develop areas of housing standards, policy or delivery.

In 2013 the Council introduced the Pre-Housing and Community Tenant Forum (previously called the Pre-HEED Tenant Forum). The Forum is attended by the Housing Convenor, the Head of Housing and senior Housing Officers.

The Forum meets prior to each Housing and Community Committee to discuss housing related items. Tenant representatives from each RTO have an opportunity to ask questions, discuss items and express their views before items are discussed at the Committee Meeting.

Key principles which apply to these meetings include:

- the dates, times and venues for these meetings are agreed in advance between tenant organisations/representatives and housing services,
- necessary papers for these meetings are issued 10 working days prior to the meetings taking place, (for the pre-Housing and Community Forum as soon as they become available)
- copies of the draft minutes are sent to all tenant organisations (not just those who attend) within a minimum of 10 working days following the meetings taking place and

- tenant representatives on these working groups are invited to place items on the agenda (agenda items for the pre-Housing and Community Forum reflect housing related items on the Housing and Community agenda)

Invitations to other Council meetings

Housing services will provide details of the time, place and purpose of any meeting 10 working days in advance. Tenant organisations will confirm whether or not they will attend.

A shorter notice period may be necessary in some circumstances however we will endeavour to provide tenants and tenant organisations with as much notice as possible.

Home visits

Home visits will be offered, where appropriate, to those people who cannot attend outside meetings.

Estate management

Given that housing officers are working in areas where tenants live, additional methods of providing tenants with information include:

- home visits, including annual visit
- meetings in person at the area housing office
- direct dial by telephone to you local housing officer
- follow-up letters to visits, meetings and telephone conversations

Information we will provide to all tenants:

Under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, tenants can receive the following information when they request it:

- the terms of the tenancy agreement
- right to buy rules
- rent setting and charging policies
- the housing allocations policy
- repairs and maintenance policy
- the tenant participation strategy
- decision making structures and procedure.

This information can be requested from Housing Strategy and is also available from the Council's website. It will be issued within 10 working days of the request.

We will provide all tenants with:

- A tenant handbook. This is provided to all new tenants when they sign their tenancy agreement. Updated copies of the tenant handbook and sheltered housing handbook are available on the tenant participation section of the Council's website and will be issued to all tenant organisations for information.

- Housing officers will provide all new tenants with information about tenant participation and about tenant organisations in their area. This information will be provided during the new tenant visit which occurs within 8 wks of a tenant moving in to their property.
- We will regularly update and publish our Registered Tenant Organisation (RTO) database. This list of registered tenant organisations is available at the reception area of each housing office and at the Council's headquarters. It is also available via the Tenant Participation pages on the Council's website.
- The Council will produce a capital programme brochure 'delivering housing improvements' which will provide tenants with broad information about planned improvements in their area.
- Prior to the start of any capital projects (e.g. kitchens, bathrooms, close painting) all affected tenants are sent a letter and a project brochure which provides information about the contract work to be carried out and the contact details for Council officers involved in the project. As soon as project details are available and the appointed contractors have been confirmed, these letters and brochures are sent out.
- In larger projects such as the over cladding of multi-storey flats and structural works meetings with residents are arranged to provide information and obtain their views.
- Regular performance bulletins about how the housing service is performing are provided via the 'Housing News' newsletter and on the WDC website. Updated information is in all the area housing offices notice boards and is also available via the Council's website.
- Starting in 2014, tenants will receive an annual performance report which provides information about how the Council's housing services are performing against the Scottish Social Housing Charter outcomes.



Information we will provide to all tenant organisations and tenants on our ‘register of interested tenants’

As of December 2013 there are 13 Tenants and Residents Associations and two Federations of Tenants and Resident’s Associations in West Dunbartonshire. These are independent organisations set up primarily to represent tenants’ housing and related issues. Organisations which meet the registration criteria set out by the Scottish Government are eligible to become Registered Tenant Organisations (RTOs) and have a recognised role within the tenant participation process.

The Council also has a duty to consult with individual tenants as well as tenant organisations. One of the ways in which we will do this is by setting up and supporting a ‘interested tenants register’. Tenants who wish to receive information or be involved in consultation but are unable to get involved in tenant organisations or events will be invited to register their interest with us. We will contact these tenants to provide them with information and to ask them for their views.

In addition to the information made available to all tenants, we will make the following information available to tenant organisations and tenants on the ‘interested tenants register’.

Consultation Calendar

We will produce in conjunction with tenant organisations a calendar which will provide advance notice about consultation events to take place in the forthcoming year. The calendar also provides information about surveys or questionnaires being issued by housing service areas to obtain feedback about services. For example, a repairs service survey or allocations survey.



The Tenant Participation Officer will organise an open meeting with all tenant organisations to identify key issues for the forthcoming year. We will use the calendar to inform tenants of planned consultation throughout the year.

A printed copy of the calendar is issued to all tenant organisations and tenants on the register and re-issued when up-dates require it. The calendar will also be sent to equalities and seldom heard groups.

Consultation proposals

In addition to the calendar, information about all consultations will be published in the Housing News newsletter, on our website and passed to all tenant organisations.

Rent Consultation / Financial information

Under Section 25 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 we are required to give each tenant not less than 4 weeks notice, in writing, before increasing rents or other charges. If we propose to increase our rents we will first consult with those tenants who will be affected.

- We will ensure that tenants understand how their rent money is spent
- We will start rent consultation in September of each year
- When we produce budget information we will include commentary
- Our budget information will be linked to the business plan.

Housing Policies

In addition to those policies made on request to all tenants, tenant organisations may request copies of our re-let policy and arrears policy. This will be made available within 10 working days.

Changes to Housing Officers

We will inform tenant organisations as soon as is practically possible when there is a change of Housing Officer and Caretaker (where there is one) within the area that they represent.

Key housing staff – contact list

We will provide tenant organisations with a contact list for key housing staff. This will be updated when necessary. This will also be available on the tenant participation section on our website.

Council Committee Meetings

We will provide a contact number and dates and times of when Council Committee Meetings will take place and how to obtain copies of Council minutes.

Briefing Notes

The Housing Strategy Team will continue to share briefing notes with tenant organisations. The briefing notes provide information about housing services, policy and practice both at a West Dunbartonshire and Scottish Government level.

Good Practice in Consultation

Our Tenant Participation Strategy 2013-16 outlines key areas for consultation, for example, rents and rent policy, housing management and regeneration. In carrying out this consultation we will adhere to the following good practice:

Tenants and tenant organisations will be built into the consultation and participation process from the start

We will use a variety of approaches to consulting, for example, the Housing Matters newsletter, leaflets / posters, public meetings, conferences / seminars, open days, home visits, focus groups, questionnaires / surveys, text messaging and through our web-site

The method of consultation will depend on the scale and significance of the project, we will take into account tenant organisation views on the consultation methods used

Detailed information will be provided to tenants and tenant groups on any proposals we are consulting on, including:

- how and when the final decision will be taken
- how the proposal will affect tenants
- how and within what timescales tenants can make their views known to us
- the contact officer dealing with the consultation and
- information on how and where to complain

Where possible, individual tenants and tenant organisations will be given a minimum of 8 weeks to respond to housing consultation proposals. Council officers must seek permission from the Head of Housing and Community Safety to carry out consultation in a shorter timescale. If permission is granted we will explain why the consultation must be carried out within a shorter timescale.



Measuring Customer Satisfaction

The Council introduced a Customer Satisfaction Survey in 2012 which sets out a comprehensive approach to measuring customer satisfaction across Housing and Community Safety Services.

Exit surveys of customers who have recently received a service from housing services enables the Council to report on levels of customer satisfaction. In August 2013 the Council started using a new Survey of Tenants and Residents (STAR). This is a comprehensive tenant satisfaction survey being used across Scotland. The Council will develop an action plan to respond to any weaknesses identified in the survey and levels of customer satisfaction in West Dunbartonshire can be benchmarked with other housing providers in Scotland.

Tenants living in the Council's travelling people's site have also been asked how satisfied or dissatisfied they are with the Council's management of their site.

Providing feedback

When we ask tenants and tenant organisations for their views we will always provide feedback. Key principles include:

- Council officers responsible for carrying out consultation will also be responsible for ensuring feedback
- We will provide feedback using a range of methods (Housing Matters newsletter, displayed or distributed via area housing officers, the Council's website, directly to participants)
- We will ask participants during consultation about how they would like to receive feedback

- The outcome of consultation will be provided to all individuals and groups who participated
- Feedback will demonstrate how tenants' views have been taken into account and how views have been considered
- We will provide regular feedback from our surveys and questionnaires and we will tell tenants how we have used this information

Monitoring

We will continuously develop ways of improving communication and information to meet the needs of all our tenants and tenant organisation

Housing Services

Anti Social Behaviour and Estate Management Services

Responsibilities – Estate management and tenancy management and caretaking services. Anti Social Investigation and Support Team, Mediation Services, Anti-social behaviour team out of hours, public reassurance team and early intervention team.

Homelessness and Allocations

Responsibilities - Access to temporary housing accommodation, prevention of homelessness, gypsy travellers service. Access to housing, lettings and void management and the provision of housing advice services

Repairs and Maintenance

Responsibilities - Housing repairs and maintenance, minor capital works, sold property repairs.

Housing Strategy and Development

Responsibilities – Tenant Participation, Strategic Planning, New Build Development, Affordable Housing Supply Programme, Scottish Social Housing Charter, Performance, Information, marketing and user consultation.