



TIGHRA TALES

Spring 2005

Get Engaged This Summer!

An update on national tenant engagement

Following the national conference held during last November, Communities Scotland is now arranging to contact tenant groups throughout Scotland. This contact, which will be made through consultants, is to enable groups to give their opinions about suitable structures to take the engagement process forward. National engagement should offer tenants an opportunity to be consulted on Scottish housing policy at an early stage in its development and to take the initiative in getting items put on the national agenda.

However, for the process to work democratically, it is essential that a proper structure is put in place to represent tenants' views from across all our communities. Such a structure will need to incorporate the needs of those who may be disadvantaged because they live in remote locations or have age, disability, language or cultural issues.

Some of our members have told us that they favour having a system of regional networks so that tenant representatives can access meetings with the minimum of difficulty and time spent in travelling. However, they also recognise that networks will work better if there is a cross-section of tenants present to compare experience and ideas.

We would urge all those who are contacted by the Communities Scotland representatives to use the opportunity to voice their views about appropriate structures to meet the needs of all rural and remote tenants.

In the light of concerns put forward by our members, we are pleased to note that all tenant groups known to Communities Scotland, not just registered tenant organisations, will be given the chance to contribute views at this stage of the process.

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**For a large print newsletter contact our office at;
Fairfax House
64 Market Place
Inverurie
Tel. 01467 672233**

**Book now for our annual conference!
9th and 10th
Sept 2005 at
The Thistle
Aberdeen Airport
Hotel.**



Young residents hard at work in the early spring sunshine at Badger's Hill

Where are those Easter Eggs?

Firhill Residents Association held an open day on 30th March at Badger's Hill, a wild and green area in the estate. Nearly 40 volunteers came along with members of the Green Gym, community wardens, tenants and their children.

The aim of the day was to clear rubbish from Badger's Hill, cut-back scrub and plant 200 trees and shrubs. The black bags of rubbish and eight vehicle loads of scrub were later removed by The Highland Council's technical services.

A morning snack and lunches were provided by the Residents Association and there was an Easter egg hunt and cream eggs for all participants.

Who Cares About Rent Arrears?

The answer, of course, is that rent arrears and other housing debts are of concern to both tenants and landlords. Most importantly, on a personal level for the tenant involved, mounting arrears can result in spiralling debt, poor health or perhaps homelessness.

For the landlord, arrears result in essential financial resources being tied up in staff-time, administration and legal expenses. Ultimately some debt may have to be 'written-off' (cancelled) if it becomes impossible or financially impractical to collect. All these costs increase the amount of income which has to be collected in order to balance the housing services budget.

So, the management of rent arrears and other housing debts significantly affects tenants, therefore tenants should be consulted about the development of arrears strategies, policies and performance monitoring and reporting.

A sound strategy will focus on prioritising policies to prevent arrears and housing debts occurring. 'Prevention is the best cure' as they say! A little time spent advising new tenants of their responsibilities, assisting with benefits advice and providing information on budgeting will go some way to help prevent problems later. Many local authority and housing association landlords are developing projects within communities which should assist those at risk. Debt and benefits advice services are amongst the most popular.

Housing Benefit—its administration, misuse and complexity—impacts significantly on rent arrears and there should be policies and agreements in place between departments and agencies to ensure that best practice is followed by everyone involved. The delivery of housing benefit payments to tenants in the future is likely to change and tenants involved in consultation should be aware of the implications of government policy in this area.

Strategies must also adequately address the means of recovering arrears and debts from both present and former tenants. Early intervention and consistent, but sensitive, procedures are essential but even then, success is not guaranteed.

The ultimate sanction against any tenant in arrears is the imposition by a court of a legal order (decree) to evict them from their home and there is increasing pressure on social landlords to avoid using this penalty of eviction. Recent developments in homeless law may also act to discourage eviction for debts as the rights to alternative accommodation for those left homeless have been improved.

Tenants involved in consultation with their landlord about arrears strategies have many issues to consider and many start the process of performance evaluation and reporting by comparing their landlord's performance on arrears collection with that of other similar landlords. This information is available on an annual basis from Audit Scotland (for local authorities) and Communities Scotland (for housing associations).

TIGHRA can provide a course for groups or landlords on rent arrears management covering all the points raised above. See page four for details.



BIG LOTTERY FUND BOOST FOR COMMUNITY IN ALNESS

The West Alness Residents Association who manages the local community centre has been successful in receiving an offer of £122,000 from The Big Lottery Fund to help renovate and extend the existing premises which originate from unused shop shells. The offer is conditional on match-funding of a similar amount being found in the near future. A new youth facility is much needed in the area but while waiting for the alterations, the group has also been successful in receiving grants from Highland Wellbeing Alliance and others to provide diversionary activities for teenagers at the weekends. A 'Nite- Café offers pool, darts, TV, video, DVD and computer games on Friday and Saturday evenings. Many different groups use the community centre and the management committee will be working hard over the coming weeks to complete the financial package, They are grateful to Helen Houston, Alness Community Economic Development Officer, for her help and guidance in their efforts.

Community Ownership Update

We checked with some rural local authorities to find out how they currently stood with the community ownership programme.

Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar

The Hebridean Housing Partnership was set up in 2002 to bring forward a detailed proposal to transfer the council's housing stock to a new not-for profit housing association. Should the Council approve the organisation's proposed 30-year business plan, a ballot of tenants will be held later in 2005 to determine whether the houses would be transferred.

Shetland Islands Council

Initial stock transfer proposals were stopped at the pre-ballot stage in 2002. The Council has made a decision not to formally consider stock transfer again until at least 2007, subject to considerations relating to the delivery of the Scottish Housing Quality Standard

The Highland Council

The Council decided last October to apply to join the community ownership programme. Subject to tenants agreeing the proposals at the stage of ballot, the housing stock would be transferred to a new not-for-profit housing association. This would be a single organisation which would initially manage all the current housing stock throughout the Highlands. The Council has set out the principles that must guide any new landlord arrangements, including a commitment to second-stage transfers. Project management arrangements are in-hand and tenants will receive independent advice and guidance to assist them to make an informed and objective opinion.



Orkney Islands Council

Orkney Islands Council gave active consideration to wholesale stock transfer between 1999 and 2000 but due to low debt levels and good stock condition there was little pressure on the Council or inclination on the part of tenants, to pursue this course. Whilst the door is not firmly closed to transfer, Orkney would require a good argument to reconsider the issue.

The Moray Council

The Moray council have recently re-confirmed their commitment to retain full stock ownership. This follows work undertaken to prepare for the delivery of The Scottish Housing Quality Standard and a recent tenant survey.

Argyll and Bute Council

Argyll Community Housing Association submitted their revised Business Plan to Argyll and Bute Council in February. Both parties are working closely to agree remaining issues and develop a strategy for the future. The Tenants' Ballot is provisionally scheduled for September 2005.

Perth and Kinross Council

The Council and tenants opted to keep the housing stock in Council ownership. A steering group, with tenant representation has successfully worked to produce a Business Plan which will enable the housing service to meet a standard which is higher than the Scottish Housing Quality Standard.

What is The community Ownership Programme?

The Community Ownership programme is the name given to a transfer of council –owned houses to a not-for-profit housing organisation. This new organisation is usually a housing association and its management board would include tenant representatives. Some councils consider that the existing financial situation means that stock transfer is the best hope for improving the standard of housing in their area. Tenants, though, have the final and most important say in any potential transfer.

What can We Do For You?

TIGHRA has introduced new training courses for 2005. These include;

- Engaging With Rural Tenants.
- Understanding Tenant Participation.
- Managing Anti-Social Behaviour.
- Effective Groups and Committees.
- Rent Arrears Management.
- A Home Of Your Own (Video based training programme for those working with young people).

Additionally we can arrange and construct courses on housing management services and tenant participation issues according to your needs. Our rates are very competitive and we can organise a free session (charging travel and related costs only) on the work of TIGHRA.

Some of our courses will include the use of training video 'Tenants Know-How' which focuses on the valuable community work being done by residents associations in Kalliness and Soundside (Shetland), Hatton (Aberdeenshire), and North Fintry (Dundee).

For a full list of courses see our website or contact Judith at the office;

Judith@tighra.org or Tel 01467 672233

Board Member Profile



Nigel Slater

Nigel has been an active member of our Board of Directors for a number of years and has been the representative for Perth and Kinross Tenants and Residents Federation .

Recently, however, Nigel has moved to the Caithness area and is now the Chairman of the Highland Tenants and Residents Federation.

The potential stock transfer of Council-owned homes in Highland is high on the agenda at present and Nigel is keen to raise awareness and encourage interest amongst tenants regarding their rights to consultation on existing and future housing services.

Being a member of a successful Country and Western band, Nigel says that his time spent touring gave him an insight into the lives of tenants across the UK and, while he notes that Highland's housing problems are not the same as those of major cities, he feels that there are definite challenges for those representing tenants from widespread, small and remote communities across Highland.

A Welcome To TAWRA

TIGHRA is very pleased to welcome TAWRA (Thistle and Windmill Residents Association) as a member. This is our first group of sheltered housing residents to take up membership.

We look forward to helping them get the most out of tenant participation and to hearing their views about the housing needs of the senior citizens in our rural communities.

In the light of a recent meeting with TAWRA we are keen to hold a seminar just for older people on issues relating to their homes and support.

If you would like to comment on issues which you think we should cover then contact Judith at our office.



Thistle and Windmill Residents at their meeting in March. Guest speakers included Jennifer Horne from Communities Scotland and Lesley McKenzie from Grampian Society for the Blind.

GET A FREE WEBSITE

If you represent a tenants or residents group and would like a website without the trouble and expense of setting one up, then we can help.

We can set up pages for you in our website, giving you the opportunity to keep tenants in your area regularly updated with your activities. Contact us.