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A thematic study into how social landlords share information about performance and governance

Ensuring decent housing
and strong communities across Scotland

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Summary

Aim of the study

The study aimed to provide a national picture of landlords' openness and accessibility to their tenants and other people who have an interest in their services, and to identify examples of positive practice. It focused on information about governance, performance and complaints.

The study tried to answer four questions:

1. What kinds of information do landlords provide?
2. Are they providing the right sort of information for their tenants and other service users?
3. Do they provide the information in a timely way?
4. How easy is it for tenants and other people to get the information they need?

Provision of information

The national research, based on a survey of local authority landlords and RSLs, found some notable differences in the kind of information they provide. While nine out of ten local authorities said they published committee papers and minutes on their website, only 16 per cent of RSLs were using their website to publish minutes or papers of their governing body meetings. But RSLs were more likely than local authorities to say they published a tenants newsletter or annual report.

Fewer than half the landlords said they had published information about their service standards. Local authorities were more likely than RSLs to provide

information about service standards (62 per cent compared to 44 per cent of RSLs).

Different legal and governance arrangements help to explain some of the differences. For example, local authorities have corporate responsibilities to report on their performance and this may account for the relatively low percentage who said they did this through a tenants newsletter or annual report. There is no legal requirement for RSLs to publish minutes of their board meetings.

More surprising, perhaps, were the different responses to a question asking what landlords saw as the main barriers to providing information. Two-thirds of RSLs thought lack of interest from tenants was one of the main barriers compared to only 15 per cent of the local authorities. Local authorities were more likely to say lack of resources was a significant barrier to providing information.

Are landlords providing the kind of information people want?

In contrast to the perception that tenants are not interested in governance and performance information, the study found that tenants do want to know how well their landlord is doing. But the desire for information may be latent in the sense that, if they don't know what could be available, people will not necessarily ask for it.

The tenants we consulted during the study wanted to know what standards of service they can expect and how well their landlord is doing against the standards. They were interested in information at a local level, about the areas of service that directly affect their lives. They were most interested in performance information about rent collection, anti-social behaviour, repairs, tenant participation and tenant satisfaction. The outcomes from their landlord's

inspection were also of interest. Governance information was of interest too but appeared lower down on the list of priorities.

In terms of the kind of publication that tenants like, newsletters and annual reports were both popular. The publication landlords said they were most likely to provide was a tenants newsletter. It was encouraging to find that tenants' preferred method of communication is the one that more than nine out of ten landlords use. But the fact that fewer than half the landlords said they had published service standards was a matter of some concern. Both the national research and group discussions with our tenant assessors showed this kind of information is a high priority for tenants.

Gaps in information

As we would expect, all the case-study organisations published some information related to the statutory performance indicators or key performance indicators. One local authority and one RSL did not provide any performance information beyond the statutory or key performance indicators. The other landlords provided a wider range of information, but (particularly in the case of RSLs) often failed to set it in context by showing how well they were performing compared to other landlords, or in relation to their performance in previous years. Among local authorities, information about the performance of the homelessness service is often lacking compared to information about other areas of the housing service.

Most of the case-study landlords provided good, clear information about how to make a complaint. Overall, we thought the quality of complaints leaflets was good. But although several organisations said they would use complaints to improve services, we did not see any direct evidence that they were doing this. Few landlords reported to service users on the number and nature of complaints they received. This suggests that complaints and other forms of feedback are still an under-used resource.

Accessibility

Previous research has identified a number of difficulties for people who need access to information in alternative formats or languages. For example, there is a low take-up of translations available 'on request' because people do not know what is available.

This study (and our previous thematic study on equalities) suggests that while there is evidence of some very good practice in the sector, landlords need to work hard to make sure everyone has equal access to information.

More than nine out of ten organisations said they would provide at least some documents in other formats or languages on request. But a few said they did not provide documents in other languages or formats, even on request. Even when landlords think they are meeting their legal obligations to make information available in different languages and formats, it isn't always obvious to people that they can ask for these. Some tenants in the case-study organisations said they didn't know their landlord could give them information in large print or other formats. The study suggested that it may be more difficult for people to get information promptly if they need it in an alternative format or translation. It appeared that these services vary in different parts of the country and between different organisations.

Conclusions

We found no evidence of deliberate lack of openness among landlords. Rather, there seemed to be an unintentional lack of openness in some parts of the sector. The view that tenants are not interested in the kinds of information the study was concerned with may reflect this.

The study highlighted various legal requirements for local authorities and RSLs. But we found examples of positive practice across the sector, and it was clear that the best examples of performance information came from organisations that had consulted service users about what they wanted. This, rather than legislation, seemed to be the key to genuine openness and accessibility.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The Regulation and Inspection division of Communities Scotland (R&I) regulates and inspects registered social landlords (RSLs) and inspects the housing and homelessness services provided by local authorities. We aim to promote improvements in the quality of housing and homelessness services. Around one in four households in Scotland rents a house from a landlord we regulate or inspect.

Twenty-seven of the 32 Scottish local authorities are landlords. Between them they own around 346,000 houses. The smallest local authority landlord (Orkney Islands Council) owns fewer than 800 houses and the largest (North Lanarkshire) just under 39,000 (Scottish Executive, 2007).

RSLs include housing associations, housing co-operatives and companies limited by guarantee. There were 254 landlords on our Register of Social Landlords in April 2007. Together they own around 257,000 houses. Most RSLs own fewer than 2,500 houses. But there are also some very large landlords, including those created following the transfer of stock from local authorities. For example, Glasgow Housing Association owns and manages more than 70,000 houses, Dumfries and Galloway Housing Partnership around 11,000. More than nine out of ten RSLs are industrial and provident societies and are membership organisations whose members elect the committee of management.

1.2 Purpose of thematic studies

Thematic studies look at a single area of practice across Scottish local authority landlords and RSLs. They are based on a combination of national research and

case studies of selected organisations. They aim to give a picture of that area of practice in the housing sector and provide examples of positive practice that landlords can share. The findings should interest landlords, their tenants and other people with an interest in their services.

1.3 Context of the study

This is our sixth thematic study. It focuses on landlords' openness and accessibility in the information they provide about their governance and performance, rather than information about services. It looks at the kind and quality of information landlords provide about their performance and how they manage their business. This includes the service standards tenants and other service users can expect and information about how to complain or appeal against a decision.

Openness about these matters is a measure of accountability. But evidence from inspections suggests that information about housing services is usually more readily available, and of better quality, than information about service standards and performance. We have sometimes found that lack of good performance information limited service users' ability to influence service priorities and standards (Communities Scotland, 2005). Before starting this study, we reviewed all our inspection reports published over the two years since the end of the pathfinder inspections (2005/06). There were 48 RSL inspection reports and seven local authority reports. These were our findings:

- Performance management and reporting were not particularly strong areas for either RSLs or local authorities. Fewer than a third were judged to be very good. More encouragingly, over a third were said to be 'fair' or 'improving' in these areas.

- Performance management and reporting on homelessness services were generally quite poor, with only one council doing this really well.
- All the local authorities published an annual performance report, as required by the Local Government in Scotland Act (2003). They also conveyed performance information in various other ways.
- Most RSLs published an annual report and these usually included some information about performance. But six RSLs were not producing an annual report at the time of inspection.
- Local authorities were more likely than RSLs to have formal service standards in place. All the local authorities had standards for at least some elements of their service. Around four in ten RSLs had published service standards at the time of their inspection.
- Landlords didn't always monitor those standards they had set, particularly in homelessness services.
- Landlords were good at making information available in different languages and formats to meet different needs, although a few were not so good at publicising these services.
- Nearly all the organisations had published a formal complaints procedure, though one local authority and one RSL hadn't. Just under half the organisations were regularly reporting to their committee, board or tenants about complaints, feedback or service-user satisfaction.

Local authorities and RSLs are different types of organisation with very different governance arrangements and lines of accountability. RSLs are not public bodies, although they provide some services of a public nature. But councils are public authorities with a wide range of roles and duties, accountable to the electorate through their elected members. Because of these differences they make different kinds of information publicly available, and in different ways. Some of the information held by RSLs, for example, may be commercially sensitive. Size is important too. A small RSL is unlikely to have the same resources for managing and providing information as a large local authority with access to the resources of a corporate services department. But it may have a greater level of personal contact with individual tenants. So each organisation may have a different approach to providing information.

The important question for this study was how open and accessible landlords are to their service users and other people. Although they are different kinds of organisation, RSLs and local authority landlords provide services of a similar nature to the public. So there are lessons and examples of positive practice that both should find useful.

1.4 Aim and objectives

The aim of the study was to provide a national picture of landlords' openness and accessibility to their tenants and other people who have an interest in their services. We also wanted to identify examples of positive practice. Our objectives were to:

- identify what information is important to tenants and other service users;
 - identify any particular information and access needs of service users, such as those from ethnic minority groups and people with disabilities;
 - evaluate landlords' openness and accessibility in providing information;
- and

- assess the quality of information they provide.

The study tried to answer four questions.

1. What kinds of information do landlords provide?
2. Are they providing the right sort of information for their tenants and other service users?
3. Do they provide the information in a timely way?
4. How easy is it for tenants and other people to get the information they need?

1.5 Study methods

We appointed an independent consultant, ERS, to carry out the national research for the study. This included:

- a review of relevant legal requirements and guidance;
- a survey of landlords to find out what kind of information they provide; and
- consultation with tenants and organisations about the kind of information they think is important.

We also carried out 13 case studies, and these provided the bulk of evidence for this report. Nine were RSLs and four were local authority landlords (see annex 1). Staff from R&I carried out the case-study work with tenant assessors, whose role we explain in the next chapter. Lynn Sweeney managed the inspection team and the inspectors were Jean Harper, Ian Kerr, Paul Milligan, Elaine Rosie, Gordon Scobie, Lindsay Stother and Elaine Whyte. Diane McKiernan, Inspection Officer, supported the team and co-ordinated the material for tenant assessors.

1.6 The project advisory group

We set up an advisory group to oversee the study. Members of the group are listed in annex 2. The group provided valuable comments and advice at each stage of the research.

1.7 Structure of this report

The next chapter explains the role of the tenant assessors. We then outline the main legal requirements and performance standards that are relevant to openness and accessibility. Chapter 4 summarises findings from the national research about the kind of information landlords provide, while chapter 5 looks at what kind of information tenants want. This provides the context for the case-study findings in chapters 6 and 7. The final chapter draws together findings and conclusions and we make several recommendations for landlords.

2 The role of tenant assessors

2.1 Introduction

Tenant assessors are volunteers who work with Regulation & Inspection staff. They bring a service user's perspective to the inspection of RSLs and local authority housing services.

2.2 The tenant assessor role

We developed the role of tenant assessors after evaluating a pilot project involving tenants in our first pathfinder inspections (Communities Scotland, 2004). We introduced the new role at a national tenants conference in March 2005 and, shortly afterwards, advertised for and recruited 30 tenant assessors.

The tenant assessors come from all over Scotland and bring with them a wide range of skills and experience. What they have in common, as well as their enthusiasm and commitment to improving the quality of housing services, is that they are all tenants of RSLs or local authorities.

All tenant assessors have to sign up to a code of conduct and confidentiality agreement before they can work with R&I. This is similar to the code our own inspection staff work to. We also make sure there are no conflicts of interest involved in any work we ask them to do. For example, we will not ask a tenant assessor to work on an inspection of their own landlord or in their home area, or of an organisation they have worked for in the last four years. Again, these rules are similar to those that apply to R&I staff.

2.3 Tenant assessors and inspection

Over the last two years the tenant assessors have been working alongside our inspection teams. They can be involved for up to three days on any one inspection, carrying out tasks such as:

- assessing samples of information that landlords provide for their tenants;
- attending formal meetings with tenants' groups; and
- taking part in on-site visits with inspectors, where they meet staff and tenants, visit properties and ask questions.

We have recently evaluated the tenant assessors initiative. The inspection team, staff of inspected organisations and tenant assessors themselves said they have found it positive and useful. We have also identified areas to work on over the coming year. These include further training, feedback and development of the tenant assessors' role to fit in with our revised framework for regulation and inspection.

2.4 Tenant assessors and the thematic study

This is the first time tenant assessors have been involved in a thematic study. As the study focuses on the quality, availability and accessibility of information that landlords provide for their tenants we knew the tenant assessors would have an important part to play. They:

- took part in two workshops, one at an early stage of the study and the second towards the end;
- carried out desk-top assessments of information provided by the case-study landlords; and
- led group discussions with tenants from the case-study organisations.

Fourteen tenant assessors contributed to the case studies. They were Jeanette Boyd, Bill Chapman, Wilson Dunlop, Charles French, Isabell McLaughlan, Ian MacLean, Jess Martin, Gordon Mason, Danny Mullen, Thérèse Mullen, Clare Newton, Nanette Reid, Fiona Samson and Martin Van der Lee.

Tina Beattie also contributed to the study. She represented the Tenants' Regulation Advisory Group on the project advisory group and came to one of the workshops in her capacity as a tenant assessor.

3 The legal framework, performance standards and good practice

3.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises legal requirements for landlords and discusses some of their implications for policy and practice. It also outlines the performance standards that are relevant to openness and accessibility.

3.2 Legal framework

3.2.1 Access to information

The Freedom of Information law in Scotland has without doubt raised expectations about the kind of information that should be publicly available. But local authorities have long been expected to publish information about matters discussed at council meetings. The Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985, requires council meetings to be open to the public and media (although certain exempt information can be discussed and decided in private session). If the meetings are open to the public their agendas, officers' reports and background papers must be publicly available at least three days in advance. But some decisions are taken by officers to whom the council has delegated authority. These decisions only became subject to the openness provisions of the 1985 Act when the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 (FOISA) came into effect in January 2005.

FOISA gave the public a right of access to information held by public authorities. Apart from certain exemptions set out in the Act, anyone has the right to ask for and be given information held by a public authority. Each public authority must publish and maintain a publication scheme, setting out the classes of document it

publishes or intends to publish. In developing the scheme the authority must have regard to the public interest in information that:

- is about the services it provides, including cost and quality of services; and
- consists of facts or analysis forming the basis of important decisions.

Local authorities must comply with the Act as they are Scottish public authorities listed in schedule 1 of the Act. RSLs are not currently subject to the Act, although Ministers have reserved the right to review the position in future. RSLs were not originally included because their representative body, the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (SFHA), argued successfully during the passage of the Bill through Parliament that RSLs already comply with the spirit of the law through regulatory and other requirements. But RSLs are affected by FOISA for two main reasons.

One is that the Scottish Government, Communities Scotland and other public bodies who are subject to the Act may be asked to provide information about RSLs. They would have to respond to the request in accordance with the Act.

Secondly, the general climate of increased openness and transparency leads people to expect that RSLs will be more open about their affairs.

The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (SFHA) has advised that 'as a matter of positive practice RSLs should seek to act in a manner consistent with the principles of the Freedom of Information legislation' (SFHA, 2005).

3.2.2 Public performance reporting

Local authorities have a duty under the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 to report publicly on their performance. The Scottish Government expects that:

‘... the authority has identified what information stakeholders need in order to form a view on the performance of the authority. It recognises that different sections of the community will have different needs in terms of getting information and responds accordingly. It presents this information in a form that people find useful, accessible and that allows stakeholders to form a clear view of the authority’s overall performance.’ (Scottish Executive, 2004)

There is no legal requirement for individual RSLs to report publicly on their performance. Each RSL does have to provide Communities Scotland with an annual performance and statistical return (APSR). We use this information to publish an annual report about the sector’s performance.

3.2.3 Data protection

The Data Protection Act 1998 aims to protect the privacy of individuals by setting out eight principles for processing and keeping personal information. They include the requirements that personal data is processed for limited purposes, that it is accurate and up to date, held securely and ‘adequate, relevant and not excessive to the purpose of the processing’. The Data Protection Act applies to RSLs as well as local authorities.

3.2.4 Complaints

Under section 22 of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002, listed authorities must provide people with information about:

- their right to make a complaint;
- any time limit for doing so; and
- how to contact the Ombudsman.

This information must be included in or provided with information about a listed authority's services or complaints procedure, and with any correspondence in response to a complaint. If the Ombudsman has investigated a complaint about its services a listed authority must also arrange to allow inspection of its report on the investigation for a period of at least three weeks. It must also arrange for interested parties to receive a copy of the report. Listed authorities include RSLs and local authorities.

3.2.5 Equal opportunities

Part 7, section 106 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 requires RSLs and local authorities to fulfil their duties under the Act 'in a manner which encourages equal opportunities and in particular the observance of the equal opportunity requirements'.

Guiding standard 2.1 of the performance standards for social landlords and homelessness functions covers equal opportunities. This sets out clear expectations that landlords will 'embrace diversity, promote equal opportunities for all and eliminate unlawful discrimination in all areas of their work'.

The Disability Discrimination Act 2005 extended the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act 1995. It introduced a general duty on service providers to promote equality of opportunity for people with disabilities in everything they do. The duty applies to anyone carrying out functions of a public nature. There are also specific duties that apply to public bodies including local authorities and Communities Scotland. For example, they have to produce a disability equality scheme explaining how they intend to fulfil the duty to promote equality. The specific duty does not apply to RSLs, but the general duty does, as the Disability Rights Commission considers that they carry out functions of a public nature.

The Race Relations Act 1976 (as amended) places a general duty on public authorities, which include Communities Scotland and local authorities, to promote race equality. Among other things, this means they must have in place a race equality scheme. The scheme should set out how the organisation will make sure everyone, whatever their ethnic background, has access to information about the authority and its services.

The Commission for Racial Equality has published the Statutory Code of Practice on Racial Equality in Housing: Scotland, which came into effect in October 2006. It applies to all providers of housing and related services in Scotland. Among other things, the code promotes good practice in access to information. The Commission for Racial Equality in Scotland has stated that most housing-related complaints it has received concern the failure to recognise, or appropriately react to, racist harassment of tenants and to discrimination in offering advice and information.

3.3 Policy and practice implications

3.3.1 Accessibility

While the Race Relations Act says everyone in the community should have access to services, this does not mean all material must be translated. The Commission on Integration and Cohesion recently argued that local authorities and their partners should move away from automatically translating all documents into community languages towards taking a more selective approach. Instead, the Commission suggested the emphasis should be on providing English-language classes. This stimulated a lively debate in the media with strong views on both sides of the argument. But the Commission acknowledged that language barriers can perpetuate inequalities and that 'where new communities have arrived in a local area then clearly they need initial information

in appropriate languages'. (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007, Annex E)

It is still relatively unusual to find publications routinely available in other languages in Scotland. More often, they can be provided in other languages on request. This will often be a more practical and cost-effective approach for landlords. But the availability of translations needs to be well publicised.

The Disability Discrimination Act has similar implications in terms of access to information in alternative formats such as large print, audio, Braille and Moon. Landlords are expected to make sure information is available in these formats on request. They should also be able to provide sign-language interpreters if asked to do so. The Act also requires organisations to promote positive attitudes towards disabled people. That includes using positive images appropriately in their publications.

We published a follow-up thematic study on equalities last year (Communities Scotland, 2006 a). We found that, while landlords had made good progress in some areas since the first study in 2002, many had more to do in terms of:

- gathering information to inform community profiles;
- understanding and responding to the access requirements of all equalities groups; and
- reviewing publications regularly to make sure they contain positive images and language and that they meet the needs of the local community.

3.3.2 Openness

More generally, people increasingly expect openness in public services. One of the principles of public service reform is greater accountability to people using services. Openness in providing information is central to this.

The recent report of the Tenant Involvement Commission, chaired by Ed Mayo, suggested that tenants do not know enough about how their landlord performs.

‘Few tenants know how to find out how their association performs compared to others ... Fundamentally, all tenants want to have the option of looking at information on housing association performance. Some would like to receive this regularly in a structured way while others would simply just like to know where to access it, should they want to.’ (National Housing Federation, 2006, p 20)

The Cave review of social housing regulation in England has recommended a greater role for tenants in assessing performance and holding landlords to account. In particular, Cave recommended that service providers should be encouraged ‘to:

- enable tenants to make periodic assessments of the quality of services provided;
- share benchmarking information about their performance and costs with other providers and publish this information to tenants and more widely; and
- include an independent element in their performance assessment so that there is effective external challenge’. (Cave, 2007, p 82)

Professor Lorne Crerar's review of inspection, audit, regulation and complaints handling in Scotland has also emphasised the need for a greater focus on the people who use services. In a literature review carried out for Crerar, the Scottish Consumer Council notes that accurate performance reporting contributes to satisfaction with services. The same report comments that:

'The literature supports the development of local targets and measurements over 'top down' mechanisms, partly due to the need for targets and measurements to be responsive to the needs of local consumers and citizens.' (Scottish Consumer Council, 2007, p 23)

3.4 Performance standards

The performance standards for social housing and homelessness functions are published by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA), Communities Scotland and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (SFHA). Performance standards let tenants and others know what standards to expect from social landlords. They also let landlords know how they should manage and deliver housing services. We provide material to support good practice, such as self-assessment questions for each standard on our website. The guiding standard on openness and confidentiality, GS3.5, is particularly relevant to this study. But several other standards are also relevant (Box 1).

Box 1

Performance standards relevant to openness and accessibility

Guiding standards 2: social inclusion

GS2.1 Equal opportunities: We embrace diversity, promote equal opportunities for all and eliminate unlawful discrimination in all areas of our work.

Guiding standards 3: service delivery and communication

GS3.1 Responsiveness to service users: We place the people who want to use our services at the heart of our work. We treat people with respect and are responsive to their views and priorities.

GS3.2 Information and advice: we provide or secure effective information and advice, in line with the national standards for housing information and advice services.

GS3.3 Complaints and appeals: We deal fairly and effectively with anyone wanting to appeal against, or complain about, any of our decisions or activities. We make it clear that they can complain about us to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman.

GS3.4 Performance reporting: We give our stakeholders the information they need about the organisation and its plans, services and performance.

GS3.5 Openness and confidentiality: We are open about what we do and publish information about our activities. We provide information that people ask for, unless there are justifiable reasons for withholding it.

(COSLA, SFHA and Communities Scotland, 2006)

www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk

3.5 Governance

Governance is the leadership, direction and control of the organisation to make sure it achieves its agreed aims and objectives, and in doing so serves the public's best interests.

The regulatory code of governance we have published for RSLs (Communities Scotland, 2006 b) is based on the good governance standard for public services (Office for Public Management and Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountability, 2005). The good governance standard, in turn, is based on a set of principles agreed by an independent commission on governance in public services chaired by Sir Alan Langlands. These principles, sometimes known as the 'Langlands principles' or 'the good governance standard', are summarised in box 2 below.

Box 2

The good governance standard for public services (the 'Langlands principles')

1. Good governance means focusing on the organisation's purpose and on outcomes for citizens and service users.
2. Good governance means performing effectively in clearly defined functions and roles.
3. Good governance means promoting values for the whole organisation and demonstrating the values of good governance through behaviour.
4. Good governance means taking informed, transparent decisions and managing risk.
5. Good governance means developing the capacity and capability of the governing body to be effective.
6. Good governance means engaging stakeholders and making accountability real.

As the regulatory code of governance is statutory guidance, issued on behalf of Scottish Ministers, RSLs must meet the requirements it sets out. We have also published supporting guidance and self-assessment questions relating to each element of the code.

3.6 Conclusion

The wide range of legal requirements summarised in this chapter reflects the complexity and importance of the subject of this study. In the next chapter, we give an overview of the kind of information landlords currently provide in Scotland.

4 What kind of information do landlords provide?

4.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises findings from the survey of landlords and review of their publications and websites. ERS carried out this work for us and we have published the full report on their findings separately.

4.2 The landlord survey

The survey aimed to provide a national picture of the kind of information landlords publish and how they make it available. The consultants also asked landlords for copies of a selection of publications such as tenants newsletters and annual reports.

We sent the questionnaire to the 27 local authorities that own housing stock and 203 RSLs (we did not include Abbeyfield Societies¹). The survey aimed to find out about the range of information provided, where and how it was published and whether it was available in alternative formats and languages. The questionnaire also asked landlords about their arrangements for producing and managing information and what they saw as the main barriers to providing information.

More than two thirds of the landlords responded. They included all 27 local authorities and 129 RSLs (64 per cent of those we asked).

For the purpose of analysing the survey results, we grouped RSLs into those with fewer than 1,000 houses ('small RSLs') and those with 1,001 or more ('larger RSLs').

¹ Abbeyfield Societies are small independent organisations. Many of them own just one house. We excluded Abbeyfield Societies from the survey because of their small size.

4.3 Desk-based review of publications and websites

The consultants also carried out a desktop assessment of a sample of publications and websites. This supplemented the survey and enabled the researchers to relate survey responses to real examples of information.

4.4 Availability of publications

In terms of the kind of documents landlords said they provide:

- 92 per cent published a tenants newsletter;
- 88 per cent had a complaints procedure;
- 87 per cent produced an annual report;
- 82 per cent provided a tenants handbook;
- 76 per cent provided a complaints form;
- 47 per cent published service standards; and
- 27 per cent published a leaflet on governance.

4.5 Content of publications

Just under two-thirds of the landlords said their tenants newsletter sometimes includes information about performance. Local authorities were less likely than RSLs either to publish a tenants newsletter (78 per cent compared to 95 per cent of RSLs) or to publish one that includes performance information (54 per cent, compared to 67 per cent of RSLs). The desk-top review of newsletters revealed a wide variety in the nature and quality of information about performance among those landlords that did provide it.

Local authorities were also much less likely than RSLs to publish an annual report or leaflet on governance. This was perhaps not surprising, given their different governance arrangements. Local authorities were more likely than RSLs to say they provide

information about service standards (62 per cent compared to 44 per cent of RSLs). The review of inspection findings mentioned in section 1.2 confirmed that local authorities were more likely than RSLs to have service standards in place.

While nine out of ten local authorities said they published committee papers and minutes on their website, the survey showed that few RSLs (16 per cent) were using their website to publish minutes or papers of governing body meetings. Local authorities were also slightly more likely to say minutes were publicly available in their offices (48 per cent compared to 42 per cent of RSLs). Small RSLs (those with fewer than 1,000 houses) were more likely than either larger RSLs or local authorities to say they displayed minutes on notice boards in their offices. Provision of minutes on request was high – 96 per cent of local authorities and 83 per cent of RSLs.

Just under 60 per cent of RSLs said they published details of governing body membership on their website and around 75 per cent that they published these details in the tenants newsletter. Local authorities were more likely to publish details of committee membership on their website (95 per cent compared to 60 per cent of RSLs), but few said they included these details in tenants newsletters.

4.6 Accessibility

More than nine out of ten organisations said they would provide at least some documents in other languages on request. Nearly a quarter (22 per cent) said they produced some documents in other languages 'as standard'. The languages most often used for standard translations were Urdu (35 per cent), Arabic (33 per cent) and Polish (33 per cent). But a small minority of organisations (8 per cent) said they did not provide documents in other languages, even on request. This figure was broadly consistent with findings from our recent follow-up study on equalities. Based on survey work in 2006, we found that 10 per cent of landlords did not provide published material in other languages. (Communities Scotland, 2006 a)

The questionnaire also asked about provision of information in alternative formats – audio, large print, Braille and Moon. The pattern of responses was similar to those for languages, with 93 per cent saying they provided some documents in alternative formats on request. Five per cent said they did not. Forty-four per cent of landlords told us they monitor requests for alternative languages and formats, which is a good way of managing demand and keeping track of costs.

The research looked at digital exclusion. It found that 70 per cent of all landlords have a website while a further 18 per cent plan to develop one. Only just over 50 per cent of landlords with fewer than 1,000 properties have a website. Evidence from the Scottish Government's Digital Exclusion Strategy showed that

‘households in the least deprived 20 per cent of communities are more than twice as likely to have home internet access to those in the most deprived 20 per cent of communities (67 per cent and 31 per cent respectively)’. (Scottish Executive 2006 a, section 1)

All the local authority landlords and three-quarters of the RSLs had websites. Just over a fifth (21 per cent) of RSLs said they were planning to develop a website.

4.7 Managing information

Landlords had a variety of arrangements for publishing information. Most often they said design and printing were contracted out (40 per cent) but one in ten said they managed both design and printing in-house. Some organisations produced some publications in-house and out-sourced design and printing services for others.

Fifty-nine per cent of organisations said they provided training for staff about the kinds of information that are accessible to the public.

The question ‘What do you think are the main barriers to the release of information?’ drew very different responses from local authorities and RSLs. Two-thirds of RSLs

thought lack of interest from tenants was one of the main barriers, compared to only 15 per cent of the local authorities. Local authorities were more likely to say lack of resources was a significant barrier to providing information. Forty-two per cent of local authorities said this was a significant barrier, compared to 35 per cent of the RSLs.

4.8 Conclusion

There were differences in the kind of information most likely to be published by local authorities and RSLs. Different legal and governance arrangements help to explain some of these. For example, local authorities have corporate responsibilities to report on their performance and this may account for the relatively low percentage who said they did this through a tenants newsletter or annual report. There is no legal requirement for RSLs to publish minutes of board meetings, although, as we discuss later, good practice guidance suggests they should.

But the most surprising difference was in the percentage of landlords who perceived 'lack of interest among tenants' as a barrier to providing information. We return to this later.

5 What kind of information do tenants want?

5.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises discussion at the two workshops with the tenant assessors. It also draws on ERS's findings from their consultation with tenants and findings in the report of the Tenant Involvement Commission published by the National Housing Federation in England.

We held two workshops with the tenant assessors: one during the first stage of the research and the second towards the end. The purpose of the first workshop was to introduce the study and explain the case-study framework. It was also a first opportunity for tenant assessors to contribute to the research through group discussions about the information needs and preferences of tenants. The second workshop, which took place after the case studies, focused on samples of performance-related information collected by the consultants during the first stage.

5.2 Most important information

We asked the tenant assessors at the first workshop, working in groups, to consider what information was most important from the following list (from a questionnaire provided by ERS):

1. how your landlord organisation is run, by whom and how decisions are made;
2. landlord performance in relation to its service standards;
3. landlord performance in relation to other landlords;
4. the number of complaints about the service;
5. the service standards your landlord aims to give tenants and service users;
6. named staff responsible for services.

We asked the tenant assessors to consider the information needs of tenants generally, rather than their own needs as actively engaged tenants. Service

standards, and how landlords are performing against the standards, were top priorities (see annex 3). Knowing which staff are responsible for providing the services was also important.

5.3 Preferred method of communication

We also asked each group to consider which method of communication they preferred:

1. an annual report or summary of the year's performance;
2. a complimentary calendar or diary;
3. an individual letter enclosing information;
4. information on request;
5. leaflets in reception area;
6. quarterly newsletters;
7. newsletters twice a year;
8. tenants handbooks;
9. tenants meetings/conferences.

Quarterly newsletters and annual reports were both popular. Two groups commented that the best method of communication often depends on circumstances. While they liked the personal contact afforded by meetings and conferences they are not always the best option in remote rural areas. One group placed a high priority on websites as they are 'always available'.

5.4 Most important accessibility factors

We offered a list of 'accessibility factors':

1. availability of information in different languages;
2. publishing information at a local level;
3. size of lettering in documents that is large enough to be read easily;
4. use of plain English – text that is jargon-free;

5. value for money in document production;
6. an easy-to-read website;
7. well-explained statistics, graphs and charts;
8. a wide selection of information available.

All four groups placed a high priority on use of plain language, availability in other languages or formats and the size of lettering. One group also commented on the need to provide information in a variety of ways to meet a range of different needs. Three of the groups said they valued 'published information down to a local level'.

5.5 Findings from the national research

ERS consulted tenants from the national tenants engagement network during the study. They found that service standards were a top priority. The tenants were most interested in performance information about rent collection, anti-social behaviour, repairs, tenant participation, tenant satisfaction and complaints.

The report of the Tenant Involvement Commission also found that tenants want to have the option of looking at information on RSL performance. Some would like to receive this regularly in a structured way while others would simply like to know where they can access this information. Overall they want information to be simple and to clearly set out how well RSLs perform on providing the basic level of service. (National Housing Federation, 2006)

5.6 Presentation of performance information

At the second workshop we asked the tenant assessors to review samples of performance-related information collected by ERS. They worked in groups again, and each group reviewed a range of different examples.

In terms of content, the tenant assessors thought it was important for landlords to compare their performance with:

- their performance in previous years, to assess the ‘direction of travel’;
- how other local landlords perform; and
- how other similar organisations perform.

The most common weaknesses they identified in some of the samples were the absence of clear targets or service standards, information that lacked enough detail to be meaningful, failure to explain terms such as ‘urgent’, ‘routine’ and ‘emergency’, and the absence of contact details for further information.

In terms of presentation, the tenant assessors liked:

- a clear, uncluttered layout with plenty of space around text;
- clear explanations of terms in plain language; and
- a combination of graphics and text to present information.

Several landlords had provided samples of calendars they produced for tenants. The pages of the calendars were used to display information about various aspects of the previous year’s performance. These were popular with the tenant assessors, as were the use of graphics such as a pile of coins to illustrate spending on different areas of the service.

They didn’t like heavily coloured background paper, print that was too small, and glossy, expensive-looking publications (sometimes printed on thick paper or card).

5.7 Conclusion

The publication landlords said they were most likely to provide, a tenants newsletter, also seemed to be a preferred method of communication among tenants. That is an encouraging finding. But we were concerned that fewer than half the landlords said they had published service standards. The national research and the group discussions with the tenant assessors showed this kind of information is a high priority for tenants. The report of the Tenant Involvement Commission for England drew similar conclusions.

6 The inspection framework and selection of case studies

6.1 The inspection framework for openness and accessibility

The assessment framework we used for the case studies was based on questions about how the landlords provide information about their organisation and its activities. These questions are summarised in box 3.

6.2 Selection of case-study organisations

We selected a range of different types and sizes of landlord based in different areas of Scotland for the case studies. They included two councils in rural areas and two large mixed urban/rural authorities. The RSLs were a range of different types and sizes of organisation. There were two national organisations, a small rural association, two urban RSLs and one with mixed rural and urban stock. We also included two local housing organisations that manage some of Glasgow Housing Association's houses. We did not select any organisations due to be inspected over the next year.

The case-study organisations are listed in annex 1.

6.3 How we carried out the case studies

The case studies were carried out in April and May 2007. They included:

- desk-top reviews of information and websites, carried out by the inspectors and tenant assessors;
- visits to offices and reception areas;
- meetings with groups of tenants at each organisation, with the tenant assessors leading discussion; and
- interviews with a range of staff involved in providing information.

These were based on the inspection framework outlined in Box 3 on the next page.

We were unable to visit one of the 13 organisations as it was moving office at the time of the case studies, but we did carry out a desk-top assessment and website review.

The next part of the report summarises what we found from the case studies.

Box 3

The inspection framework for openness and accessibility

Culture and leadership

- Is there a culture of openness in the organisation?
- What does the landlord see as the main barriers to openness, and does it try to overcome these wherever it can?
- What do service users think of their landlord's approach to providing information?

Governance (RSLs only)

- How open is the organisation about the way it is run and how decisions are made?

Approach to providing information

- Does the landlord have a publication scheme or policy?
- If so, is it well publicised?
- Is there guidance for staff on dealing with information requests (or, in a local authority, a policy for dealing with FOI requests)?
- Do staff know how they should respond to requests for information?
- Has the landlord consulted service users about the kind of information they want, how often they want it and in what format?

Accessibility

- Is information accurate, up to date and useful?
- Is it written in plain English, and available in different languages and formats on request?
- Are staff proactive in offering alternative formats and languages, and do they monitor take-up?
- Does the landlord know which of its service users need information in different formats?
- How and when does the landlord collect this information about service users' needs?

Information about complaints and appeals

- Is there an accessible complaints procedure that meets legal requirements?
- Does the landlord publish any reports about its services by the Scottish Public Service Ombudsman?
- Does the landlord tell service users how it has used the information from complaints to improve services?

Performance reporting

- Does the landlord have 'SMART'* service standards that let service users know what to expect?
- Were service users involved in developing the standards?
- How do tenants and other service users know about the standards?
- Does the landlord monitor and report performance against the standards?
- What kind of performance information does the landlord publish, where, and how often?
- Is it meaningful and interesting?

* SMART: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timed

7 The case studies

7.1 Introduction

The landlord survey helped us to identify what kind of information landlords are providing across Scotland. The case-study visits were an opportunity to get a feel for the culture of each organisation and look in more depth at their approach to providing information. They were a ‘reality check’ of the survey findings. We also wanted to identify examples of positive practice.

7.2 Culture and leadership

All the case-study landlords told us they were committed to a culture of openness in their organisation. The staff we met seemed genuinely committed to being as open as possible and said they would generally provide information on request unless it was already publicly available, confidential or sensitive information. One RSL said that, before receiving the questionnaire, it had simply not considered making committee minutes and papers publicly available. But the chief executive told us he supported the principle of making sure the association was open and accountable about its decision-making. He said he would be happy to consider making some of this information publicly available in future. We found other organisations where the research had prompted them to reconsider the kind of information they publish. We hope the study will encourage others to think again about what information they publish.

When asked what they saw as the main barriers to releasing information, answers broadly reflected overall findings from the survey. Seven of the nine RSLs considered lack of interest from tenants was the main barrier, while the other two mentioned data protection constraints and commercial sensitivities.

Only one local authority said it had found that a low level of interest ‘in some aspects of performance information’ was a barrier. The council intended to explore this issue further in their next tenant survey. The same council thought data protection and time constraints were more important barriers.

To some extent tenants at the group discussions supported the view that tenants are not particularly interested in getting more information. Many of them said they received enough information. One participant in a group of older tenants said, ‘most tenants are very happy ... and don’t want to be bothered with information about performance or how the organisation is run’. But some people did say their landlord could do more to keep them informed. One group said they would like to see more information about the landlord’s performance compared to previous years and with other landlords. Sometimes it depends how you ask the question. For example, one organisation had a regular prize draw for people returning repair-satisfaction slips. It published the name of the winner in its newsletter, but no information about levels of satisfaction with the service. When asked, this group of tenants all agreed they would like to have this information although they had said at first that they received all the information they wanted. As one of our tenant assessors noted:

‘By and large we found that tenants ... were happy with the level of information received. But if you are not aware of the full range of information gathered by landlords then how are you to make a proper judgement as to what you should be permitted to see and comment on?’

Tenants are also more likely to be interested in information that is presented in a way that makes it meaningful and relevant to them.

7.3 Governance

7.3.1 Good practice

The regulatory code of governance sets out the principles of good governance for RSLs. The supporting guidance we have published alongside the code describes good governance practice we expect RSLs to consider in deciding how they will put these principles into practice. The supporting guidance for the principle of **engaging stakeholders and making accountability real** suggests that:

‘RSLs should be proactive in publishing information about their activities, consistent with the expectations of their service users and other stakeholders. Service users should receive regular information about decisions which will affect them. They should also be made aware of the range of information they can expect to receive, or are entitled to ask for...Minutes of governing body and other meetings should be published or made freely available to anyone who asks for them. RSLs should also consider making governing body reports available, either by publishing these or making them available on request.’ (Communities Scotland, 2006 c, p 17-18)

7.3.2 How accessible is RSL governance information?

The case-study findings were consistent with the national research findings. Only two of the nine RSLs published minutes of board meetings on their website. A third RSL made the minutes publicly available in its office, while another had recently started publishing a summary of decisions made at management board meetings. This association told us they did not feel it was appropriate or helpful to have a copy of the full minutes available, although they would provide copies on request. The summary was available in reception and on the website. Three of the other RSLs said they would provide copies of minutes on request. One RSL said it did not make minutes available at all.

Only four of the RSLs said they would make governing body papers or reports publicly available. This was usually 'on request'. None of the RSLs published this information on its website.

RSLs did provide more general information about the role of the committee and how to become a member of the association. All the RSLs used their newsletter to provide some information about how they are managed, the role of the governing body or how to become a member of the association. Some used the newsletter to publicise their annual general meeting and invite tenants to attend. Five RSLs were also making good use of their websites to provide information about the role and membership of the management board.

Positive-practice example 1 – Making accountability real

Perthshire Housing Association is committed to operating within a culture of openness and accountability. It has a strong focus on consulting, as well as involving and informing, residents about its work.

The association's leaflet 'Who are we and what do we do?' provides a clear, brief outline of the association's history. It explains how it is run and what the main purpose of the association is. There is clear information about how to contact the association to find out more.

A second leaflet, 'Become an association member... open to all' explains clearly what it means to become a member of the association and how to apply. It gives contact details for further information. An application form is also attached to the back of the leaflet.

The association has also developed a resident democracy policy and a resident participation strategy. These outline the association's commitment to involve residents in decisions about their homes and communities and explain how it will do this. Both documents are updated every year. All residents receive a copy of the resident participation strategy and the annual residents report.

Positive-practice example 2 – Making accountability real

Shettleston Housing Association has published a summary of its internal management plan (IMP) for tenants. The summary IMP outlines the association's proposals and plans for the next three years and some specific targets for the first year. This is a good way for the association to tell tenants about its activities, plans and performance.

7.4 Approach to providing information

7.4.1 Good practice

As we noted in paragraph 3.2.1, local authorities have to maintain a publication scheme setting out the classes of document they publish or intend to publish. The Scottish Information Commissioner provides guidance on publication schemes and a range of other matters related to freedom of information. In preparing their publication schemes public authorities must consider, in particular, the public interest in information about:

- the services they provide;
- their costs;
- factual information and analysis that provides the basis for important decisions.

(Scottish Information Commissioner, 2003)

Although RSLs are not covered by the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act, good practice guidance suggests that they should have a clear policy statement on the kinds of information they will publish. The SFHA recommends that there should be a policy and procedures on confidentiality. These should set out service users' rights to access information as well as what should be kept confidential (SFHA, 2002 a). And the regulatory code of governance supporting guidance recommends that RSLs should have a clear policy for managing requests for information (Communities Scotland 2006 c).

7.4.2 Publication schemes and policy statements – what we found

All four of the local authorities had a publication scheme in place, as required by the FOISA. We also found examples of good policy statements on openness and accessibility. One had a specific statement on openness and accessibility for its tenants. The statement was published in the tenants' information area on its website and as part of the tenant participation strategy. Another local authority published a guide to the FOISA and provided advice about freedom of information on its website and at local service centres.

Among the nine RSLs, five had no specific information or 'openness and accessibility' policy or statement. One of the five was developing an openness and accountability policy at the time of our visit. Three RSLs had a policy for use by staff or committee members but didn't publish the policy.

7.4.3 Procedure and practice

The four local authorities and five of the nine RSLs had internal guidance or a written procedure for staff on dealing with information requests. The RSL procedures generally focused on the legal requirements around data protection and confidentiality, while local authority procedures were related to freedom of information.

All four local authorities and six of the nine RSLs said they provided training for staff on the kinds of information that can be made available to the public. One local authority had an officer in the housing service who specialised in freedom of information and gave advice and assistance to other staff. Two RSLs didn't provide training, but told us that managers would provide guidance if staff were in doubt about what information could be made available. One RSL said it did not provide training and did not have a policy or procedure for dealing with information requests.

7.4.4 Asking tenants about their information preferences

All except two of the case-study organisations said they had consulted tenants at some stage about the kind of information they wanted (one RSL and one local authority hadn't). Most of the landlords said they used tenant satisfaction surveys to ask tenants about their information preferences. It was not clear whether tenants had any say in the questions asked. Three organisations had also used meetings with their tenants and residents groups to discuss this topic, although in two cases this had been some time ago. One of our tenant assessors commented that he felt the concept of being consulted was a new one for some of the tenants he met.

All but one of the landlords who had consulted said they had made changes in response to the tenants' views. One organisation said it had not made any changes as a result of consultation because tenants were happy with what they already had in place. The changes mentioned most often were changes to the content and frequency of the newsletter. Two RSLs said they had developed an action plan on the basis of their consultation with tenants.

It is important to remember that, while satisfaction surveys have their uses (particularly in seeking views of large numbers of tenants not actively engaged in tenant participation), they also have limitations and may not capture everyone's views (Communities Scotland, 2006 d). There are many other ways to gather service users' views, such as focus groups, panels, conferences and workshops. We found some good examples among the case-study organisations. Another possibility would be to include tenants as part of an editorial board or panel for their newsletter or other publications. We did not come across any organisation doing this among the case studies, although several tenants consulted in the national research said their landlords did involve them in this way.

Positive-practice examples 3 and 4 – Asking tenants about their information preferences

Manor Estates Housing Association asks tenants about their information preferences in its full tenant satisfaction survey carried out by a consultant every four or five years. The association supplements the full survey with smaller, in-house surveys each year. These are brief and targeted to focus on areas that have previously been identified as giving cause for concern. The last survey included questions about:

- how the quality of the information tenants receive about the association could be improved; and
- how they prefer to be consulted.

A third of tenants who responded to the first question said they would like more local information. As 74 per cent of tenants had indicated that they used newsletters to obtain information about the association, Manor decided to develop local inserts for the newsletter. It will use next year's survey to evaluate the impact of the local inserts.

Local meetings were one of the preferred options for consultation, with letters and newsletters. In response, Manor decided to pilot local surgeries for tenants in its sheltered housing schemes, where housing officers are on hand to talk to tenants, answer questions and listen to their views.

Perthshire Housing Association (PHA) uses a range of methods to gather residents' views, so that residents can decide how much they would like to be involved and choose what suits them best. The methods include:

- an annual residents convention;
- public meetings;
- a resident satisfaction survey every five years;
- service-specific satisfaction surveys;
- group meetings with residents; and
- its ViewPoint residents panel.

There are around 130 members on the ViewPoint panel. They represent a cross-section of the association's residents. Panel members have agreed to complete and return questionnaires in pre-paid envelopes supplied by the association. PHA uses the questionnaires to gather performance and satisfaction information that it can use to improve and develop its services. The association is committed to carrying out three ViewPoint surveys a year and publishes the feedback on its website. The website encourages other residents to add further comments or suggestions after reading the feedback.

Based on the panel's feedback, PHA now uses a range of ways of providing information for residents. These include public meetings, informal 'drop-in' sessions, newsletter articles, leaflets and electronic communication.

7.5 Accessibility

7.5.1 Good practice

However much information an organisation provides, it will only be useful if it is accessible and relevant to those who receive it. This may be the key to what some organisations perceive as a lack of interest.

As we discussed in chapter 3, access to information is central to equality of opportunity. No-one should be at a disadvantage because they cannot read English or they need information in a different format. Accessibility is also about information that is well presented, looks interesting, is written in clear concise language and avoids jargon. We don't expect all publications to be 'crystal marked' or otherwise accredited by organisations like the Plain English Campaign or Plain Language Commission. That would obviously be expensive and time-consuming. But both these organisations provide a lot of free advice about clear writing styles. And the Scottish Accessible Information Forum provides advice that, while it aims to improve access to information for disabled people, is useful good practice for all written communication.

7.5.2 Presentation and content of publications

We found some excellent examples of well-written, attractively presented information. This was particularly true of newsletters, which were often clear, well-written and interesting. The tenant assessors also found many of them were well presented and attractively laid out. Where we found room for improvement in newsletters, it was usually in terms of design rather than language. As noted earlier, the tenant assessors found publications harder to read if they were printed on glossy or dark-coloured background paper or if the print was too small.

There were also good examples of other publications such as complaints leaflets and annual reports. We did find a few that were heavy on jargon and short on

interest. One or two organisations seemed to take the view that more technical language is appropriate for some documents, such as annual reports or reports to committee. These should be available and accessible to the public, and there is no good reason to cloud them with obscure language. Everyone, including councillors and board members, appreciates clarity.

The topic guide we used to review publications is in annex 4.

7.5.3 Understanding the access needs of everyone in the community

Our recent follow-up study on equalities highlighted this as an important area for improvement. This study confirms that many landlords still need to do more in gathering information so that they can understand and respond to the access and information requirements of everyone in their community. Few of the case-study landlords (three RSLs and one local authority) were systematically collecting information about service users' information and communication needs.

7.5.4 Responding to community needs

All the case-study landlords could provide information in other languages or formats on request. One provided some information, such as housing application forms, in other languages 'as standard'. Another provider specialising in services for older people provided its newsletter on tape and in large print for people who prefer these formats.

Positive-practice example 5 – Gathering information about service users' needs

Horizon Housing Association's application form includes several questions to find out whether applicants need information in a specific format or alternative language. The questions are:

- Do we need to make any particular arrangements if we contact you, for example because of a visual or hearing impairment?
- If yes, what arrangements do we need to make?
- Should we provide information about your application in a language other than English?
- If yes, which language is required?
- If we were to interview you, would you need us to provide an interpreter?
- Do we need to provide information about your application in a format other than standard print?
- If yes, which format is required? (e.g. large print, tape, computer disc or other). If computer disc, please indicate the software in order for us to check compatibility.

This information is recorded onto the association's IT system. Housing officers follow up the questions during the application process, when they contact applicants while allotting points to the application, and again during the allocation process. The information is recorded on the computer and a pop-up box brings up any relevant information whenever a member of staff looks at the tenancy record.

This is a good way to gather and record information about individual service users' needs. Horizon staff have a lot of personal contact with tenants – the association says it relies on 'knowing our tenants' to make sure it meets their information needs.

Around half the case-study organisations said they did not have a planned approach to providing documents in translation but would provide translations as and when people asked for them. Others took a more active approach to identifying the languages most likely to be needed in their area. One RSL, for example, was able to obtain information as a member of an integrated network on asylum seekers. And one local authority used information collected by the education department on the languages spoken in schools.

Some RSLs reported few or no requests for translation or alternative formats. But sometimes the offer of alternative formats or languages wasn't well publicised, or only in English. Some of the tenants we spoke to didn't know their landlord could provide information in alternative formats or translation. Previous research has drawn attention to the difficulties people can experience in getting information in translation and other formats. It has found that there is a low take-up of translations available 'on request' because people do not know what is available. (Scottish Consumer Council 2005; Scottish Executive, 2006 b)

Landlords themselves reported different experiences of translation services. One organisation said it had experienced delays in getting documents translated and the process could take around three weeks. Another said the delay in getting translations is 'endemic'. But a third, in a different area, told us the turnaround time for translations was only a few days.

Most of the case-study organisations said they would provide language interpretation for meetings or a sign-language service on request. But one local authority and one RSL said they would not provide these services.

Positive-practice example 6 – responding to community needs

Moray Council is aware of the language needs of the communities it serves. It has responded to the arrival of migrant workers from Europe by making its guide to local services and housing application form available in Polish, Russian and Portuguese. Corporately, the council does not have a full profile of people's needs for information in alternative formats and the council's equalities officer was trying to develop one at the time of our visit. The housing division keeps a database of tenants' needs for information in alternative formats.

The council gathers data on people's needs for information in other formats by monitoring the take-up of its translation and interpreting services. The equalities officer monitors take-up and this information is broken down by council department, purpose and language or alternative format needed. The council also collects information from other sources such as the education department, which holds information about the languages spoken by school pupils. Moray publishes some of its information in different languages and makes all information available in other formats and languages on request. The housing division has produced a range of advice and information leaflets for service users that are Plain English Crystal marked and state clearly that they are available in community languages and alternative formats.

Moray Council was taking part in the 'Happy to Translate' pilot at the time of our visit (see box 4).

Box 4 – Happy to Translate

The **Happy to Translate** initiative was set up as a pilot project to improve access to information for people in Scotland who speak or read little or no English, or who use a non-verbal language. After successful completion of the pilot, it has recently become fully operational as an organisation offering membership.

Member organisations display a recognisable logo to signal that they will provide a confidential language service to people who need it, and staff follow a few simple guidelines to determine what services they require.

Several RSLs and public-sector organisations took part in the pilot. Membership information is available from info@happytotranslate.com, or the Equality Scotland website at www.equalityscotland.com.

7.6 Complaints information

7.6.1 Good practice

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) provides good-practice guidance on the 'Valuing Complaints' section on its website. The idea that complaints should be welcomed with a positive attitude, and valued as feedback on service performance, is central to the guidance.

Communities Scotland expects landlords to have an accessible complaints policy. That means a policy that is clear, free, available to all, and widely publicised. We have also provided advice on using comments, compliments and complaints as feedback in our publication 'How to gather views on service quality'. (Communities Scotland, 2006 d)

7.6.2 What we found

Most of the case-study landlords provided good, clear information about how to make a complaint. Overall, we thought the quality of complaints leaflets was very good.

But two leaflets did not tell people how long it would take to respond to their complaint and one didn't include contact details for the Ombudsman. In a third organisation the complaints policy seemed complicated and was not written in plain English. The inspector and tenant assessor did not think the tone of the leaflet would encourage service users to make complaints or raise concerns. We noted that one of these organisations had received very few complaints over the last five years. That isn't necessarily a good thing – it could be a sign that people don't know how to complain or don't believe their complaint will be taken seriously.

Positive-practice example 7 – Identifying complaints

South Lanarkshire Council has good systems in place to record and monitor complaints. The council also has an excellent system in place to identify complaints at its local offices. Anyone who calls at a Q and A office* and speaks to a customer service officer has their reason for calling at the office recorded as either a complaint or a service-delivery enquiry. This means that the council is capturing both formal and informal complaints at each of the local offices.

(* 'Q and A' stands for 'Question and Answer')

Positive-practice example 8 – Raising awareness of the complaints policy

Bield Housing Association makes sure tenants know about its complaints policy. It has made tenants more aware of how to make a complaint because its 2005 tenant survey found that nearly a third of its tenants did not know about the formal complaints policy. The tenants handbook gives good clear information on how to complain, make an appeal and take a complaint to the Ombudsman. The complaints policy is also on the website and tenants can report a complaint online.

Bield has recently revised its complaints policy with its partnership forum. It told tenants about the changes in the April 2007 edition of its newsletter, the Bulletin. The new complaints leaflet is clear and easy to understand and includes the 'Happy to Translate' logo (see box 4). The leaflet includes a complaints form. Although the leaflet is A5 size, the form is double-sided and gives people a lot of room to explain their complaint. It also provides prompts to help people think through their complaint – for example:

- what took place?
- who was involved?
- when did it happen?
- where did it happen?

Our tenant assessor liked the form and thought it would make it easy for tenants to make a complaint. Staff at Bield told us that they would accept complaints in any format and from relatives or advocates on behalf of the tenant, as well as tenants themselves. This is a good approach.

7.6.3 Recording and monitoring complaints

Several case-study organisations were reporting to their board or committee on the number and type of complaints they received, but only two were reporting this kind of information to service users. Although several organisations said they would use complaints to improve services, we did not see any direct evidence that they were doing this. This suggests that complaints and other forms of feedback are still an under-used resource.

Positive-practice example 9 – Reporting on complaints

Perthshire Housing Association (PHA) has published a complaints policy, procedure and leaflet. They explain how residents can complain, what the appeals process is and how complaints will be dealt with. This information is also available on the website and included in the tenants and sharing-owners handbooks. The tone used makes it clear that PHA welcomes complaints. The leaflet and policy-and-procedure documents also make it clear that people can go to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman at the final stage of the procedure. There are clear timescales for each stage.

PHA provides regular quarterly reports on complaints to the residents panel, as well as its senior management team and the customer services committee. There is also a summary report to the management board.

PHA also includes information about complaints in the annual report, the annual residents' report and its newsletter, 'Open House'. It has started to break down this information into the main service categories – housing management, property maintenance, development, and Care and Repair.

7.6.4 Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) reports

Several case-study organisations provided a link from their website to the SPSO website. One local authority published details of SPSO investigations into

complaints about its services in the 'news' section of its website and provided a report reference with a link to the SPSO website. This is a good approach and indicates a culture of openness and accountability.

7.7 Performance reporting

7.7.1 Good practice

The Scottish Executive has issued statutory guidance for local authorities on how they should fulfill their duty to report publicly on their performance. In terms of content, councils are expected to provide:

- 'information that provides a rounded, honest and balanced picture of how the authority is performing;
- trend information, benchmarking information, and performance against targets or benchmarks to help stakeholders assess how performance is changing; and
- information on what the authority is doing to improve its performance and impact, what targets it has for improvement, and what improvements have been achieved since it last reported' (Scottish Executive, 2004, p 25-26).

The regulatory code of governance tells RSLs they need to give service users information that meets their needs 'about the RSL, its services, performance and future plans' (Communities Scotland b, 6.2).

When we inspect RSLs and local authority housing services, we look for a picture of performance that goes beyond the rather limited range of statutory and key performance indicators. Important as these are, they tend to focus on outputs rather than the quality of services as experienced by the people who use them. Our good practice guidance includes advice on how to 'measure what matters':

‘Qualitative aspects of work are best defined and used through a participatory process involving staff and service users, so that they identify what is important to track and which measures are critical to success.’ (Communities Scotland, 2006 d, p 61-62)

7.7.2 What we found

As we would expect, all the case-study organisations published some information related to the statutory performance indicators (SPIs) or key performance indicators (KPIs). One local authority and one RSL did not provide any performance information beyond the statutory or key performance indicators.

7.7.3 Performance reporting – RSLs

The eight other RSLs provided some information that went beyond the KPIs. They covered areas such as the quality of estates, the number of applications from homeless people, the number of new properties developed and the amount of money invested in upgrading homes. But only two RSLs included information about performance in previous years and only one compared its performance to that of other organisations. The other seven did not include trend or comparative information. That made it difficult to see if performance was getting better or worse over time or how they compared to other organisations. Two RSLs told us they had found it difficult to identify similar organisations to compare themselves with. But it should still be possible to compare performance with national figures and include comments to explain their local context.

Three of the RSLs had asked tenants about the kind of performance information they would like to see published. One of these had agreed a set of service standards and targets in partnership with its tenants forum. Another talked to its residents panel about the kind of performance reports they would like to see.

Most of the RSLs used their annual reports to report on performance, with five also publishing some performance information in the tenants newsletter and two on their websites.

7.7.4 Performance reporting – local authorities

Three of the four local authorities had set service standards for their housing services that went beyond the statutory performance indicators. One of the three collected and monitored an excellent range of information, but published only a limited range of it. Two councils produced clear and interesting information for tenants as well as a council-wide public performance report. We saw excellent examples in their tenants newsletters where performance was compared to that in previous years and with other local authorities. Both organisations had talked to tenants about the kinds of information they were interested in.

Positive-practice example 10 – Reporting performance

Perthshire Housing Association publishes an annual residents report. The report provides a good range of information about what the association has achieved over the previous year. The format of the residents report is reviewed by the residents panel and it includes graphs and charts to help explain performance. The report includes information of particular interest to residents, such as lettings, levels of resident satisfaction, performance of the repairs service and complaints. It includes information that is not contained in the annual report about the allocation of homes, lettings satisfaction surveys and repairs satisfaction surveys.

Performance in some areas is compared to performance in previous years and other RSLs. For example, the average rent increase is compared with the Scottish average, and performance against targets for specific allocations groups is clearly reported. This is a good approach to giving residents and others a clear picture of how the association's performance compares to Scotland and its own targets. As well as reporting service performance, the association measures its commitment to resident democracy against specific targets and reports on progress in the annual residents report.

Summary of the performance indicators for resident democracy 2006/07

Indicator	Target	Outcome
Action plan (in business plan)	Achieve targets	Most achieved
Newsletters	Three editions	Achieved
Leaflets	Review and amend	Achieved
Website	Update weekly	Achieved/ongoing
Annual residents report	Produce once per year	Issued May 2006
Settling-in visits	Within six weeks of tenancy start	100% achieved or attempted
Residents convention	To be held in May/June	Held in May 2006
Residents panel	Monthly meetings	Achieved/ongoing
Public meetings	To be held as required/requested	Fourteen local meetings held in various developments
Viewpoint surveys	Three questionnaires	Two issued
Development completion surveys	Within 6-12 months of new residents moving in	Three issued

This is an excellent approach to telling residents what the association has promised to do and reporting actual performance against clear and measurable targets. The association also publishes updates on service performance as news items on its website. It includes summary information on housing management and repairs performances in its newsletters over the course of the year. Tenants and residents are encouraged to contact the housing services team for further information if they have any questions.

Positive-practice example 11 – Reporting performance

Fife Council meets its statutory requirement to report publicly on its performance by advertising in the local press and producing a booklet, which is placed in local service centres and libraries. Fife also produces a publication that combines a guide to council services with a review of the council's performance in several important areas. This is published once a year and sent to all households in Fife. The guide is very visual and full of photos and graphics, easy-to-understand graphs and charts. It is designed in a magazine style with short, bite-sized articles. Its format and content were designed after consultation with various focus groups. The council has sought feedback and has been told people are using it and keeping it. This is an innovative and cost-effective approach to making sure that information about the council's performance gets to all residents. The guide costs 12.5p a copy to print.

The housing service has also developed ways to tell tenants about its performance. Every year each tenant receives a calendar which contains, month by month, information about the housing statutory performance indicators (SPIs). There is also information about lettings and anti-social behaviour. The format and design of the calendar is discussed with the tenants forum. This is a good approach to providing performance information for tenants.

The housing service management and business strategy team has been working on an annual summary of performance with a local perspective, presented in the form of 'report cards'. The draft, seen by the inspector, gives readers a good picture of how well the service is performing in their area and compares this with the previous year. It adds useful explanatory comments on performance. Staff planned to take the draft to the tenants forum in June to get views on whether it included the right sort of information pitched at the right level. These report cards will be available at local offices and staff will use them to discuss performance with local tenants groups. This local performance information will also be displayed on the plasma screens in the local service centres. This is a good approach. All the tenants who attended our focus group said it was very important to them that published information was focused at a local level.

The housing service also provides performance information annually in its tenants newsletter. Again, this is produced in a 'report card' format and covers performance against the SPIs. It is written in plain English with a clear explanation of the figures.

Positive-practice example 12 – Reporting performance

Moray Council states that its public performance reports should:

- contain the information people need and want to know;
- be written in plain language and in a tone and style that is easy to understand;
- be presented in a way that takes into account the needs of people from socially excluded and under-represented groups;
- use simple charts, diagrams, illustrations and symbols to convey statistical information; and
- include a performance commentary and comparisons with previous years and other organisations.

The housing service has asked tenants for their views on its service standards and targets through its newsletter, 'The Tenants' Voice', and at meetings with its tenants core group. The newsletter is published twice a year, in May and December. The May issue covers performance over the previous financial year, while the winter issue covers the first six months of the year. These reports combine text and graphics and cover areas such as rent lost through empty properties, repairs performance and satisfaction with the service, rent arrears and complaints. The charts and commentary for the statutory performance indicators show clearly how the council is doing against its own targets, in comparison with the previous year and in comparison with other councils.

The May 2006 newsletter included a separate feature on the council's housing service standards. These set out the standards people can expect in each of the main service areas – allocations, homelessness, housing and property management and tenant participation.

The newsletters also include local information from each of the five local tenants forums.

Our tenant assessors found the newsletters easy to read, interesting and relevant. The tenants we spoke to from the Moray tenants' core group said they were happy with the kind of information they received about the council's performance.

7.7.5 Homelessness service standards

As we noted earlier, many local authorities fail to set and monitor meaningful service standards for their homelessness service. We were impressed by the approach adopted by one case-study local authority.

Positive-practice example 13 – Homelessness service standards

Fife Council's homelessness team started looking closely at front-line activities and how it could involve service users in monitoring performance after the first round of Care Commission inspections.

The team developed two sets of service standards after consultation with service users, partners and staff. One set of standards relates to the statutory assessment process and the other to the council's provision of temporary accommodation and support. The standards were launched in February 2007 at the council's annual homeless conference. They were also published in the council's newsletter for homeless applicants, 'Homes for you'. The service standards are on view at all four of the council's Home4Good centres and on its website.

While those consulted saw publication of the service standards as an important step forward in demonstrating the council's commitment to service users, the greater challenge of meeting these standards still lay ahead. The team began by drafting a customer feedback policy, which explained how performance against the standards would be measured. Then they developed audit tools such as customer feedback surveys, comment cards and a formal complaints procedure. They encourage people using the council's purpose-built Home4Good resource centres (some of which have temporary accommodation on site) to comment on their experience, using a variety of methods.

The team will gather performance information every three months and report it to a variety of in-house groups and area committees. The council plans to publish the outcomes from the new monitoring arrangements once a year, celebrating successes and, where weaknesses are found, explaining how these will be turned around.

7.8 Conclusion

The case studies have shown examples of positive practice across the sector. The 13 landlords ranged from an RSL with 324 houses to a local authority with 33,000 houses and it seems fairly obvious that one particular way of doing things will not work for all organisations. So, for example, a big local authority serving a population of thousands might find it more difficult to implement positive-practice example 5, but easier to take an approach similar to example 6. Each landlord needs to decide what will work best in its particular circumstances. It is also important to stress that while we have included some examples of positive practice in this report there are likely to be many other examples among the other landlords who contributed to the study through the survey and case studies.

It is also worth reiterating that local authority housing services are part of a broader corporate framework. This means their approach to providing information about governance, performance and complaints is sometimes determined at a corporate level rather than by the housing service alone. It may also mean they are able to draw on corporate resources that are not available to RSLs.

The study has highlighted various legal requirements for local authorities and RSLs. But if there is a common theme in the examples we have described it is that most if not all of them came from organisations that had consulted service users about what they wanted. This, rather than legislation or the amount of resources available, often seemed to be the key to genuine openness and accessibility.

8 Conclusions and recommendations

8.1 Introduction

In this chapter we come to some conclusions about the questions we asked at the beginning of the study. Having identified some differences between the two sectors, we then make different recommendations for RSLs and for local authorities, and some recommendations for both.

8.2 What kind of information do landlords provide?

Some landlords provide information of a very high standard, particularly in newsletters, annual reports and complaints leaflets. There was also great variety between individual organisations and between the local authority and RSL sectors in the kind of information landlords provide. This is only to be expected in a large and very varied housing sector. But local authority and RSL tenants share a Scottish Secure Tenancy and they have a right to expect some common standards of information provision.

While local authorities are legally obliged to publish committee papers and minutes, it appears that only a minority of RSLs publish minutes or papers of their governing-body meetings. RSLs should be publishing these unless there is a good reason not to.

This does not always mean local-authority governance information is particularly accessible to service users. It can sometimes be hard to find information about a particular committee, discussion or decisions on websites. And committee reports are not always written in an accessible way.

RSLs were more likely than local authorities to include information about their governing body in newsletters. As newsletters are popular with tenants, this is a useful way of providing this kind of information.

Similarly, if they don't already do so, local authorities could consider making more use of their tenants newsletter to publish performance-related information. Even if they publish council-wide performance information elsewhere, there is some information that will be of particular interest to tenants. We found some excellent examples among the case-study organisations.

The best performance information we saw in the case studies was produced by organisations that had consulted their service users to find out what they wanted. This kind of consultation often went beyond a few questions in a tenant survey and involved people in discussing content, format and design. In contrast, organisations that hadn't consulted tenants (beyond questions in a survey) published a much more limited range of performance information. Some of these landlords were collecting and reporting internally on a good, broad range of information – but they weren't telling tenants about it. As we noted in chapter 3 there is a positive relationship between accurate performance reporting and satisfaction with services. So, it is in organisations' best interests to report publicly on their performance.

8.3 Do landlords provide the right sort of information?

In contrast to the perception that tenants lack interest, our own consultation showed that tenants are interested in information about how their landlord manages its business. They are most interested in knowing what standards of service they can expect, who provides the service, and whether the standards are being met. Landlords who have consulted their tenants have found they are often interested in information at a local level. This is consistent with what our tenant assessors said and with evidence from previous research. (Scottish Consumer Council 2007; National Housing Federation, 2006)

The kind of performance information tenants have told us they want to see is how landlords are doing against their targets; trends; and comparisons with other landlords. This is only what any well-managed organisation should be collecting and reporting anyway.

Both the landlords survey and findings from previous inspections suggest that too few landlords provide this kind of information. Local authorities are more likely than RSLs to have set housing management and property maintenance service standards and to report against them. But local authorities who set and monitor meaningful service standards for their homelessness function still appear to be in the minority.

Most landlords produce a tenants newsletter. This method of communication is popular with tenants, and it's easy to see why. Many of those we saw were of a high standard, well written with interesting content. Newsletters are an excellent way of getting information across in an accessible, readable way. Landlords who don't already do so could consider making more use of their newsletter to publish governance and performance-related information.

Tenants also like annual reports. We came across several organisations that produced these in a 'calendar' format, which the tenant assessors particularly liked. They are a good way of showing performance over the year in an interesting and accessible way.

8.4 Do landlords provide information in a timely way?

The timing and frequency of publications obviously depends on various factors, including cost and staff time. Some landlords publish a quarterly newsletter while others produce one twice a year, and this is a matter for them to decide and discuss with their tenants. Websites are a good way of providing up-to-date,

accessible information. However many tenants still do not use the internet. Using a range of different ways to communicate and remembering that different people like to receive information in different ways is the best way to keep people up to date.

The case studies did suggest that it may be more difficult for people to get information promptly if they need it in an alternative format or translation. It appeared that these services may vary in different parts of the country or between different organisations. One landlord told us it could take several weeks to get a document translated. But it did regularly provide some documents on tape. Another said translations could be done in two or three days, but that it was more difficult to get documents put on tape. It was beyond the scope of this study to look at this in detail. As we have noted, previous research has also drawn attention to the difficulties people can experience in getting access to information in other languages and formats. The housing sector has led the way in trying to improve access through the 'Happy to Translate' initiative, but it still has to rely on independent, unregulated organisations or individuals to provide the services required.

8.5 How easy is it for people to get the information they need?

Landlords provide a lot of information. Much of this is published and some is available to people if they ask for it. But the study also showed that a lot of information is much less accessible to some people, such as those who have difficulty reading English and those who need information in an alternative format. Even when landlords think they are meeting their duty to make information available in different languages and formats, it isn't always obvious to people that they can ask for these. Some tenants we met in the case-study organisations, for example, said they didn't know their landlord could give them information in large print or other formats. And a few landlords still don't provide any information in other languages or formats.

It isn't easy to find out how landlords are using complaints and other kinds of feedback to improve services. Many landlords have excellent complaints leaflets that explain clearly how to make a complaint and what the landlords will do in response. From the evidence in our case studies, many are also monitoring complaints and reporting trends to their committee or board. But few landlords provide these kinds of report for tenants or other service users.

8.6 Costs, consultation and barriers to providing information

One of the more surprising findings from the study was the number of landlords (particularly RSLs) who perceived 'lack of interest among tenants' as an important barrier to providing more information. In contrast, only one in three landlords said lack of resources was an important barrier.

Staff seemed to be genuinely committed to being as open as possible but said they would not provide information if it was confidential or sensitive. A narrow interpretation of what is confidential or sensitive could act as a barrier to providing information.

The evidence suggests that landlords who actively consult and involve tenants in developing their publications will find it very worthwhile in terms of the results. There could be various ways of doing this – for example, those suggested in the positive-practice examples, or through focus groups, discussion at tenants forums or editorial groups.

The tenant assessors were aware that information can be expensive to produce and publish. In terms of document design, they didn't like glossy publications (that may well have been expensive to produce) because they are more difficult to read. This is just one example where consulting tenants could prove cost effective for landlords as well as contributing to publications that appeal to service users. We are not suggesting that our tenant assessors' views should be

seen as the last word on what kind of information should be provided. The point is that landlords should talk to their tenants about the kind of information they would like to see.

Certainly a lack of interest among tenants (even if it existed) shouldn't be a reason to withhold information. One way forward is to think about how to make it more interesting and more, not less, accessible.

As two of our tenant assessors commented,

'We found that the... organisations genuinely believed they were being open and accessible to their respective tenants. Unfortunately, so long as they continue to advance so-called 'tenant apathy' as a barrier to information sharing, it seems to us that little progress will be made.'

8.7 Recommendations

Recommendations for both local authorities and RSLs

1. Gather and use information about service users' information and communication needs. This will help to build up a community profile that will also be useful in planning other services.
2. Provide clear, well-publicised information about how to get information in alternative formats and languages.
3. In consultation with service users, set service standards and monitor performance against them.
4. Talk to tenants about their information needs and preferences.

5. Consider involving tenants more in the development of newsletters and other publications.
6. Record, monitor and use information from complaints and other feedback to improve services, and tell service users how you have used this information.
7. Consider providing a summary of important decisions taken by the governing body or the council committee.
8. Information is an important resource, but it can be expensive to produce and publish. This may be one of the barriers to providing some information or providing it in other languages and formats. You may want to consider monitoring the cost of providing information.

Recommendations for RSLs

1. Develop and publish a policy on access to information that minimises restrictions and sets out the kinds of information you will publish.
2. Publish minutes and papers of governing body meetings, unless there are good reasons for not doing so.
3. Publish performance information that shows how you are doing compared to other landlords, your 'direction of travel' and your performance in previous years.

Recommendations for local authorities

1. Review the language you use in council committee reports to make sure they are accessible to the public.

2. Set meaningful standards for the homelessness services, involving service users if possible.
3. Monitor and report performance against the homelessness service standards.

Annex 1 The case-study organisations

Angus Council

Angus Council owns and manages around 8,300 houses. The housing service is decentralised and the head office is in Forfar. Most day-to-day services are provided from local offices in Arbroath, Brechin, Carnoustie, Forfar, Kirriemuir, Montrose and Monifieth. These offices serve the population in the seven towns, surrounding villages and rural areas.

The housing service strategy team is responsible for monitoring and reporting on the performance of the housing service and for providing information to tenants. At a corporate level, these functions are the responsibility of a central team.

www.angus.gov.uk

email: housing@angus.gov.uk

Tel: 01307 474779

Bield Housing Association

Bield Housing Association specialises in providing housing, care and support services for older people. It owns and manages 4,914 sheltered or very sheltered units for rent over 22 local-authority areas in Scotland. Bield's registered office is in Edinburgh. There are two other offices in Glasgow and Dundee. Few tenants visit these offices and contact with the landlord is through the scheme manager based in each sheltered complex or with the housing officers, who visit regularly.

The management and business support team, based in Edinburgh, is responsible for monitoring and reporting performance and providing information for tenants. Information about corporate issues, as well as tenancy and property matters, is conveyed to tenants in a variety of ways. Depending on what is most appropriate,

this may be through newsletters, individual letters, scheme annual general meetings or Bield's partnership forum.

www.bield.co.uk

Tel: 0131 273 4000

Cordale Housing Association

Cordale is a small charitable housing association operating in the West Dunbartonshire Council area. The association, which was founded in 1993, manages around 360 general needs and 12 shared ownership properties. The housing service is delivered from Cordale's office in the village of Renton. The association works to regenerate Renton and to improve the quality of local housing by demolishing or refurbishing the existing stock and by building new homes. Cordale works with partners and has been engaged in innovative 'wider role' activities.

The management committee has 12 members. It has overall responsibility for managing the association's affairs, supported by four specialist sub-committees.

www.cordalehousing.org.uk

Email: gibsos@cordalehousing.org.uk

Tel: 01389 721216

Fife Council

Fife Council is the third largest local authority in Scotland by population. It covers an area of 1,322 square kilometres that includes large urban areas, such as Dunfermline, Glenrothes and Kirkcaldy, as well as many small villages.

The council owns and manages around 33,000 houses throughout Fife. A local network of 21 service centres throughout Fife provides frontline housing

management services and advice and information services. Staff at these centres provide access to a wide range of council services in a 'one-stop shop' approach. The council also runs a telephone contact centre for 12 hours every day. Customer service advisers provide advice and information over the telephone. They can link callers directly to area offices dealing with housing repairs, allocations, housing benefits and a range of other council services. In April 2007 the housing service, the local service network and the contact centre (which were previously part of the council's central support services) were brought together under the management of a single executive director. The aim was to better co-ordinate service delivery.

The management and business strategy team in the housing service is responsible for monitoring and reporting on the performance of the housing service and providing information for tenants. At a corporate level, these functions are the responsibility of the policy and organisational development team.

www.fifedirect.org.uk

Tel: 08451 550000

Horizon Housing Association

Horizon owns and manages 645 houses across 11 council areas in central Scotland. It provides both mainstream and specialised housing. When it was first established in 1975, as the Scottish Spastics Housing Association, Horizon had a number of objectives. One of these was to provide equal housing opportunities for disabled people. Nowadays one of Horizon's targets is to make a quarter of its stock suitable for wheelchair users. By the end of March 2006, 22 per cent of the housing stock met this target. Only two other housing associations in Scotland had a greater proportion of their housing stock suitable for wheelchair users at this time.

Horizon is a registered Scottish charity. At the time of the case study there were nine members on its management committee. Three members were tenants. The management committee meets quarterly. There are also three sub-committees, each of which meets once a month.

The management team is made up of the chief executive and the three directors of service. The management team shares responsibility for managing, distributing and publishing information about governance and performance.

www.horizonhousing.org

Email: e-mail@horizonhousing.org

Tel: 01506 424140

Lochaber Housing Association

Lochaber Housing Association owns and manages 537 houses in the Scottish Highlands. It operates from an office in Fort William. At the time of the case study there were 12 members on the association's management committee. There were also two co-optees on the committee.

The operations manager is primarily responsible for managing, distributing and publishing information.

www.lochaberhousing.org.uk

Email: info@lochaberhousing.org.uk

Tel: 1397 02530

Manor Estates Housing Association

Manor Estates is a charitable organisation that owns and manages 930 houses throughout Edinburgh. It operates from an office in the Gorgie Dalry

area of the city. At the time of the case study there were 15 members on the association's management committee. Ten of the members were tenants.

The Association's management team is primarily responsible for managing, distributing and publishing information.

www.manorestates.org.uk

Email: info@manorestates.org.uk

Tel: 0131 337 3222

Moray Council

Moray is a mainly rural area between Inverness and Aberdeen in the north east of Scotland. It has a population of 87,000, of whom three-quarters are concentrated in and around the five main centres of Elgin, Forres, Keith, Buckie and Lossiemouth. The Moray Council covers one of the largest local authority areas in Scotland and has its headquarters in Elgin.

The council owns and manages a stock of 6,044 houses concentrated in the five main centres. It provides frontline housing management services, and a range of other council services, through access points in Buckie, Keith and Forres. The council's headquarters in Elgin has a separate reception for the housing service and an access point for the other council services.

The chief housing officer has overall responsibility for managing and publishing information within the housing service. Normally these responsibilities are delegated to another member of staff but this post was vacant at the time of our visit. The housing service also has an information assistant. Members of staff in the council's corporate policy unit are responsible for council-wide information about performance and complaints. This team also records and monitors

Freedom of Information requests, although service departments are responsible for responding to the requests.

www.moray.gov.uk

email: housinginfo@moray.gov.uk

Tel: 01343 543451

New Shaws Local Housing Organisation

New Shaws was set up in 2003. It is a Local Housing Organisation (LHO) of Glasgow Housing Association (GHA) and manages 3,000 properties on behalf of the association. Most of its housing stock, which is mainly multi-storey blocks, is in the Pollokshaws area on the south side of Glasgow. The organisation operates from an office in Pollokshaws. New Shaws is run by a management committee with 13 members, eight of whom are tenants.

The LHO receives an annual allowance from GHA to cover the overall cost of delivering the housing service.

Email: newshaws@gha.org.uk

Tel: 0141 274 7400

Perthshire Housing Association

Perthshire Housing Association was established in 1990. It owns and manages around 1,400 properties across the Perth and Kinross Council area. The association has more than 200 sharing owners.

Perthshire is a charitable housing association and operates from a single office in the centre of Perth. It is governed by a voluntary management board. Three of the 19 places on the board are reserved for co-optees from the residents' panel. The management board meets every two months. Four service committees

support the management board and each of them meets at least four times a year.

The housing services director and deputy chief executive share the main responsibility for managing, distributing and publishing information about governance and performance. The association has recently appointed a trainee policy and information officer to assist the housing services director with this.

www.perthshireha.co.uk

Email: hainfo@perthha.co.uk

Tel: 01738 441088

Shettleston Housing Association

Shettleston Housing Association was set up in 1976 and since that time has improved or built over 1,500 houses. It currently provides a range of services to tenants and owners in the Shettleston, Sandyhills, Greenfield and Springboig areas in the east end of Glasgow.

Shettleston manages 895 houses on behalf of Glasgow Housing Association in accordance with the terms of a remodelled management agreement. Shettleston manages this stock through a Local Housing Organisation (LHO) sub-committee. The association is a registered Scottish charity and operates from an office in the Shettleston area of the city. It is governed by a management committee consisting of 20 members, seven of whom are tenants of the association and six tenants of the LHO. The management committee (which includes four owner-occupiers who receive a factoring service from the organisation meets monthly and manages the affairs of the association with the assistance of specialist sub-committees.

The association's senior staff share responsibility for managing, distributing and publishing information. The director also has a role and interest in the content and quality of all publications.

www.shettleston.co.uk

Email: sha@shettleston.co.uk

Tel: 0141 763 0511

South Lanarkshire Council

South Lanarkshire Council covers approximately 1,772 square kilometres and is a mix of urban and rural communities. It has a population of over 300,000. The council owns and manages around 26,700 properties and is the fifth largest local authority in Scotland.

The Housing and Technical Resource is responsible for providing housing services. The resource has eight area service offices. These offices are responsible for allocating council houses and providing a range of other housing services. The area service offices are also responsible for providing the homelessness service. The offices cover eight defined geographical areas across South Lanarkshire. Each of the eight areas has a one-stop shop (called a Q and A office) providing frontline services for all council departments.

www.southlanarkshire.gov.uk

email: customer.services@southlanarkshire.gov.uk

Tel: 0845 7406080

West Granton Housing Co-operative

The West Granton Housing Co-operative owns and manages 324 houses in the West Pilton area of Edinburgh. It operates from an office in the heart of its housing stock. It is a fully mutual housing co-operative, which means all its tenants are members of the organisation. There are 12 members on its management committee, all of whom are tenants.

The housing manager is primarily responsible for managing, distributing and publishing information.

Email: mail@westgrantonhc.co.uk

Tel: 0131 551 5035

Annex 2 The project advisory group

Tina Beattie, Tenants Regulation Advisory Group

Morag Boyter, Scottish Housing Best Value Network

Emma Gray, Scottish Public Services Ombudsman

Rob Hughes/Alan Stokes, Scottish Federation of Housing Associations

Caroline Johnston, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities

Linda Leslie, Communities Scotland (R&I)

Jennifer Wallace, Scottish Consumer Council

Elaine Whyte, Communities Scotland (R&I)

Tessa Brown, Communities Scotland (R&I) – project co-ordinator

Lynn Sweeney, Communities Scotland (R&I) – inspection/case study manager

Stephen Connolly, ERS – project manager

Moira Saunders, ERS – senior consultant

Annex 3 Summary of discussion at tenant assessors workshop

Group		A	B	C	D
Most important information	1	The service standards your landlord aims to give tenants and service users	The service standards your landlord aims to give tenants and service users	Landlord performance in relation to service standards	What rent and service charges are spent on
	2	Named staff responsible for service + landlord performance in relation to service standards	Landlord performance in relation to service standards	How the organisation is run; who makes decisions and how	Repairs and maintenance performance and plans
	3		Named staff responsible for service	Named staff responsible for service	Performance in responding to ASB, including action taken and outcomes
Preferred method of communication	1	Quarterly newsletter	Tenants handbook	Quarterly newsletter/ tenants handbook/complimentary diary	Newsletter
	2	Annual report	Quarterly newsletter	Tenants meetings (but depends on location – not so good in remote rural areas)	Website (always available)
	3	Depends on location of offices	Annual report	Annual report	Individual letter
Most important accessibility factors	1	Use of plain English + size of lettering	Size of lettering + use of plain English (or other language)	Published info at local level, in plain English, and an easy-to-read website	Wide variety of methods (in translation and format)
	2	Published information down to local level		Size of lettering	Plain language
	3	Availability in other formats	Published information down to local level	Availability in different languages	Print size/colour balance

Annex 4 Topic guide: accessibility of documents

Issues to consider

Is the document written in plain English? Has the author:

- kept sentences short? (average 15-20 words)
- used everyday words rather than jargon and abbreviations?
- used personal pronouns? For example, 'we will give you the information that you need' is more accessible than 'the landlord will provide tenants with the required information'.
- used mostly active verbs rather than passive ones? For example, 'we will give you information when you ask for it' rather than 'information will be provided by the landlord on request'.

Is the document printed in a way that makes it easy to read?

In making an assessment you should consider these basic design elements:

- **Type size:** should be between 12 and 14 point (the equivalent to a minimum x-height size of 2mm). This page is typed in 12 point. This sentence is in 14 point.
- **Contrast:** Is there a good contrast between the colour of the background and the text? Black text against a white background is the easiest to read. If a light-coloured type is used, the background colour should be dark.
- **Typeface:** Has a plain easy-to-read typeface been selected for this document? Good examples are:

Helvetica

Arial

Times New Roman.

Decorative or handwriting typefaces are more difficult to read. One example is:

Monotype Corsiva.

- **Spaces between each line:** the space between one line and the next should be at least 1.5 times the space between the words on the line.
- **Spaces between words:** a document will be easier to read if the amount of space between each word is the same. People with sight problems find it difficult to read type that has been squeezed into a line or which has been stretched to fit.
- **Alignment:** text is easier to read if it is aligned to the left-hand margin. This is because it makes it easier for the reader to find the start of the next line and keeps the space even between the words.

Readers with sight problems will find text that has been 'justified' (like in this paragraph) more difficult to read. This is because justifying text results in uneven spacing between words.

- **Columns:** if the text is divided into columns, these should be clearly separated by a margin.
- **Paragraphs:** there should be a clear space between paragraphs because dividing the text up gives the eye a break and makes reading easier. Paragraphs should be kept short. Breaking up longer paragraphs by using bullet points makes it easier to read.

- **Line length:** lines should be around 12 words long.
- **Images:** text should not be overlaid onto images (for example photographs, diagrams or illustrations) since this affects the contrast and makes it more difficult to read. And text should not be fitted around an image if this means that the lines of the text start in a different place.
- **Printing:** text printed on glossy paper can be more difficult to read.

Availability in alternative formats

Does the document include a clear statement that it can be made available in different formats and languages? Is this statement:

- in a prominent position?
- in large print (at least 16 point)?
- in different languages?

Source: adapted from [Scottish Accessible Information Forum](http://www.saifscotland.org.uk) (www.saifscotland.org.uk).

References

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- Communities Scotland (2006 b), **Regulatory Code of Governance**
- Communities Scotland (2006 c), **Regulatory Code of Governance supporting guidance**
- Communities Scotland (2006 d), **How to gather views on service quality: guidance for social landlords**
- Communities Scotland (2005), **Key themes from inspection: tenant participation**
- Communities Scotland précis (2004), **Tenants talking to tenants**
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- National Housing Federation (2006), **Report of the Tenant Involvement Commission**
- The Independent Commission for Good Governance in Public Services (2005), **The Good Governance Standard for Public Services** (Office for Public Management and Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountability)
- Scottish Consumer Council (2007), **Literature review on the consumer approach to scrutiny**
- Scottish Consumer Council (2005), **Is anybody listening? The user perspective on interpretation and translating services for minority ethnic communities**
- Scottish Executive (2007), **Housing trends in Scotland: quarter ending 31 December 2006**
- Scottish Executive (2006 a), **Digital Exclusion Strategy**

Scottish Executive (2006 b), **Translating, interpreting and communication support: a review of provision in the public services in Scotland**

Scottish Executive (2004), **The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003: Best Value guidance**

Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (2005), information note on **Freedom of information and housing associations**

Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (2002 a), **Raising Standards in Housing**, chapter 18, Access to Information

Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (2002 b), **Raising Standards in Housing**, chapter 4, Governance and Accountability

Scottish Information Commissioner (2003), **A guide to publication schemes under the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002**

Websites

Communities Scotland	www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk
Equality Scotland	www.equalityscotland.com
Happy to Translate	www.equalityscotland.com/happytotranslate/happytotranslate.php
Plain English Campaign	www.plainenglish.co.uk
Plain Language Commission	www.clearest.co.uk
Scottish Accessible Information Forum	www.saifscotland.org.uk
Scottish Consumer Council	www.scotconsumer.org.uk
Scottish Public Services Ombudsman	www.spsso.org.uk

Otwartość i dostępność?

Raport z badań o udostępnianiu informacji o osiągnięciach oraz metodach zarządzania wykorzystywanych przez spółdzielnie mieszkaniowe

معلومات مكتشفة وقابلة للاطلاع عليها؟
دراسة بحثية حول الطريقة التي تقوم بها المؤسسات الخدمية للمساكن بالمشاركة في إنشاء المعلومات حول الأداء وأساليب الإدارة

公開透明？

關於社會業主（social landlords）如何分享績效與治理資訊的主題調查

ਖੁਲਾਪਣ ਅਤੇ ਪਹੁੰਚ ਦੇਣ ਯੋਗ?

ਸਮਾਜਕ ਮਕਾਨ-ਮਾਲਕ ਕਾਰ-ਕੁਸ਼ਲੀ ਅਤੇ ਸ਼ਾਸਨ ਬਾਰੇ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਵੇਂ ਵੰਡਦੇ ਹਨ ਇਸ ਬਾਰੇ ਇਕ ਵਿਚਾਰ ਯੋਗ ਅਧਿਐਨ

Открытость и доступность?

Исследование (социальных/общественных жилищных учреждений) об открытости и доступности информации о результатах и методах управления

شفاف اور قابل رسائی؟
اس باہت ایک موضوعاتی مطالعہ کہ کارکردگی اور نظم چلانے کے معاملات سے متعلق معلومات کو سوشل لینڈلارڈز کس طرح شیئر کرتے ہیں۔

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