

*National research for the thematic study  
into how social landlords share information about  
performance and governance*

NOVEMBER 2007



Ensuring decent housing  
and strong communities across Scotland

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### **Zespół tłumaczy**

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# **National research for the thematic study into how social landlords share information about performance and governance**

**This report was produced by ERS for Communities Scotland**

It is based on national research carried out in 2006/07 for Communities Scotland's thematic study of openness and access to information.

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## **Explanation of terms**

### **Accessibility**

This is used to describe the ease of obtaining information and how an organisation can be reached, contacted and asked for information

### **APSR**

The annual performance statistical return is performance information (including the key performance indicators) supplied to Communities Scotland by registered social landlords

### **Benchmarking**

The establishing of a reference point for performance measurement – commonly by comparison with other organisations or previous performance

### **BME**

Black and minority ethnic people or groups

### **Complaint**

Any expression of dissatisfaction that requires a response

### **COSLA**

Convention of Scottish Local Authorities

### **CRE**

Commission for Racial Equality

### **DCLG**

Department for Communities and Local Government in England

### **DRC**

Disability Rights Commission

**Equalities body consultees**

In this report they include Stonewall, the Commission for Racial Equality and the Disability Rights Commission

**Governance**

The leadership, direction and control of an organisation to make sure that it achieves its agreed aims and objectives and in doing so serves the public's best interest

**Governing body**

This term mirrors that used in the Langlands report on The Good Governance Standard for Public Services (Office for Public Management, Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2004): 'the body with overall responsibility for directing and controlling an organisation' – in other words, the body responsible for the landlord's activity. Here examples include the board or management committee of a housing association and the relevant council committee in local government.

**HA**

Housing association

**KPI**

Key performance indicator – Communities Scotland collects and publishes key performance indicator information from registered social landlords

**Openness**

This is used to describe the organisation's willingness to provide information.

**LA**

Local authority

**LHO**

Local housing organisation

**Performance information**

Information provided by landlords about how their organisation has performed in various areas, commonly including rent arrears, repairs and lettings

**RSL**

Registered social landlord

**RTOs**

Registered tenants' organisations

**Service user**

Anyone using a landlord's services, for example a tenant, applicant for housing, or shared-ownership homeowner

**SFHA**

Scottish Federation of Housing Associations

**SPI**

Statutory performance indicator – Audit Scotland collects and publishes statutory performance indicator information from local authorities.

**SPSO**

Scottish Public Services Ombudsman

**Tenant assessors**

Tenants who work as volunteers with Regulation and Inspection. Their role is to bring a service user's perspective to regulation and inspection of local authorities and RSLs.

**Tenant consultees**

Tenants from the tenants' regulation advisory group, the tenant assessors, members of the national tenants' engagement network and other tenants consulted as part of the study.

# 1 Executive summary

This thematic study considered the openness and accessibility of registered social landlords (RSLs) and local authority landlords with regard to information about **governance, performance and complaints**.

- The study showed differing standards of openness and accessibility across the sector. Many landlords show positive practice in the production of governance, performance and complaints information. But quality and availability vary and this is a weakness.
- The legislation applying to RSLs and local authorities affects the levels of information they provide, in terms of the information they produce and the way they make it available.
- Tenants we consulted believed that meeting their information needs helps to build up trust between them and their landlord.
- Tenants we consulted were often unaware of what types of information could be made available to them. They were keen to have a more open dialogue about the kind of information available.
- The study suggested that tenants' desire for governance, performance and complaints information is rather latent. Tenants are most likely to be interested in information about areas that directly affect them.
- The study showed that, when asked, tenants are particularly interested in access to information about performance, service standards and complaints.

- There is evidence that language, age, disability, literacy, digital access, the readability of documents and the location of offices are important factors in how people gain access to information.
- Local authorities are firmly committed to producing documents in alternative formats and languages, and most RSLs are also prepared to provide tenants and other service users with information in alternative formats and languages 'on request'. However, some documents such as annual reports are not available in alternative formats and languages from all landlords.
- Tenants from equalities groups expressed a strong desire for landlords to be inclusive in providing information. They thought documents should be offered or available in the formats and languages they need.
- Tenants in general expressed a strong desire for information to be written in plain English.
- The research indicated that landlords may be better able to meet format and language needs if they take an active approach to building up a profile of their tenants and other service users.

## 2 Introduction

Communities Scotland commissioned ERS in November 2006 to carry out a study of landlords' openness and accessibility in the information they provide about their governance, performance and complaints. The aim was to provide a national picture of landlords' openness and accessibility to their tenants and other people who have an interest in their services.

The key questions for the study were:

- **What kinds of information do landlords provide?**
- **Are they providing the right sort of information for their tenants and other service users (that is, the sort of information that tenants and service users want)?**
- **Do they provide the information promptly and in a timely way?**
- **How easy is it for tenants, other service users and stakeholders to get the information they need?**

The study looked at the availability and presentation of published governance information. This included details of governing body meetings; communication of decisions; minutes and papers; and information about governing body membership and appointment.

We also considered the availability, content and presentation of performance information, and whether performance was shown in comparison to other landlords and performance in previous years.

Finally, we looked at how open and accessible landlords were in providing information about how to complain, and what kind of information landlords reported about the number and type of complaints they received.

The subject of this thematic study touched on a wide range of the performance standards for social housing and homelessness, published by

the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA), Communities Scotland and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (SFHA). The performance standards relevant to each part of the study are set out in the report.

RSLs are subject to the regulatory code of governance published by Communities Scotland in 2006. The report sets out the regulatory requirements relevant to the subject of this study as they arise.

During the research we found various barriers to people getting information, and tenants made it clear that access to information is important to the landlord–tenant relationship. We hope the findings from the study will be helpful to landlords when they consider the accessibility of their governance, performance and complaints information in future. Tenants and tenants groups who are interested in information may also find the research useful.

## **3 Context of the study**

### **3.1 Sources of information**

Generally, tenants, other service users and stakeholders can get information by seeking it, being given it, absorbing it passively or finding it casually. The main sources of information from landlords are:

- posters in reception
- leaflets
- newsletters
- responses to individual information requests
- annual reports
- websites
- verbal information at tenants meetings and tenants conferences
- tenants handbooks.

Publications are an important communication tool. One tenant we consulted during the study said landlords should use information to build and enhance relationships with tenants, service users and stakeholders.

### **3.2 Legal and regulatory context**

There are important distinctions between the legal obligations of local authority landlords and RSLs.

RSLs include housing associations, housing co-operatives and companies limited by guarantee. More than 90 per cent of Scottish RSLs are Industrial and Provident Societies and are membership organisations whose members elect the committee of management.

Local authorities and Communities Scotland are public bodies. They have certain legal obligations that do not apply directly to RSLs. On occasion, legal requirements of Communities Scotland indirectly affect RSLs. For example, Communities Scotland has a duty to respond to freedom-of-information

requests about RSLs and would supply on request (and under the legislation) information about RSLs which they themselves would not have a duty to provide.

The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 set out the corporate best value duty of local authorities. The principles of best value include commitment and leadership, responsiveness and consultation, sound governance, sound management of resources, scrutiny, equal opportunities and accountability.

In 2004, the Independent Commission for Good Governance in Public Services, chaired by Sir Alan Langlands, published the Good Governance Standard for Public Services. The standard is based on six principles, commonly known as the Langlands principles, for governance of public services:

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.

The regulatory code of governance published by Communities Scotland (2006) is based on the Langlands principles and sets out Communities Scotland's expectations on RSL governance. As the code is statutory guidance, issued on behalf of Scottish Ministers, RSLs must meet its requirements.

### **3.3 Current debates about information**

A number of current debates are also relevant to the study. These include freedom of information, stock transfer and the availability of performance information.

In 2006 the Scottish Executive carried out a public consultation on the operation of the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002. Among other questions, the consultation asked for views on whether the coverage of the Act should be extended to include other bodies, such as RSLs. Responses to the consultation showed there were mixed views about this. The Scottish Government will be carefully reviewing the arguments for and against extending the coverage of the Act.

Research by the Scottish Information Commissioner, the arbiter of the Freedom of Information Act, has revealed some interesting trends in how people perceive information accessibility. The Commissioner's 2006 survey on public awareness showed 'that the Scottish public agree that more information is available as a result of the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002. The survey also showed a sharp fall in those who believe that public authorities will find ways around the law'. (Scottish Information Commissioner, 2006)

The landlord survey in this study found that the 27 local authorities responding had received 20 freedom-of-information requests relating to governance, performance and complaints in 2005/06. Three local authorities accounted for 17 of those requests.

The legal requirements of the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 set local authorities apart from RSLs. But the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations advises RSLs that they should act within the spirit of the freedom-of-information legislation.

Because the legal frameworks of local authorities and RSLs are different, tenants transferring from one sector to the other may find their rights to information altered. This study did not specifically look at whether or not stock transfer landlords have sought to maintain the rights of their former local authority tenants. But the Scottish Information Commissioner has commented that this issue has been brought to his attention:

‘Relatively few enquiries or invalid applications have been made to my Office regarding bodies which members of the public believe are or should be covered by the legislation. However, those which have been raised with me include private prisons, prison escort, roads maintenance, PFI contracts for schools' building and operation, stock transfer housing associations, and leisure trusts which have assumed responsibility for services previously provided by a local authority.’ (The Scottish Information Commissioner, 2006 p3)

Finally, another relevant issue is that of performance information and its publication. This has recently been considered in Professor Michael Cave's review of social housing regulation in England. The Cave review recommended that:

‘The regulator should encourage a plurality of mechanisms to be used by providers to drive them to achieve better outcomes for tenants. It is expected that empowered tenants would play a key role in assessing performance and holding landlords to account for weaknesses in performance. To these ends, it is recommended that all providers should establish formal arrangements 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.'

If progressed, this would certainly enable England's tenants, stakeholders and landlords to compare performance more readily with other housing providers. Making comparative performance information in Scotland more available and readable than at present may be a future consideration.

## 4 Methods

Our study methods included a review of existing reports and research, a survey of landlords, and consultation with tenants and others.

### 4.1 Document review

The research included a review of relevant literature on openness and accessibility. A list of references is set out in Annex 2.

### 4.2 Survey of information from landlords

Our landlord survey aimed to find out exactly what information about governance, performance and complaints landlords produce and how it is made available. The survey also aimed to find out how landlords manage the production of information.

We sent questionnaires to all 27 local authorities retaining housing stock and 203 RSLs (excluding Abbeyfield Societies, because each is so small – there are approximately 300 societies for 700 properties in the UK). The LA questionnaire is in annex 4 and the RSL questionnaire in annex 5.

All the LA landlords and 129 RSLs (64 per cent of the 203 we targeted) responded to the questionnaire. The responding RSLs included two whole-stock transfer associations. Overall, the survey response was 68 per cent (156 landlords). A breakdown is given below. For the purpose of analysis we split the landlords into three groups: RSLs with 1,000 or fewer properties, RSLs with 1,001 or more properties and local authorities.

**Table 1**

<b>Landlord survey responses</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage of total response</b>
RSL 1 to 1,000	71	46%
RSL 1,001 or more	58	37%
Local authority	27	17%

### **4.3 Tenants' views**

We used a questionnaire and group discussions to ask tenants for their views on the kind of information they need. We consulted 52 tenants who took part in various forms of tenant involvement. Consultation took place over six meetings. Participating tenants included members of the tenants' regulation advisory group, the Regulation and Inspection tenant assessors, and people attending four tenants' engagement network meetings. We also held a workshop with tenant assessors, looking at performance information.

### **4.4 Discussion with tenants with particular needs**

We also consulted a further 30 tenants from particular groups to capture their perspective on matters. These tenants included two groups of people with disabilities, one group of older tenants and one of tenants from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups. Discussion on equality-related information needs focussed on:

- particular barriers to access;
- personal experiences;
- specific considerations around information provision; and
- evidence of positive practice and suggestions for improvements.

### **4.5 Other consultation**

To make sure we covered the full range of information needs, we had face-to-face meetings with the Commission for Racial Equality, the Disability Rights Commission and Stonewall. The views of these bodies are expressed as those of 'equalities body consultees'. We also sought views from the Scottish Information Commissioner's office.

### **4.6 Desk-based publication and website assessment**

The research included a desk-based assessment of information about governance, performance and complaints sent by landlords who responded to the survey. The assessment included:

- approximately 180 newsletters (105 landlords sent one or more copies of their tenants newsletter);

- 25 leaflets on governance;
- a mixed sample of 50 complaints forms and procedure documents; and
- almost 100 annual reports – we assessed these for their content in terms of performance, governance and complaints.

We also briefly assessed the 27 local authorities' websites and a random sample of 21 RSL websites.

## **4.7 Case studies**

Communities Scotland asked landlords to participate as case studies for the research and 13 organisations volunteered. The case studies were carried out by Communities Scotland inspection staff and tenant assessors. This research included a review of information provided by the case-study landlords and interviews with staff and tenants on site. This aspect of the study analysed landlords' accessibility and openness in greater depth. The case-study landlords were:

- Angus Council
- Bield Housing Association
- Cordale Housing Association
- Fife Council
- Horizon Housing Association
- Lochaber Housing Association
- Manor Estates Housing Association
- Moray Council
- New Shaws Local Housing Organisation
- Perthshire Housing Association
- Shettleston Housing Association
- South Lanarkshire Council
- West Granton Housing Co-operative.

## **5 Accessibility**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This section of the report sets out the main issues relating to accessibility.

Landlords have a legal duty to make all their services as accessible as possible and to ensure that all groups and individuals have equal opportunities to use them. The study explored ways in which landlords are accessible and the accessibility needs of tenants and other service users.

The Housing Act (Scotland) 2001 part 7, section 106 established an overarching responsibility for landlords to encourage equal opportunities. It states that local authorities and RSLs 'must exercise the functions conferred on them by this Act in a manner which encourages equal opportunities and in particular the observance of the equal opportunity requirements'.

The Disability Discrimination Acts 1995 and 2005 established a disability equality duty covering organisations that carry out public functions. Local authorities have a general duty under the Act to make sure that disabled people are treated fairly, and this covers matters relating to access to services and employment. Local authorities, as named public bodies, also have a specific duty to publish a disability equality scheme. This is known as the Disability Equality Duty.

Communities Scotland is a named public body and, through regulation and inspection, monitors RSLs' compliance with the general duty of the Act. Crucially, the Disability Rights Commission, the overseer of the Act, has said that housing associations must fulfil the general duty. This is because they provide services of a public nature.

The Race Relations Act 1976 and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 put a general duty on public authorities to promote race equality. This means they must eliminate unlawful racial discrimination and promote equality of opportunity and good relations between people from different racial groups. (Commission for Racial Equality 2006)

The Race Relations Act places specific duties on local authorities. One of these is to produce a race equality scheme. The race equality scheme should set out how the public authority will make sure that everyone, whatever their ethnic background, has access to information about the authority and its services.

The duty to promote race equality is supplemented by the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, which makes equal opportunities part of local authorities' best value duty and their procurement function. (Commission for Racial Equality 2006)

The relevant performance standard is:

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

Information about a change to statutory rights is expected to be available in alternative formats and languages. On introducing the Scottish Secure Tenancy, the Scottish Executive advised:

'Landlords must make sure that all tenants are treated equally irrespective of their sex, marital status, age, race, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, disability or religion. In implementing the Scottish Secure Tenancy landlords will need to make arrangements to make sure that they can, as appropriate, give information in different languages, Braille, large print, etc. All existing tenants should have access to information which tells them of the changes to their statutory rights and responsibilities.' (Scottish Executive 2002)

## **5.2 Accessibility needs**

The study considered whether landlord information about governance, performance and complaints was accessible. Several tenants we consulted stressed that it was important for mainstream services to meet everyone's needs. One equalities body consultee called for organisations to adequately resource the provision of information in alternative formats.

The range of barriers to accessing information, as expressed by tenant and equalities body consultees, was wide. They included personal factors such as literacy, disability, health, confidence and language. Potential physical barriers included the distance from landlord offices and the presentation of written information. Some people we consulted also said lack of access to the internet was a significant barrier.

Barriers to accessing information may be compounded by increased need for support for particular tenants and service users. Equalities bodies said people from minority groups may need more information because of their vulnerability. For example, they may experience hostile behaviour such as harassment or have difficulties in communicating. One equalities body consultee said that some vulnerable tenants and service users may have had poor experiences with other public authorities previously, and openness and accessibility could help rebuild trust.

The document review revealed some of the barriers to accessing information. The following paragraphs set out in more detail the different vulnerabilities we identified which may hamper access and openness.

### **5.3 Language**

There is evidence that language restricts access. In 2005 the Scottish Consumer Council looked at interpretation and translation services for minority ethnic communities from a user viewpoint. It concluded that 'difficulties in communicating in English emerged repeatedly as playing a significant role in curtailing access to public services for many members of minority ethnic communities.' (Scottish Consumer Council, 2005)

In 2007, the Scottish Executive published a draft national strategy for language. It noted that 'this strategy will seek to provide a coherent approach that can guide the development of languages in Scotland and complement and encourage the progress that has been made.' (Scottish Executive, 2007)

In our consultation, people mentioned that organisations should constantly review their language needs, especially in view of the increasing migrant

worker population. One equalities body consultee commented ‘it is fundamental for a landlord to be relevant to its area.’ One case-study landlord had 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.

The landlords’ survey showed a high response rate to requests for information in alternative languages.

**Table 2**

<b>Documents in alternative languages</b>	<b>Local authorities</b>	<b>RSLs</b>	<b>All landlords</b>
Does your organisation produce some documents in alternative languages on request?	96%	90%	92%

22 per cent of landlords produced some documents in alternative languages ‘as standard’. The most common languages were Urdu (35 per cent), Arabic (33 per cent) and Polish (33 per cent).

The landlord survey suggested some landlords gave priority to translating particular documents before others. Some documents were said to be available in different formats or languages on request, others not. The survey found that several important documents were not widely available in different languages. A quarter of landlords did not provide annual reports in alternative languages and 18 per cent did not provide minutes in alternative languages. Twenty-one per cent of landlords did not provide meeting papers in alternative languages. However, 77 per cent of landlords said they would provide an interpretation service on request for governance meetings.

One equalities body consultee suggested that housing organisations need to be aware that people often have only a limited knowledge of housing when they approach a landlord. So the needs of some service users may go beyond simple document translation.

The desk-top assessment of websites found some that offered translation services. The most comprehensive offered a full website translation at the

click of a country flag. Others offered important publications in another language or the option to request a translation.

Websites allow many people to get information and can be particularly useful in enabling landlords to communicate in different languages. Some accessibility sections of websites we assessed had downloadable tools to enable translation. It was not clear if the languages offered were those most likely to be requested in the landlord's geographic area of operation.

From one case-study location it was evident that providing information in alternative languages could take several weeks.

## **5.4 Disability**

There is evidence of a lack of access to information due to disability. The Disability Rights Commission (DRC) has researched this and found that '81 per cent of public websites fail to meet minimum standards for disabled web access'. (DRC, 2004, p9)

The DRC identified specific difficulties for disabled people from BME communities:

- 'difficulty in accessing appropriate and culturally sensitive information from organisations
- the failure of mainstream authorities or services to produce and distribute specifically targeted communications
- the failure of service providers to plan for the costs of providing translation/interpreting services or alternative formats
- lack of expertise to help organisations to adapt policy and practices in a culturally sensitive and appropriate way (particularly if these policies and practices are perceived as being faith-related)'. (DRC, 2004, p18)

The DRC's conclusion was that 'overall the experience of black and minority ethnic disabled people appears to be one of comprehensive marginalisation'. (DRC, 2004 p6)

Several tenants we consulted supported the practice among some landlords of maintaining a register of particular tenants' information needs. Equalities bodies' consultees cautioned that landlords should explain to tenants that they wish to collect information about the sort of format they needed so they could offer an improved service, not as a register of disability.

In terms of alternative formats (Braille, audio, large print and Moon) the landlord survey found that:

- 94 per cent of landlords provided some documents in alternative formats on request;
- 6 per cent of landlords said they did not provide documents in alternative formats on request; and
- 80 per cent of landlords said they would provide sign language at a governance meeting on request.

Only certain documents were available in alternative formats. Twenty-four per cent of landlords provided some documents in alternative formats as standard, a slightly higher percentage than those providing information in alternative languages.

The need to publicise the availability of alternative formats was highlighted in our consultation. One tenant had sight difficulties and did not know her landlord provided information in large print. Another tenant was on a mailing list to receive information in large print, but received it inconsistently.

Disabled tenants may not have full access to website information if the tools they require are not available. The website assessment revealed several features to assist people with disabilities:

1. a clearly identifiable accessibility section
2. details of web browsers to enable the user to alter settings to improve accessibility
3. the ability to vary screen sizes
4. short-cut keys
5. an option to have text only and revert back to graphics as desired

6. provision for speech-enabled text – website software and tools allowing written words to be read to the website user
7. read-out-loud buttons
8. the ability to choose font size and consistent font use
9. moderate use of pictures and images
10. an ability to vary text and background contrast colours
11. pages with a link to a text-only version.

Several websites highlighted a commitment to alternative formats by promoting accessibility features prominently on the home page. These features included phone numbers for format services; portable induction loops (at offices or for home visits); and links to the Adobe website to enable users to access portable document format (pdf) documents.

One equalities body consultee advised that organisations should plan for the expected increase in disability levels: ‘The likelihood of having a disability increases with age, meaning the total number and the proportion of people in Scotland with a disability seems likely to increase in future.’ (Scottish Council Foundation, 2005 p29)

The cost of providing information needs to be balanced with the likelihood of requests. The Scottish Executive advises landlords to identify and meet needs appropriately:

‘... landlords should build in some assessment of the needs of different tenants and how the landlord can make information available to them, for example through translation services. It also means that where landlords assess that they do not need to make available information in different formats they should at least establish how they would go about doing so, if required. Landlords with significant numbers of tenants from a particular ethnic minority or disabled group should consider producing information in different formats’. (Scottish Executive 2002, p1)

Accessibility takes various forms. One equalities body consultee said it was important for staff to visit people with limited mobility.

The landlord survey found that:

- 97 per cent of landlords had offices open to the public;
- 77 per cent had public areas that complied with the access requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act;
- 8 per cent were due to comply within a planned timescale;
- 9 per cent said their premises did not comply and they had no plans for alterations; and
- 6 per cent of landlords were uncertain if their premises complied.

## **5.5 Telephone**

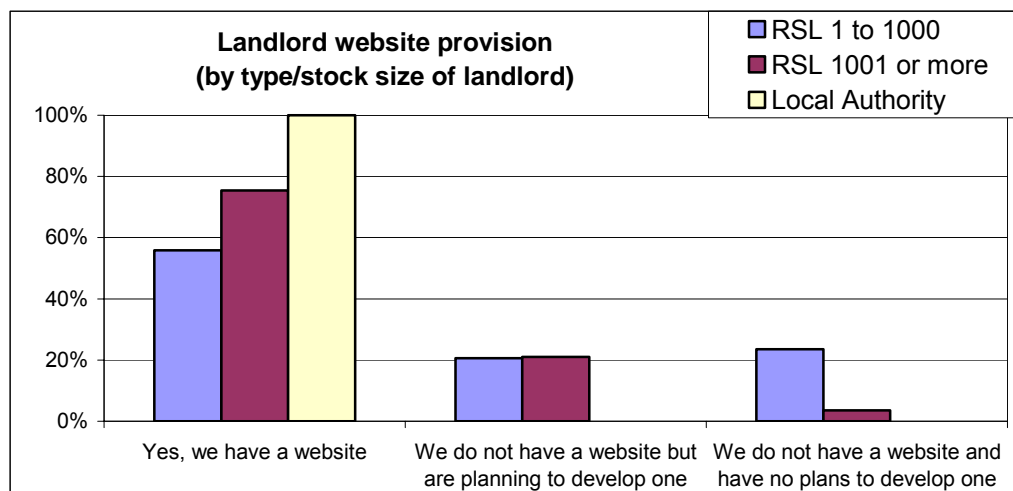
The landlord survey sought to identify whether landlords offered freephone numbers.

- 13 per cent of landlords had a freephone number;
- 40 per cent had a local rate number; and
- 11 per cent had a freephone or local rate for out-of-hours calls.

## 5.6 Digital exclusion

Digital exclusion can take two forms. Either the landlord does not provide a website, or service users do not have internet access. Our survey found that 70 per cent of landlords had a website, with a further 18 per cent planning to develop one (Figure 1). Twelve per cent had no plans to provide a website. Just over half the RSLs with 1,001 or fewer properties had a website.

Figure 1



The Scottish Executive's Digital Exclusion Strategy (Scottish Executive 2006) identified 'disadvantaged groups such as disabled people, older people and those living in deprived areas', as digitally excluded. It commented that:

- 'with just over half of the adults in Scotland using the internet the fact remains that it is younger adults who are much more likely to access the internet than those in older age groups or those with disabilities or long term illness.
- Households in the least deprived 20 per cent of communities are more than twice as likely to have home internet access as those in the most deprived 20 per cent of communities (67 per cent and 31 per cent respectively)'. (Scottish Executive 2006, section 1)

One case-study organisation provided training on internet use for its tenants. That approach is welcome, considering the evidence on present internet access rates.

## **5.7 Age**

Social landlords may need to improve their communication with young people. The report *Young Homeless People – Speaking for Themselves* noted that: 'More generally, there is a clear demand coming from young people for more information and advice which is of a high quality, is accessible and includes access to independent advice.' (Cummings et al, 2006, p16)

There is also evidence that older people experience particular barriers. At Age Concern's information and advice conference in 2005, one speaker commented that: 'Older people experience barriers in accessing information, advice and advocacy in three stages: becoming aware that there is information, advice or advocacy that could help in their situation; gaining access to appropriate and comprehensive information and advice; and receiving practical assistance to act on the information and achieve a solution.'

Demand for accessible information and support is likely to increase with an ageing population: 'between 2004 and 2031 the number of people aged 50+ is projected to rise by 28 per cent and the number aged 75 and over is projected to increase by 75 per cent'. (Scottish Executive, 2007, section 1)

## **5.8 Literacy**

Lack of literacy is another communication issue. 'Information from the International Adult Literacy Survey suggests that around 800,000 adults in Scotland have very low levels of literacy and numeracy.' (The Literacy Trust 2001, Scottish Executive website) One equalities body consultee suggested that the increased availability of audio tapes in reception may help people with literacy problems as well as those with impaired sight.

## **5.9 Readability of paper-based information**

The tenants we consulted during the research said communication in plain English was the most important factor in accessibility. The landlords' questionnaire asked about use of the Plain English Campaign or Plain Language Commission. Seven per cent of landlords indicated they were corporate members and 33 per cent had used such services. Sixty per cent said they had not.

Use of bodies who advise on writing in plain English is only one of the ways to measure willingness to produce clear and simple writing. However, such bodies are an accessible source of guidance to landlords and they have some public recognition.

During the study several landlords provided practical examples of guidance for writing publications. Many publications were written in plain language with a clear layout. There were also attractive approaches to document design. One case-study landlord provided variations of the same leaflet to appeal to different audiences.

## **5.10 Management of information and accessibility by landlords**

The landlords' questionnaire asked whether the take-up of information was monitored. The responses showed that 32 per cent of landlords monitored website use, fewer than half of those with a website. Sixteen per cent monitored the take-up of leaflets in reception and 44 per cent of landlords recorded requests for alternative formats. Monitoring the take-up of information would help to increase landlords' knowledge of people's information needs.

One case-study organisation employed an equalities officer who monitored the take-up of information in different languages and formats, and provided support and training to staff on accessibility.

We also asked how organisations managed the publication of information. This was generally the responsibility of a senior officer or specialist in the organisation (table 3). During consultation we found that a number of

landlords had editorial groups involving tenants in drafting information and designing websites. Tenants praised landlords for involving them in the editorial process and suggested this practice should be adopted routinely. Editorial group members may need training on equalities issues.

**Table 3**

<b>Person responsible for public information</b>	<b>RSL 1 to 1,000</b>	<b>RSL 1,001 or more</b>	<b>Local authorities</b>	<b>All landlords</b>
Public relations officer	0%	7%	11%	5%
Director's office	29%	21%	11%	23%
Housing manager	24%	14%	19%	20%
Service development manager	1%	5%	19%	6%
Performance manager	1%	2%	11%	3%
Housing manager and director/chief executive	20%	18%	4%	16%
Other	24%	33%	26%	28%

Tables 4 and 5 show responses to the two survey questions about arrangements for design and printing.

**Table 4**

<b>Design of publications</b>	<b>All landlords</b>
In house only	38%
Contracted out only	30%
Both in house and contracted out	30%
Other	2%

**Table 5**

<b>Printing of publications</b>	<b>All landlords</b>
In house only	11%
Contracted out only	56%
Both in house and contracted out	25%
Other	9%

Thirty-nine per cent of landlords said they had written guidance for staff on how to deal with information requests and publications, while 59 per cent said they provided training for staff on the kinds of information accessible to the

public. Only 13 per cent said their staff followed a procedure for dealing with requests (table 6).

**Table 6**

<b>Staff awareness about types of information accessible to the public</b>	<b>RSL 1 to 1,000</b>	<b>RSL 1,001 or more</b>	<b>LAs</b>	<b>All landlords</b>
Yes – they are trained	59%	64%	52%	59%
Yes – they follow a procedure	10%	14%	20%	13%
Yes – they check with their manager	23%	19%	16%	20%
Yes – other	0%	2%	8%	2%
No – few requests are received	6%	0%	0%	3%
No – no policy or procedure is in place	3%	2%	4%	3%

## 5.11 Positive practice in accessibility

*Keep documents user friendly.*

- ✓ Use a simple and clear writing style and layout.
- ✓ Consider the appropriateness of technical terms.
- ✓ Make sure graphs, tables and charts are clearly annotated and easy to read.

*Keep websites user friendly.*

- ✓ Maximise internet access – consider providing access courses and terminals at appropriate heights in reception and other places such as sheltered schemes.
- ✓ Monitor website usage and make sure there is an email contact for feedback about the site.
- ✓ Consider providing an accessibility section and website tools such as speech enablers.
- ✓ Enlist tenants willing to test sites for accessibility and navigation.
- ✓ Consider accreditation.

*Write for your audience and involve your audience.*

- ✓ Invite tenants to join editorial teams.
- ✓ Design information appropriate for the reader – written from their perspective.
- ✓ Consider value for money and balance the need to produce an attractive publication against cost – consult tenants about this.

*Provide various means of communication.*

- ✓ Review the ability and need to provide hearing loops and to present information in Braille, Moon and large print; on audio tape and CD; and by email and text.
- ✓ Be aware of what information people need and find out what format they prefer through surveys and other contacts.
- ✓ Issue an accessible list of publications and make clear that they are available in different formats.

*Review language needs.*

- ✓ Check that the languages currently available are the languages most likely to be requested locally.
- ✓ When offering to translate, write your offer in the language of the translation offered as well as in English.
- ✓ Consider offering language translations on websites.
- ✓ Consider the use of phone translation services and whether you could provide dual handsets for phone translations in the office.
- ✓ Use online resources such as HomePoint.
- ✓ Consider seeking advice from other organisations – investigate the potential of the Happy to Translate initiative.

*Publicise services and make accessibility a guiding principle for your organisation.*

- ✓ Repeat the message that people are welcome to ask for information in different formats.
- ✓ Publicise all services related to communication needs.
- ✓ Use newsletters and home pages of websites to stress your accessibility so that people feel comfortable asking for information about any topic or in any format.
- ✓ When you offer publications in alternative formats and languages advertise this prominently on the front or back cover.
- ✓ Make sure staff have equal opportunities training that covers communication needs.
- ✓ Recognise that posters in the office can be an important way to give out messages about equality and the accessibility of information, and to show visitors that they will be listened to.

*Produce a policy and procedure on making documents available in alternative formats and languages.*

- ✓ Set out your approach to information in a clear communications strategy with associated policies on access to information.
- ✓ Plan for evolving communication needs – tie these into other strategies such as older people's strategies.
- ✓ Make sure service users have access to important information. As a minimum, provide documents in alternative formats and languages where service users have a legal entitlement to receive that information (for example, the tenancy agreement and the complaints procedure).
- ✓ Know why certain documents are not available in other languages or formats – give clear reasons and communicate them to staff and service users.

*Create and take opportunities to build up a profile of service users and their communication needs at points of contact.*

- ✓ At housing application stage – include questions on the housing application form about applicants' communication needs.
- ✓ Ask about communication needs at tenancy sign-up or visits following the start of a tenancy.
- ✓ Ask about communication needs through tenants surveys.
- ✓ While dealing with enquiries, record information about customers' needs for information.
- ✓ Routinely record format requests and act on them.
- ✓ Monitor leaflet take-up.
- ✓ Include a question on internet access in tenants' surveys to monitor levels of access and trends.

## **6 Openness**

### **6.1 Introduction**

During the research tenants said they saw providing information as a way of empowering them. They thought transparency built confidence. Tenants are seeking more and better information from landlords: 'better communication and information was the most consistent request for additional support given by the RTOs in the report 'Engaging with Tenants Nationally.' (Communities Scotland, March 2006, p28)

Of the tenants we consulted, those who had had a poor experience of communication with their landlord indicated greater concern about openness and access to information.

### **6.2 Key findings**

The survey asked landlords if they had carried out market research to find out how tenants like to be kept informed about decisions, landlord news or performance. Eighty-three per cent said they had. The landlord survey also found that 45 per cent of organisations had researched the types of format needed by service users or stakeholders.

There are different ways to consult tenants about their information needs. One case-study landlord, for example, said it had sought feedback on its newsletter from tenants groups. Discussion with tenants about their information needs may reveal more areas of interest than a written survey.

The case studies showed that smaller landlords may never have received requests for information about governance, performance and complaints. Tenants may not want to make requests if they are unsure what information could be made available.

We asked tenants actively involved in tenant participation how well informed they felt about their landlord. The results were surprising. Thirty per cent said they did not feel well informed about how their landlord was run and 21 per cent said they did not feel well informed on how their landlord performed. Twenty per cent said they felt they received the 'wrong sort' of information

from the landlord and 21 per cent said they did not receive enough information. Many tenants acknowledged that their participation meant they needed greater access to information. But these findings may indicate low levels of understanding about landlord governance and performance among tenants in general.

A lack of knowledge about governance and decision-making was also evident at one case-study location, where a focus group of tenants said they did not feel well informed about how their landlord was run. However, the landlord's website had plenty of information about how the housing service was delivered; it also identified staff responsible for each aspect of service, with their contact details. This suggests that relying on websites to give information about governance may be too limiting and landlords should use a range of methods for communication. Some of the case-study landlords used the local press to give news and performance information.

### **6.3 Tenants' information preferences**

During our group discussions with tenants, several people made positive remarks about their own landlord's publications. However, we also received some adverse comments:

- 'Performance information seems a bit tokeny.'
- 'It was like reading [landlord newsletter] about a different organisation.'
- 'We don't want to be talked down to.'
- 'Would like more information about the housing revenue account.'

The tenants regulation advisory group, the Regulation and Inspection tenant assessors, and people attending four tenants' engagement network meetings were asked how they liked their landlord to communicate with them. Their preferred methods (in order of priority) were:

- 1) tenants conferences/meetings
- 2) newsletters – quarterly
- 3) annual report or summary of the year's performance
- 4) tenants' handbook

- 5) information on request
- 6) individual letter enclosing information
- 7) leaflets in reception areas
- 8) complimentary calendar or diary
- 9) six-monthly newsletters.

This showed that those already engaged in tenant participation prefer to be involved in discussion and to have regular, and relatively frequent, contact. The 52 tenants were asked what information was of interest to them. Their priorities are set out in table 7.

**Table 7**

<b>Subjects of most interest to tenants in survey – descending order</b>		
<b>Subject area</b>	<b>Information subject</b>	<b>% interested</b>
Performance	The amount of rent lost due to properties being empty	85%
Service standards	Standards you can expect in relation to different types of services provided by your landlord, e.g. repairs response times, customer care standards	85%
Performance	The results of inspection of your landlord by Communities Scotland	83%
Performance	The number of complaints made about anti-social behaviour or neighbour nuisance	83%
Performance	The level of tenant participation	83%
Performance	The results from tenant satisfaction surveys	75%
Performance	The amount of time homes have been empty between tenants	75%
Performance	The amount of overall rent collected by your landlord and the amount of rent owing	75%
Performance	The amount of money spent on repairs	75%
Complaints	The number of complaints about service your landlord has received	73%
Costs	The amount it costs your landlord to manage its housing	73%
Costs	The breakdown of how every £ of your rent is spent	71%
Governance	The minutes of governing body meetings	71%
Performance	The number of repairs done by a specific time	69%
Performance	The number of repairs done	69%
Lettings	The number of homes let	67%
Performance	The number of disability-related adaptations done	67%
Performance	The location of major repair programmes	67%

<b>Subjects of most interest to tenants in survey – descending order</b>		
<b>Subject area</b>	<b>Information subject</b>	<b>% interested</b>
Homelessness	The number of people applying for housing due to homelessness	65%
Governance	The names of governing body members	63%
Complaints	The number of Ombudsman complaints about your landlord	62%
Governance	The way governing body members are appointed	62%
Performance	The number of tenants in serious rent arrears	62%
Costs	An annual statement of accounts for your landlord	60%
Governance	Dates of governing body meetings	60%
Homelessness	The length of time homeless people have spent in bed-and-breakfast accommodation in your local authority area	60%
Performance	The average weekly rent charge for different property types	60%
Governance	The papers presented to governing body meetings	58%
Performance	Comparison information with neighbouring landlords, e.g. on rent level	56%
Costs	The level of staff sickness	54%
Performance	Factoring arrears levels	54%
Equality and diversity	Equal opportunities monitoring on property lettings	50%
Performance	The number of properties sold under the Right to Buy	50%
Performance	Types of repair jobs	50%
Performance	The number of surgeries provided at locations away from your landlord's offices	48%
Equality and diversity	Equal opportunities monitoring of governing body members	38%
Governance	Mini-biographies of governing body members	38%
Equality and diversity	Equal opportunities monitoring of recruitment	37%

*Source: 52 questionnaires completed during the study*

Tenants were concerned most with service standards and information about performance in the main areas of lettings, rent, anti-social behaviour, inspection, tenant participation and satisfaction. Many were also interested in running costs and landlord expenditure. Overall, this indicates a strong preference for performance information.

As tenants already involved in tenant matters, their views are not necessarily typical of all tenants. However, their priorities indicate the subjects that arouse tenants' interest and are more wide-ranging than the statutory performance indicators published by local authorities and the key performance indicators published by RSLs.

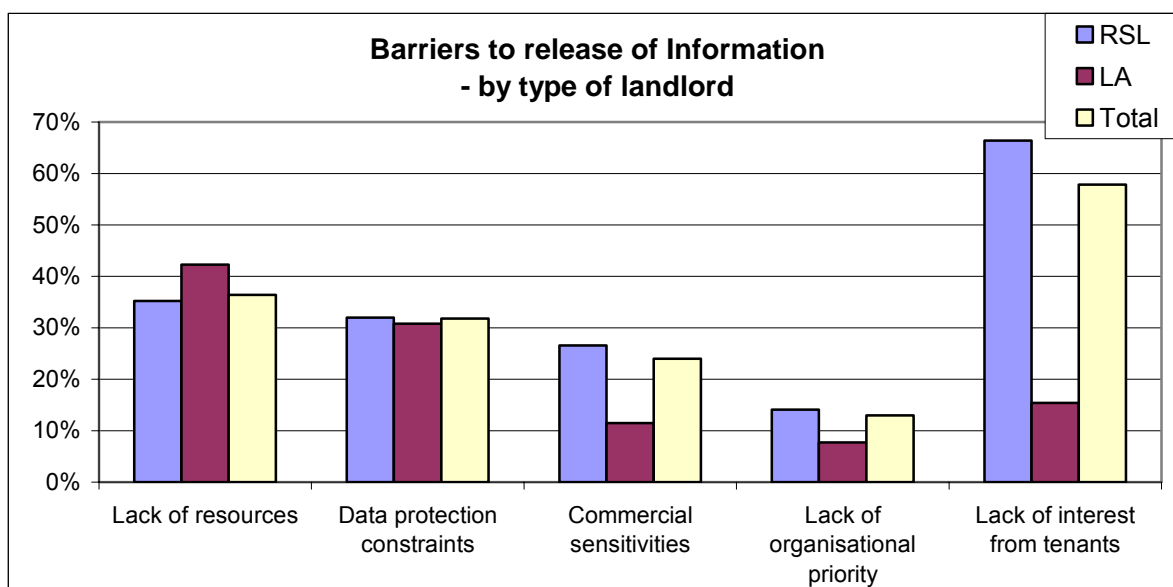
#### **6.4 Barriers to release of information**

The landlord survey sought to identify the main barriers to the release of information (figure 2 and figure 3). Fifty-eight per cent of landlords mentioned lack of interest from tenants. The majority of RSLs (66 per cent) identified lack of interest, with far fewer local authorities (15 per cent) saying this was a barrier.

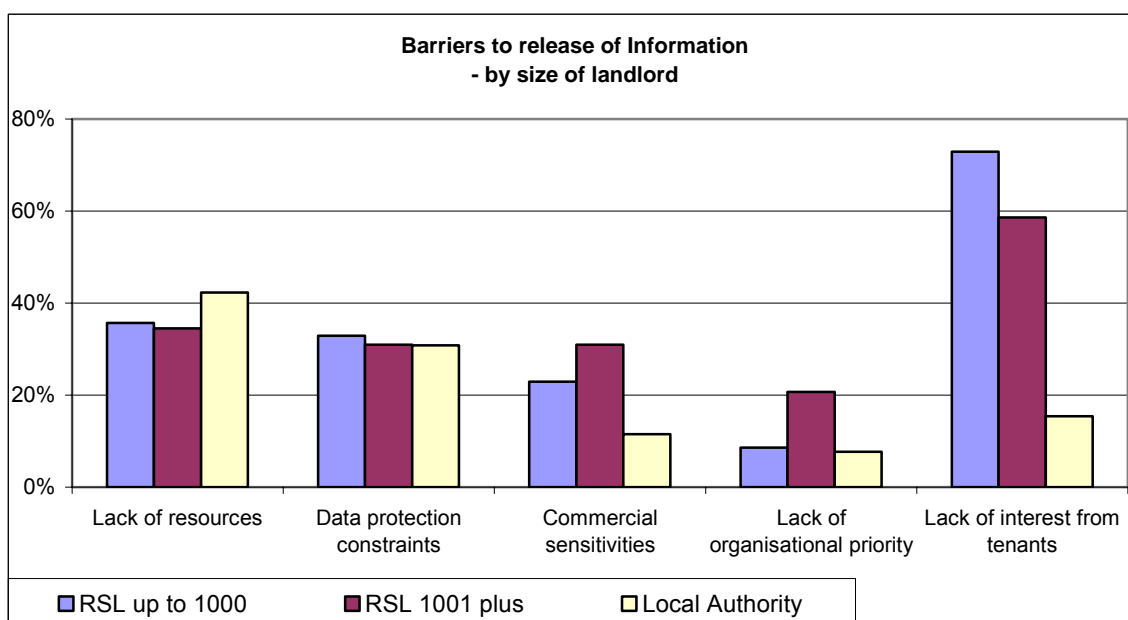
Lack of resources was identified as a barrier by 36 per cent of landlords who responded. Local authorities were more likely to identify this as a barrier (42 per cent) and RSLs less likely (35 per cent). Only 13 per cent of landlords said lack of organisational priority was a reason for not releasing information with 14 per cent of RSLs and 8 per cent of local authorities calling lack of priority a barrier. This suggests that local authorities may give greater priority to releasing information, although they appear to feel more limited by a lack of resources.

Tenants we consulted did not agree that tenant apathy, real or perceived, should have a bearing on the amount or type of information published by landlords. This suggests that some landlords should consider providing a wider range of information.

**Figure 2**



**Figure 3**



It appeared from the research that publicising certain information was not usual practice for some landlords. The study prompted at least one landlord to publish governance information on its website and this seemed to suggest that its previous lack of openness had been unintentional.

Data protection was mentioned as a barrier by 32 per cent of landlords. As the type of information considered in this study was not personal in nature we have not expanded on this issue here. However, where staff fail to

understand the differences between data-protection constraints and freedom of information this could inhibit their release of information about governance, performance and complaints.

We found that, regardless of any particular needs of individuals, tenants want to know more about landlord decision-making. As one tenant put it, 'people want to know what their landlord is doing and how they are doing'.

## 7 Key landlord publications

### 7.1 Introduction

The performance standard relevant to the discussion in this chapter is:

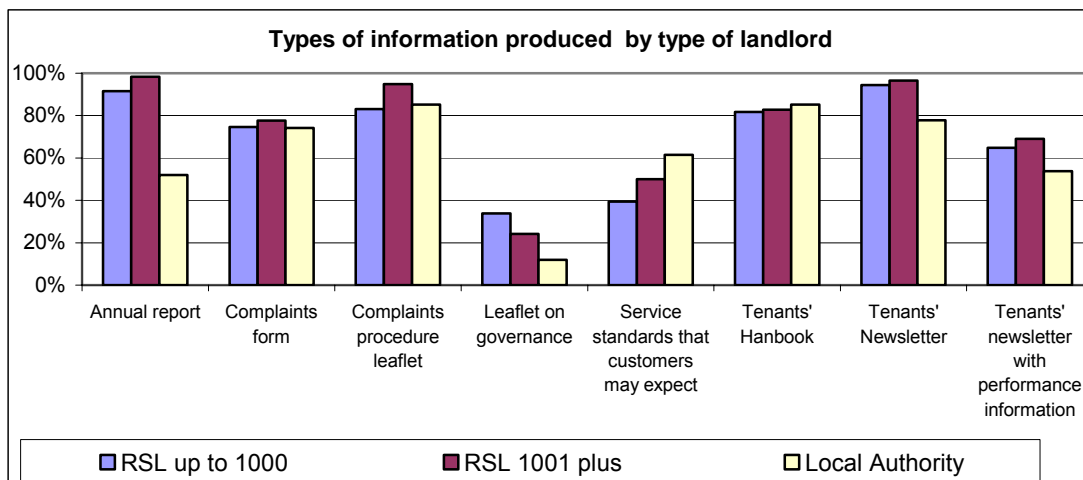
**GS3.5 Openness and confidentiality**  
 We are open about what we do and publish information about our activities. We provide information that people ask for, unless there are justifiable reasons for withholding it.

Table 7 and figure 4 show the percentage of landlords responding to our survey who said they provided each kind of document.

**Table 7**

Key document availability	All landlords
Tenants newsletter	92%
Complaints procedure	88%
Annual report	87%
Tenants handbook	83%
Complaints form	76%
Tenants newsletter with performance information	65%
Service standards	47%
Leaflet on governance	27%

**Figure 4**



Ninety-five per cent of RSLs and 52 per cent of local authorities provided an annual report. RSLs were also more likely to produce a tenants newsletter (95 per cent) than local authorities (78 per cent). Housing-related information may be included in other council documents.

## **7.2 Leaflet on governance**

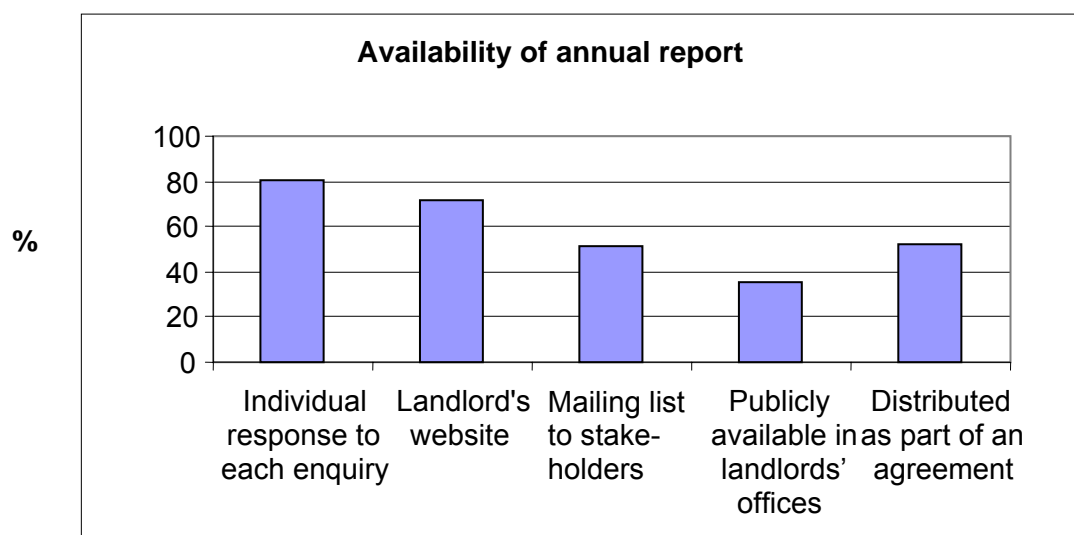
Thirty per cent of RSLs and 12 per cent of local authorities said they produced a specific leaflet on governance. Because of the different way RSLs and local authorities are governed it was not surprising that RSLs were more likely to produce a leaflet on governance. The survey showed 34 per cent of RSLs with fewer than 1,000 houses produce such a leaflet and only 24 per cent of those with 1,001 houses or more produce one.

Local authorities may supply details of councillors and the council committee (overseeing housing functions) separately from the types of information within the remit of this study. In general, there is much greater public knowledge about how councils are run.

## **7.3 Annual report**

One hundred and thirty-four of the 156 landlords (87 per cent) produced an annual report. Methods of distribution varied. For landlords with a website, that was the most popular method (figure 5).

**Figure 5**



#### **7.4 Complaints form and complaints procedure leaflet**

Eighty-eight per cent of the landlords produced a complaints-procedure leaflet and 76 per cent produced complaints forms. Figure 4 shows that larger RSLs produce complaints forms and procedures at a slightly higher rate than smaller RSLs and local authorities.

#### **7.5 Tenants handbook**

Production of tenants handbooks, at 83 per cent, was high across the sector. Many landlords provided copies of their handbook with their questionnaire response. Many of the handbooks contained sizeable sections on complaints procedures, equal opportunities and governance. There was evidence from our consultation with tenants that some landlords kept the handbook current by sending regular updates to tenants.

#### **7.6 Tenants newsletters showing performance and service standards**

Sixty-five per cent of landlords produced tenants newsletters containing performance information. The desk-top assessment found a wide variety in the nature and detail of performance information. There was no consistent set of performance measures apart from local authority information about statutory performance indicators (SPIs). Chapter 9 sets out our findings on the quality and availability of performance information.

## **7.7 Service standards**

Overall, 47 per cent of landlords said they published service standards. Sixty-two per cent of the local authority landlords said they published service standards compared to 44 per cent of RSLs. This suggests that local authority tenants are more likely than tenants of RSLs to know what standards of service to expect.

## **7.8 Tenants newsletters**

Ninety-two per cent of landlords published newsletters. A lower percentage (78 per cent) of local authorities said they produce a tenants newsletter. This may be because local authorities include housing information in their corporate communications rather than as publications solely for tenants.

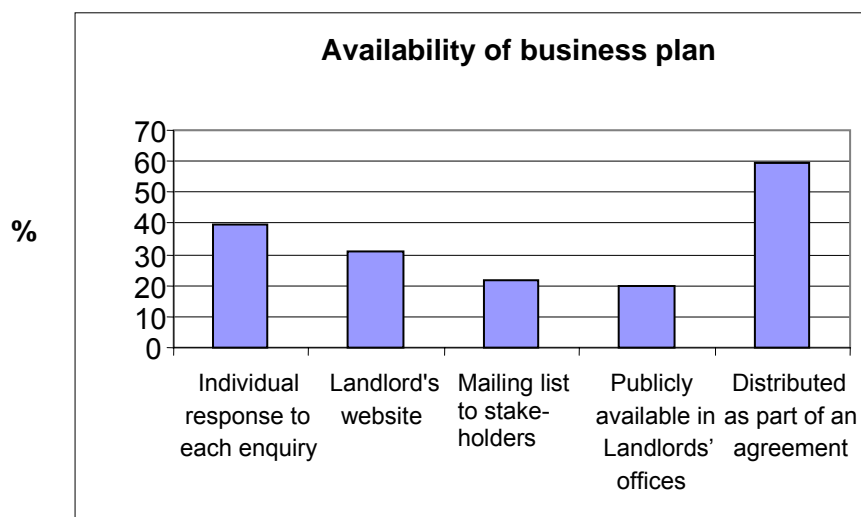
Newsletters can be used to convey information about a variety of topics and are particularly effective in publishing information at the right time, compared to other documents. It was not always clear from the samples how often they came out. Some were quarterly, some six monthly and others appeared to be seasonal.

One case-study organisation stressed the importance of providing information to all tenants at the same time. One LA case-study landlord provided a newsletter specifically for people applying to the council as homeless.

## **7.9 Business plan**

Landlords used a variety of methods to distribute business plans (figure 6).

**Figure 6**



## **7.10 Local housing strategy**

Of the 27 local authorities we surveyed:

- 14 mailed the local housing strategy to stakeholders
- 19 distributed it through planning or partnership arrangements
- 23 made it available on their website
- 22 said they would distribute a copy in response to an individual enquiry
- 14 had a copy available to the public at their offices.

## **7.11 Homelessness strategy**

Of the 27 local authorities we surveyed:

- 13 mailed the homelessness strategy to stakeholders
- 15 distributed it through planning or partnership arrangements;
- 21 made it available on their website
- 21 said they would distribute a copy in response to an individual enquiry
- 15 had a copy available to the public at their offices.

To comply with legal requirements, the local housing and homelessness strategies should be available to anyone on request.

## **7.12 Publication schemes**

The Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 requires local authorities to provide a publication scheme. The Scottish Information Commissioner's Office told us that the content of local authority publication schemes will be considered in more detail in a review in 2010. A model publication scheme may be developed in the lead-up to that review, although it is too early to say when.

In the website assessment, we came across a few RSL websites with publications sections containing a library of information for tenants, similar to a publication scheme. This was a useful way for website visitors to browse the landlords' publications. They included information leaflets, current and archived copies of newsletters and annual reports.

## **7.13 A case for a standard set of annual information for tenants?**

During the research it became apparent that the sector's publications relating to governance, performance and complaints are shaped by statutory obligations and individual landlords' willingness to publish information. But there is no guiding list of core information to make sure tenants are informed about landlords' activities in a consistent way across the sector. This raises the question of whether tenants could or should expect to receive certain key information regularly.

Some landlords produced a slimmer version of their annual report called an 'annual residents report' or 'annual report summary'. During the tenant assessors' workshop on performance information, one tenant assessor said their landlord produced an annual tenants report written for the tenants with input from tenants. It included some, but not all, of the contents of the corporate annual report.

Governance, performance and complaints information could be covered in an 'annual landlord summary' framed from a menu of core information to ensure consistency, quality and comparability. Some tenant assessors suggested that this information could be included in a newsletter; as an insert to the newsletter; as a separate document; or as a rolling report published quarterly.

In other words, they favoured distribution of core information, but thought the method of distribution should be flexible. They were keen that it should not be expensive to produce.

The type of information in an annual landlord summary could include the following:

**Annual landlord summary – proposed core information**

- a note from the chair, chief officer and tenants' panel chair (where applicable)
- details of performance (including performance indicator information)
- inspection findings
- complaints information and Ombudsman reports
- environment and estate management information
- for RSLs – information about appointment to the governing body, membership, an overview of the decision-making process, details of the role of members and a membership application form (where applicable)
- for local authorities – details of councillors on the committee overseeing housing, and contact details as appropriate
- dates of meetings for the year including the AGM, tenants forum meetings, governing body meetings
- contact details for staff
- office opening hours and disability and language accessibility arrangements
- results of tenant satisfaction surveys or other research and consultation
- a review of the year
- plans for the coming year, for example planned repairs
- equal opportunities information
- contact details for tenant participation and a summary of tenant involvement
- finance information – how each £1 is spent
- stock numbers, making reference to any increase or decrease through development or right to buy sales
- contact details for feedback on the summary or a reply slip, or both.

One case-study landlord had stopped sending a copy of the annual report to all tenants because of lack of interest in specific parts of the document. This may suggest that the content was difficult to read or irrelevant to tenants. Separately, the case studies appeared to show that where landlords had consulted tenants about content, the publications were of higher quality.

The idea of an annual landlord summary would need further development if it were to lead to a real improvement in standards. In considering the potential for a framework of core information, landlords would need to review current

publications and assess any current gaps in governance, performance and complaints information. The report now turns to each of those subjects.

## **8 Governance information**

### **8.1 Introduction**

As explained earlier, the term 'governing body' in this report mirrors that used in the Langlands report on The Good Governance Standard for Public Services, 'the body with overall responsibility for directing and controlling an organisation' (OPM, CIPFA, JRF 2004, p2). In other words, the governing body is the body responsible for the landlord's activity. Here, examples include the board or management committee of a housing association and the relevant council committee in local government. We use the term 'governance' as it is defined in the regulatory code of governance: 'the leadership, direction and control of the organisation to make sure that it achieves its agreed aims and objectives and in doing so serves the public's best interest'. (Communities Scotland 2006, p1)

Governance and decision-making can be particularly important to tenants. Tenants we consulted said transparency was crucial when major decisions affecting services were made. One group of tenants said they felt decisions were not made openly and that they saw openness as 'a matter of trust – it can make a big difference to how people feel about their landlord'. The same group said consultation was sometimes not enough, and to be a part of decision-making they needed access to an adequate level of information.

These views echoed comments in last year's consultation on Communities Scotland's draft regulatory code of governance. Many participants at a sounding-board event 'felt that RSLs should be more proactive in making information available, and in telling tenants what information is available... a number of participants felt their RSL did not provide enough basic information about how it was governed'. (Communities Scotland, 2006, p2)

On access to minutes of meetings, the same sounding-board event reported that 'many participants felt that RSLs should be more proactive in publishing these or in making tenants aware of their right to see minutes (for example, by issuing copies to tenants' organisations; placing copies in libraries; placing

signs in their offices; and providing regular reminders in newsletters)'.  
(Communities Scotland, 2006, p2)

This thematic study looked at how landlords provided information about:

- how to become a member of the governing body;
- governing body members; and
- dates, times, papers and minutes of governing body meetings.

## **8.2 Legal and regulatory framework**

Several legal requirements relating to openness in governance information affect local authority landlords rather than RSLs. The Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 requires local authorities to publish information about full council meetings involving councillors, including dates and times, agendas, and background papers for meetings. It enables some information to be discussed in private session and all meetings, except for private sessions, are open to the public and media.

The Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 applies to public bodies including local authorities and Communities Scotland, but not RSLs. It provides a right of access by the public to information held by public authorities. The Act requires that local authorities submit a publication scheme to the Scottish Information Commissioner for approval. The scheme must contain information about decision making by the authority, including the facts and analysis on which decisions are based, and about services provided by the authority, including the cost and performance of those services. Bodies may refuse to supply certain information as long as the exemption complies with the Act, and they must explain this to the person requesting the information.

The Act broadened the responsibility of local authorities to provide access to information by, for example, giving the public a right of access to background information such as decisions made by officers with delegated authority. Two performance standards for social landlords and homelessness functions are relevant to the discussion in this chapter.

**GS3.5 Openness and confidentiality (local authorities and RSLs)**

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.

**GS4.1 Independence and accountability (RSLs only)**

We focus on our purpose and outcomes for tenants and service users. We are independent from other bodies (unless we are a subsidiary RSL) and operate in line with an appropriate constitution. We engage with stakeholders and make accountability real.

There are also separate regulatory code of governance information requirements for RSLs:

**4.4** The RSL openly communicates the governing body's decisions to tenants, service users and other stakeholders.

**6.4** The RSL is open about what it does and publishes information about its activities. Wherever possible, the RSL agrees to requests for information about the work of the governing body and the RSL.

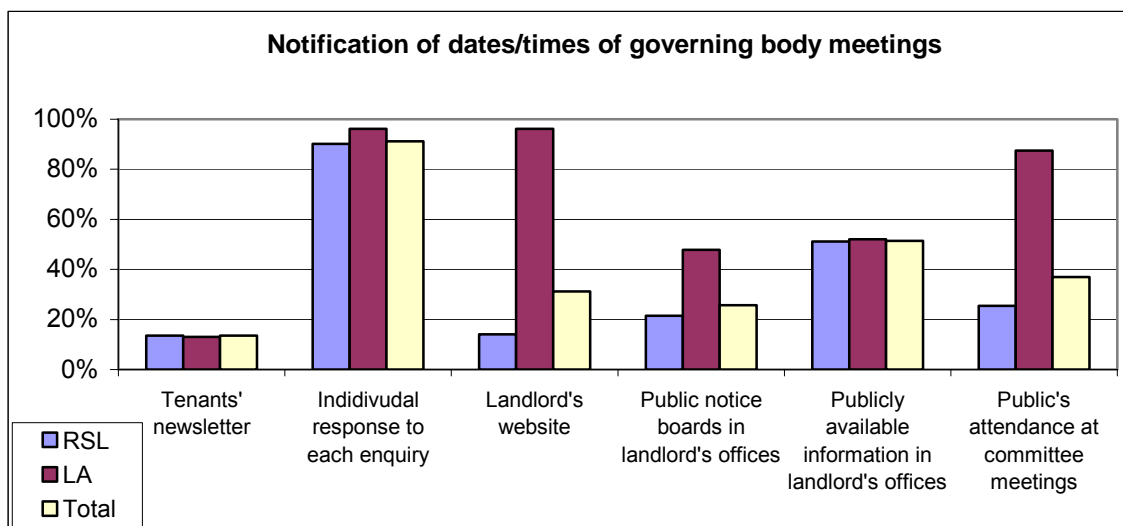
### **8.3 Findings on governance information**

The rest of this chapter looks at what information social landlords provide about governance and how it is made available.

### **8.4 Dates and times of governing body meetings**

The survey found that local authorities provide more information about governance than RSLs. Ninety-six per cent of local authorities and 14 per cent of RSLs publicised meeting dates and times on websites. Figure 7 shows that local authorities were more likely to give out information about dates and times of governing body meetings, particularly through their websites. Forty-eight per cent of RSLs said this information was publicly available at offices.

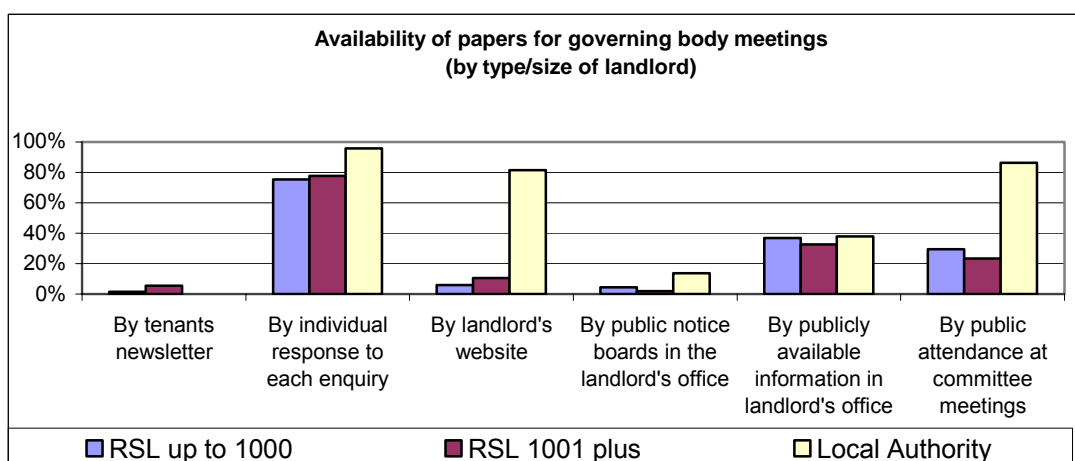
**Figure 7**



## 8.5 Papers for governing body meetings

Eighty-two per cent of local authority landlords published papers for meetings on their websites. Few RSLs did so. RSL tenants were most likely to obtain access to papers of governing body meetings from offices and by making a direct enquiry. This appears to demonstrate that local authorities, who are under a legal obligation to provide this information, are much more likely to do so than RSLs (figure 8).

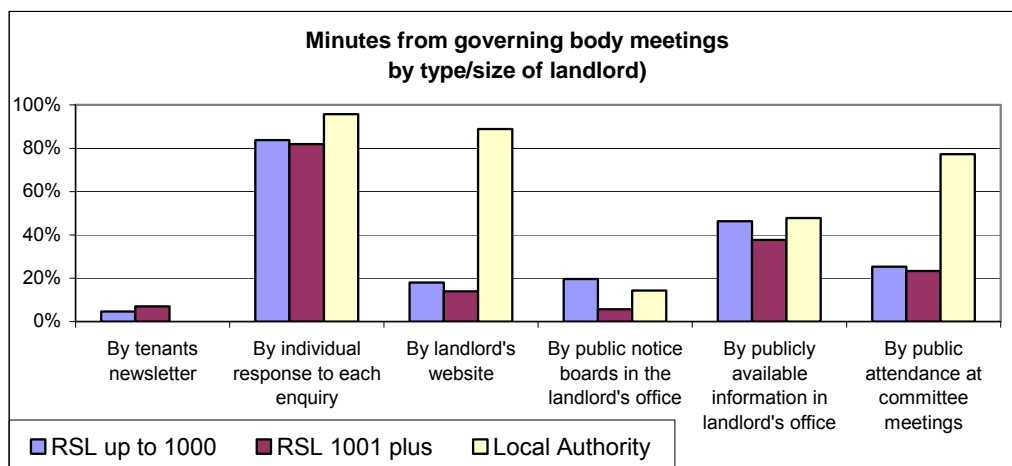
**Figure 8**



## 8.6 Minutes of governing body meetings

Eighty-nine per cent of local authorities placed minutes on websites, compared to less than a fifth of RSLs. Again, RSL tenants would be able to get access to minutes through personal enquiry. These findings continue to suggest different levels of openness between the two types of landlord (figure 9).

**Figure 9**



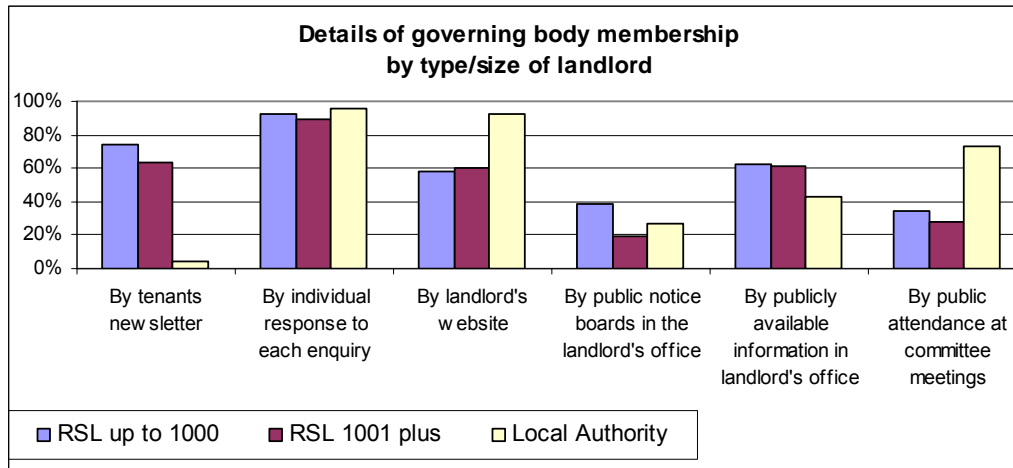
One case-study RSL produced a summary sheet of matters discussed at governance meetings and made it available to tenants. This was a positive way of making governance information more accessible. Individual RSL landlords may also wish to consider how decision-making information can be made public without compromising data protection and commercial information. These were mentioned as potential barriers to information release in a separate survey question by 32 and 24 per cent of landlords respectively.

Clearly, local authorities are able to keep various matters private where it is legally permissible to do so. Some local authority business is conducted in private session and RSLs could adopt similar principles when considering the scope for publishing more governance information.

## 8.7 Details of governing body membership

Fifty-nine per cent of landlords published details of governing body membership in their tenants newsletter. Smaller RSLs appeared to be more likely than larger ones to publicise information about governing body membership (figure 10).

**Figure 10**

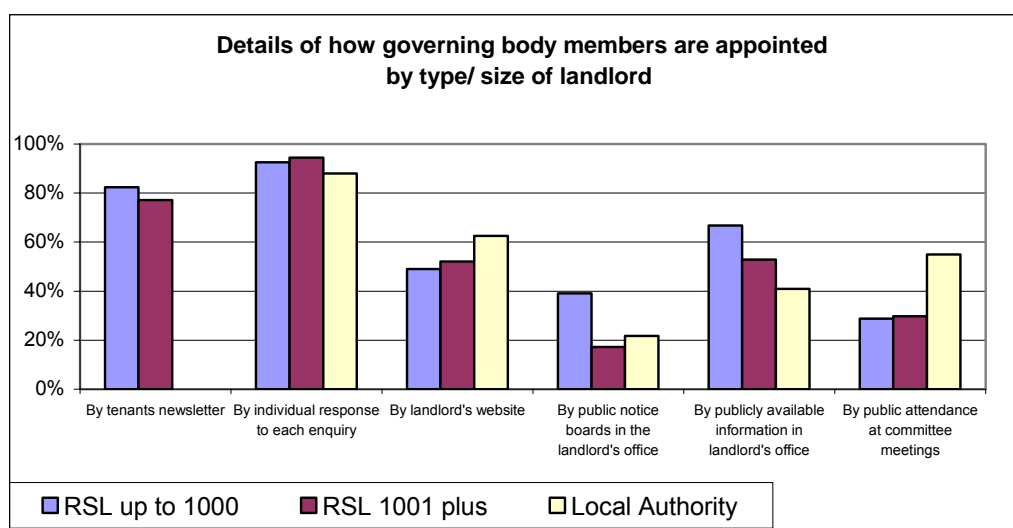


## 8.8 Governing body appointments

Local authorities were less likely than RSLs to publish details of governing body appointments (figure 11). However, election of councillors is a public act which is well publicised in the media.

One case-study local authority landlord was considering the potential to webcast governing-body meetings to boost openness.

**Figure 11**



## 8.9 Desk-top assessment of governance information

Our desk-top assessment of landlords' information included a review of 180 newsletters, nearly 100 annual reports, and 25 leaflets on governance. We also looked at all 27 local authority websites and 21 RSL websites.

Many landlords said in their responses to the survey that they used newsletters to convey information about governing-body membership and appointment. The desk-top assessment showed that information about governance appeared infrequently, with newsletters in our sample containing scant detail about decisions by the governing body.

Some newsletters provided interesting examples of communicating governance information:

- an interview with a vice-chair, which was an innovative way of getting across the work of the governing body to readers;
- a clearly explained application for membership forming part of the newsletter;
- local authority newsletters containing meeting dates and contact details for councillors;
- an article showing the governing body responding to a tenant satisfaction survey; and
- several newsletters containing information about the AGM.

And positive practice on website governance information included:

- clear governance sections giving details of governing body members and their roles;
- full details of meetings and minutes; and
- information about how to become a member of an RSL and the governing body appointment process.

Local authorities often use their websites to disseminate governance information. This is convenient for large amounts of documentation but, as suggested earlier in this report, relying too much on the internet as a way of communicating with service users is most likely to exclude older people, people with disabilities, those whose first language is not English and people from areas of high deprivation. This suggests that landlords need to use a range of methods to communicate information. Easy-to-use websites and readable documents are also important to openness and accessibility.

Few RSLs published minutes of governance meetings on their websites. Information about committee members appeared in a section on staff on a few sites. None of the 21 RSL websites we sampled in the study had board papers available for viewing. Apart from any specific interests particular tenants may have, wider sharing of governance information may improve the accountability of some RSLs to their members as well as service users.

The presentation of leaflets on governance varied greatly between RSLs. Twenty-five samples were assessed in the study. Some landlords produced a glossy leaflet providing varying amounts of information. Others had developed an A4 document setting out different aspects of membership.

The content of the governance leaflets varied from short bullet points summarising the main aspects of membership to detailed information about all aspects of the RSL and what it means to become a member of the association or a governing body member. The most readable documents were those with a clear layout (usually in the form of a leaflet), describing membership but avoiding excessive text.

Very few documents about association membership and governance offered to provide information in different formats.

## 8.10 Positive practice for governance information

*Consider style.*

- ✓ Consider the readability of documents for service users and stakeholders.
- ✓ Train staff on information obligations and accessibility.
- ✓ Make sure tenants and service users can easily find policies relating to access to information.

*Use existing channels of communication to share more governance information.*

- ✓ Brief registered tenants organisations on governance matters.
- ✓ Publish governance information about meeting dates, times and locations, background papers and minutes of meetings on websites – this is an effective means of making large documents publicly available and also lets staff know what information is accessible.
- ✓ Provide an online calendar with meeting dates.
- ✓ Provide a file with copies of minutes, available at sheltered schemes and landlord offices.
- ✓ Use public notice boards or other methods of display in reception to publicise governance information.

*Convey information about governance through newsletters and websites in an interesting and comprehensive way – this could include:*

- ✓ a summary sheet of governance meeting information for tenants
- ✓ articles showing the governing body responding to tenant satisfaction surveys and other issues
- ✓ information about how to apply for membership of the association (RSLs)
- ✓ information about how the governing body members are elected and biographical details on individual governing body members (RSLs)
- ✓ interviews with governing body members to explain the work of the governing body

- ✓ contact details for councillors in newsletters (local authorities)
- ✓ notification and follow-up information about the annual general meeting (RSLs)
- ✓ information made available through freedom-of-information requests where it may be of wider interest to service users and stakeholders (local authorities).

## **9 Performance information**

### **9.1 Introduction**

Debate about increasing openness and access to performance information is going on in both England and Scotland. The Housing Corporation, in its consultation response to the Cave Review, expressed a desire to see more public comparison of performance (DCLG, 2007). In 2006, the Scottish Consumer Council talked about the need to aim performance information at tenants.

‘As a consumer organisation, we argue that much of the information organisations are asked to produce, such as tenants’ views, complaints and repair times, should be regularly collected and analysed by RSLs and local authorities as part of their day-to-day management of social housing. Rather than seeing these activities as a burden imposed by Communities Scotland, local authorities and RSLs should consider them essential components of an outward-facing organisation.’  
(Scottish Consumer Council, 2006 p2)

This part of the study was concerned with:

- the type of performance information available;
- the presentation of information; and
- how performance information is made available.

### **9.2 Legal and regulatory framework for performance information**

The Local Government Act 1992 requires local authorities to publish information about standards of performance. Audit Scotland has set statutory performance indicators (SPIs) for local authorities. These measure the amount of rent lost due to voids, rent arrears levels, the number of right-to-buy sales and how quickly homelessness applications have been considered.

Information about local authorities’ performance against the SPIs is available on the Audit Scotland website, and local authorities typically publish it on their own websites.

RSLs are not legally obliged to make key performance indicator (KPI) information publicly available. But Communities Scotland collates nationwide information about RSL performance information through the annual performance and statistical return (APSR). The KPIs cover lettings and re-let times, void loss, rent arrears and repairs. Communities Scotland publishes this information annually in the Scottish Registered Social Landlord Statistics (Communities Scotland, 2005). RSLs often publish information about their performance against the KPIs in their own publications or on their websites.

The performance standard relevant to this chapter is:

**GS3.4 Performance reporting**

We give our stakeholders the information they need about the organisation and its plans, services and performance.

And the regulatory code of governance for RSLs expects that:

**6.2** The RSL gives tenants and service users information that meets their needs about the RSL, its services, its performance and its future plans.

**6.3** The RSL gives other stakeholders the information they need about its plans and performance.

### **9.3 Other influences on performance reporting**

The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003: Best Value Guidance suggests that landlords are expected to publish information wider than the statutory performance indicator information. It advises: ‘... 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, p20)

The number of local authority housing and homelessness statutory performance indicators is small and it would be difficult to assert that the publication of these indicators alone would give service users and stakeholders a feel for how particular landlords perform. The Scottish Social Landlord Statistics allow comparison of RSL performance but, like the Audit

Scotland reports on local authority performance, are not directly in the public gaze and not aimed at tenants and other service users. Communities Scotland's aim in publishing the statistics is 'to encourage RSLs to compare their performance with others and strive for improvement, to stimulate debate about the performance of the sector, and to help target our regulatory focus'. (Communities Scotland, 2005, p5)

So the key questions are: how do individual landlords interpret their current obligations to produce performance information, and what influences them in deciding what kind of performance information to publish?

#### **9.4 Performance information – public availability**

The findings from our survey and desk-top assessment suggest that the kinds of performance information publicly available, beyond the simple performance indicator information, are too varied in content and presentation to be described by a single name. In some ways the term 'performance information' is misleading because its presentation is so variable within the sector.

Eighty of the 129 RSLs said they made performance information related to the annual performance statistical return (APSR) publicly available (table 8).

Thirty RSLs said they did not. (The other 19 RSLs did not reply to this question.) Taken with the information in table 9, it appears that more than a quarter of RSLs publish no, or very little, performance information. All 23 of the local authorities who responded to the question said they published SPI data. As they are legally obliged to do this it would be surprising if they did not. Four local authorities did not reply to this question.

**Table 8**

<b>Table 8 Do you make performance information related to APSR/SPI publicly available?</b>			
	RSL	Local authorities	All landlords
Yes	80	23	103
	73%	100%	77%
No	30	0	30
	27%	0%	23%

Fewer landlords (124 of the 156 who responded to the survey) answered the question in table 9: ‘Do you produce other publicly available performance information – over and above APSR/SPI?’ More than three-quarters responded positively. Of the local authority landlords replying to this question, just over a quarter (six) limited publication of performance information to the statutory minimum.

**Table 9**

<b>Do you produce other publicly available performance information – over and above APSR/SPI?</b>			
	RSL	Local authorities	All landlords
Yes	79	16	95
	78%	73%	77%
No	23	6	29
	23%	27%	23%

## **9.5 Housing management performance service standards and monitoring information**

The survey asked how landlords publicise housing management service standards. The most popular method of publishing these was through the newsletter. The responses were:

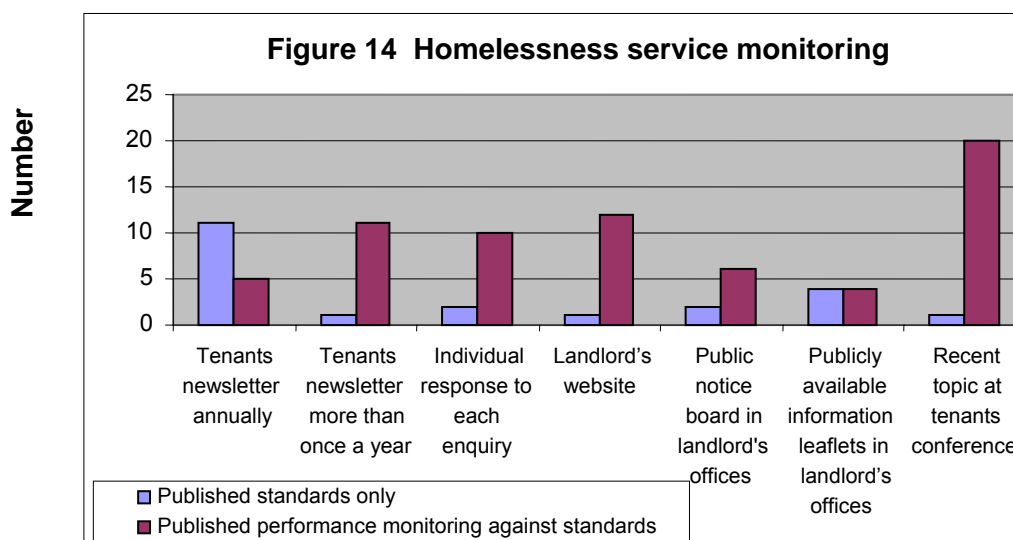
- 84 landlords produced performance information against service standards in the tenants newsletter every year;
- 53 distributed this information in response to an individual enquiry;

- 44 did this more than once a year;
- 41 published housing management performance information on the website;
- 34 made the information available at public offices;
- 28 displayed this on a public notice board; and
- 21 had recently discussed this at a tenants conference.

## 9.6 Homelessness service standards and monitoring

We asked the 27 local authority landlords in the survey if they published service standards for the homelessness service, and if they monitored performance against them. The responses are shown in figure 14.

Figure 14



## 9.7 Desk-top assessment and tenants' views of performance information

The review of documents sent by landlords showed that newsletters and annual reports were often used to present performance information, although

the level of detail and presentation varied considerably. A few landlords published a specific leaflet about performance.

Reporting on performance across the sector was inconsistent. Landlords presented performance information in different levels of detail and in a range of formats using graphs, charts, tables and text. Some graphics and tables were explained, while others were not. Some information was presented entirely in text and other information largely in charts.

The timeliness of performance information varied. Generally, landlords provided information annually. In a few cases, the presentation of performance information in a series of newsletters from the same landlord varied between issues. Typically, performance information included repairs response times, arrears levels and numbers of lettings. However, it seldom mentioned targets. This meant that much performance information was difficult to evaluate.

We identified several positive features in some publications. They included:

- a link from the landlord's website to the Scottish Registered Social Landlord Statistics published by Communities Scotland;
- Communities Scotland inspection reports available on the website;
- a summary of Communities Scotland inspection reports in newsletters;
- an annual residents report – a slimmer version of the annual report; and
- easy-to-find performance sections on the website.

Local authorities generally framed annual performance around statutory performance indicators. Performance information restricted to SPIs can appear dull and is not always written from a tenant's perspective. However, there were positive examples of performance information that went beyond SPIs, set out in colourful formats with a mixture of text and graphics. These examples included information about a range of indicators, such as customer service, housing management and maintenance, and performance in areas such as levels of tenant participation. There were comprehensive and easy-

to-read examples of performance information. Information that combined graphics and commentary was the easiest to understand.

Many landlords gave tenants calendars that combined an annual report with notes on performance. Each monthly page contained information about an area of the past year's performance. This was a creative and useful method of presenting performance information to tenants.

Performance information presented without any comparison to previous years or other landlords was the least informative. The subjects reported upon varied between landlords, and topics that seemed prominent in one landlord's publication would be absent in others. For example, a few tenant newsletters gave a detailed breakdown of complaints about anti-social behaviour and the nature of those complaints, while others did not mention anti-social behaviour or complaints. In another example one landlord set out the organisation's income for the year, but not how the income was spent, while others gave a breakdown of how money was spent.

The presentation of performance information about particular topics is a positive way to tell tenants about subjects of most interest to them. Landlords publishing performance information about particular areas may have included this following consultation with tenants. Several tenants and equalities body consultees said they were interested in particular areas of performance. Examples they mentioned were the number of disabled adaptations carried out and the monitoring of racial harassment complaints. This shows there is a desire for customer-driven performance information.

Landlords often publish tenants' satisfaction information as well as recorded performance information. The distinction between these two types of information was not always made clear in newsletters. For example, if a landlord received strong feedback about the repairs service in tenant satisfaction forms, but performed less well in terms of response times to repairs, then those differences in performance should be explained to tenants. Putting the two types of performance information together may give a more rounded picture to improve tenants' understanding of landlord performance.

Several landlords presented a summary of Communities Scotland's inspection findings. This was a good indicator of openness to tenants.

The performance information showed the variety of terms used in the sector, some of which may need to be explained more clearly in publications.

Examples of terminology included:

- debit / total rent charged / rent collectable
- unpaid rent / bad debt / rent arrears / rent owed
- void / empty property / vacancy / home to let
- transfer / relet
- responsive repairs / reactive repairs / day-to-day repairs / routine repairs.

## **9.8 Tenant assessors workshop on performance information**

The quality of presentation of much performance information is a subjective judgement. However, looking at samples with a group of tenant assessors who had been involved in the case studies helped us to identify some shared views on how performance should be presented.

The tenants assessed samples of publications, including information about performance in different areas such as rent arrears, complaints, allocations, overall performance, and how each £1 of rent was spent. Sixteen annual reports were also assessed for their layout and readability.

Several tenant assessors spoke positively about the performance information supplied by their own landlords. In considering the different samples of performance information they praised the following features:

- clear and simple explanations of information;
- a well-spaced and uncluttered layout;
- a combination of graphic presentation with explanatory text;
- use of strong colours;
- coverage of a wide range of areas of performance;
- performance information illustrated with interesting graphics, such as expenditure presented as a pile of coins; and

- financial information presented in terms of how each £1 of rent was spent and divided into pence for each major cost.

The tenant assessors supported the idea of producing an annual summary containing a broad range of performance information in the tenants newsletter. They liked the calendars containing an annual report or performance information or both.

The tenant assessors said they preferred performance information shown in comparison with:

- the previous year's performance, to assess the direction of travel;
- service standards or targets;
- local landlords; and
- similar landlords.

Negative features in some samples included:

- not explaining terms such as 'urgent', 'routine' and 'emergency' repairs;
- the absence of targets or service standards;
- lack of detail in the performance information included in some annual reports; and
- information about performance that was so minimal it became meaningless.

The features the tenant assessors liked least included:

- highly glossed presentation of annual reports, which reduced readability and was thought to be poor value for money;
- confused layout;
- heavily coloured backgrounds;
- small font; and
- bland and uninteresting presentation.

The tenant assessors thought it was important for landlords to include performance information that was of interest to tenants. One tenant assessor's landlord provided information about the council areas from which

people were rehoused. This factual performance information helped to counter perceptions that homes were repeatedly let to people from some distance away.

## 9.9 Positive practice – performance information

### *Presentation*

- ✓ Review the presentation of performance information to make sure it is readable.
- ✓ Illustrate performance information using a balance of graphics and text.
- ✓ Annotate performance graphs and charts in plain English, and avoid using too many technical terms.
- ✓ Keep layout crisp to avoid confusion and too much busyness on the pages.
- ✓ Write about performance and service standards from the service user's viewpoint.
- ✓ Consider keeping performance information apart from other tenant and landlord information by placing it on a separate page or leaflet.
- ✓ Consider providing a separate performance section on the website to make it easier to find the information.
- ✓ Provide web links for useful information such as inspection reports, or the Scottish Registered Social Landlord Statistics.

### *Content*

- ✓ Review the subject areas on which performance is reported to tenants.
- ✓ Consult tenants about content, giving them meaningful options on subject areas.
- ✓ Seek tenants' views on which types of performance information particularly interest them and, if necessary, collect and present information to meet specific local needs.
- ✓ Set out the findings from tenant satisfaction surveys and other performance information clearly, so that readers know which is which.
- ✓ Compare performance with previous years.
- ✓ Compare performance with benchmark landlords.

- ✓ Set out performance information against targets or service standards or both – use of service standards shows tenants that their landlord sets targets and minimum standards.
- ✓ Consider any particular information needs of stakeholders and service users.
- ✓ Simplify accounting information by explaining overall landlord expenditure in terms of how each £ of rent is spent.
- ✓ Consider using a glossary of terms or a jargon buster, but not in place of clearer writing.
- ✓ Make sure publication of information is timely and consistent – to maintain consistency, choose a range of information and do not deviate from it without explanation.
- ✓ Review whether to publicise performance information that is already collected but not currently published.

## 10 Complaints information

### 10.1 Introduction

Complaints are an important part of the landlord's relationship with service users. The study sought to assess how open and accessible landlords were in communicating to tenants and service users:

- how to complain, and
- how they monitor and use complaints to improve services.

Landlords have a duty to make sure tenants and other service users know how to make a complaint, and to inform them about the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO). The SPSO deals with many complaints about social landlords, and during the study it confirmed that 23 per cent of its caseload in 2006/07 was made up of enquiries and complaints about RSLs and the housing functions of councils. This was an increase of 10 per cent compared to 2005/06.

### 10.2 Legal and regulatory framework for complaints

All RSLs and local authority landlords have a duty, under section 23 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, to inform tenants about their complaints procedure. And section 15 of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002 requires local authorities and RSLs to 'provide people with information about making a complaint, any time limit for doing so and how to contact the Ombudsman'. If the Ombudsman has investigated a complaint about a landlord's services, the landlord must also arrange to allow inspection of its report on the investigation for at least three weeks. It must also arrange for interested parties to receive a copy of the report.

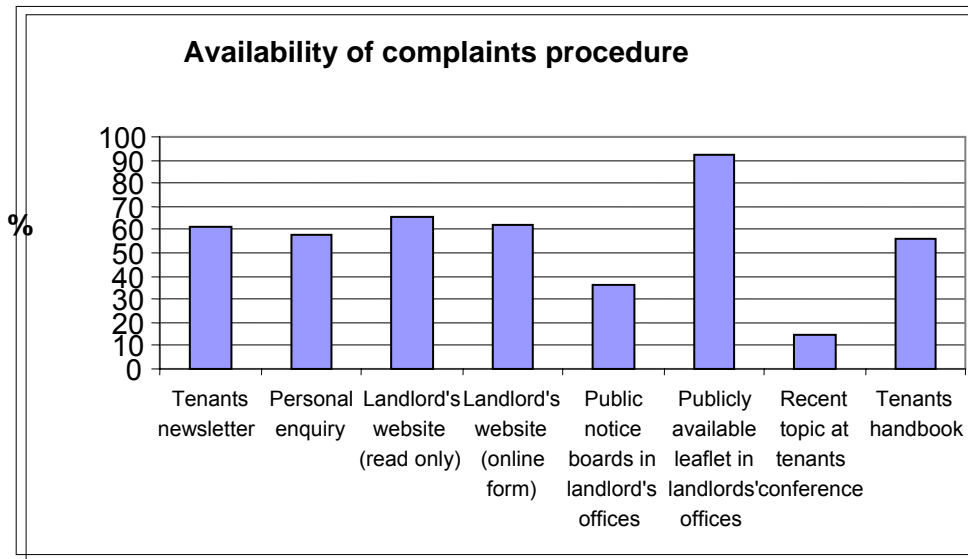
The relevant performance standard is:

**GS3.3** 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.

### 10.3 Complaints procedure information and complaints forms

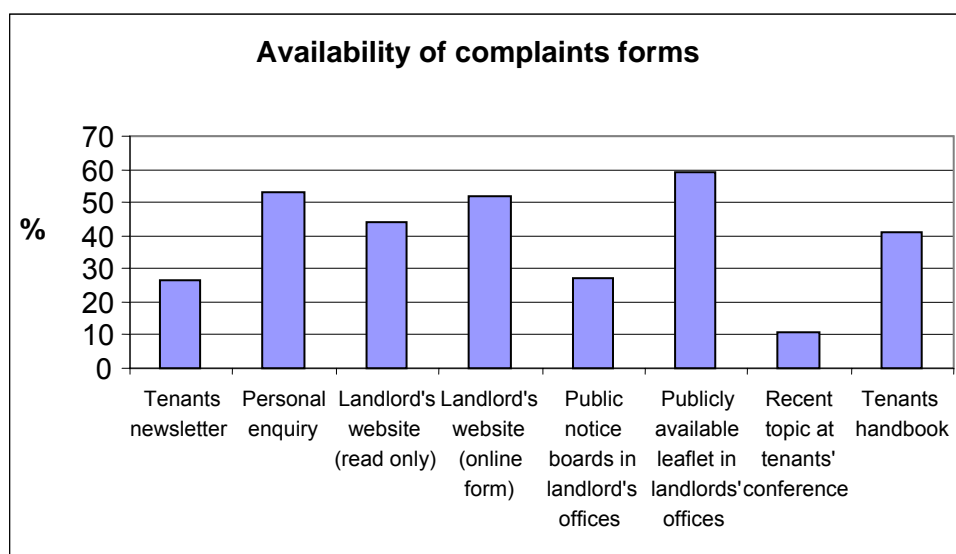
Eighty-eight per cent of landlords produced a complaints procedure leaflet for tenants and other service users. Figure 16 shows how information about complaints procedures was made available.

**Figure 16**



Seventy-six per cent of landlords also produced a complaints form for service users to complete when making a complaint. Figure 17 shows how they made these forms available.

**Figure 17**



#### **10.4 Statistical information about complaints and appeals**

Few landlords publish statistical information about complaints they receive. Twenty-six per cent said they publish information about complaints levels in the tenants newsletter, 21 per cent publish the information on the website, and 9 per cent said they display the information on notice boards in offices.

Twenty-one per cent of landlords said this question was 'not applicable', suggesting that they may not collate this type of information. The SPSO's document 'Valuing Complaints' sets out principles of good complaint management, and one of its recommendations is that governing bodies receive information about complaints as a standing agenda item (SPSO, 2007). Forty-five per cent of landlords confirmed they would respond to a personal enquiry about statistical data on complaints.

These findings suggest that some landlords are failing to seize the opportunity to use complaints to improve services and or to communicate positive changes following complaints. The findings also suggest a lack of transparency about complaints. Some landlords may not publicise complaints statistics because they do not routinely collect the information, and this was borne out by one case-study landlord. A separate case-study landlord collated detailed information about complaints, but did not publish the information.

## 10.5 Desk-top assessment of complaints information

From the sample of 180 newsletters we examined in the study, a few set out how many complaints the landlord had received and outlined the subjects of complaint.

Details about how many complaints the landlord had received and levels of tenant satisfaction were prominent in a few newsletters. The level of detail about types of complaint and their outcomes varied. Some landlords split the complaints into subject areas such as repairs, lettings and customer service. This greater level of detail made it easier to understand the information. Some annual reports published information about overall numbers of complaints.

Landlords conveyed information about how to complain, and complaints in general, in a variety of ways. Forty-five per cent of the landlords surveyed provided information about how to complain on the website and 53 per cent provided an online complaints form. During the website assessment we noted that several websites also explained the complaints process and gave details of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, with links to their reports. Less useful websites simply provided an address and phone number for making complaints.

Information on the complaints procedure and a bespoke complaint form for tenants and service users are readily available across the sector. We sifted through 180 forms and other documents about complaints procedures to get about 50 documents for assessment.

Nearly all complaints procedures included a complaints form with a pre-paid return address. The forms varied in layout. Some asked for a comprehensive set of details; others provided space to compose a letter of complaint.

The most easily understood complaints forms were those with a series of prompts helping to outline the complaint, but not a rigid structure or form. A good example was one local authority complaints form that asked for details of the complainant then details of the complaint and what actions the

complainant felt should be taken to resolve it. There was space on the form for the complainant to note any discrimination they had experienced. Only a few forms had space for advocates to make a complaint.

The majority of complaints forms were written in simple language and were jargon free. This made them easy to read and understand. Specific examples of positive practice included using bullet points to set out exactly what the complaints leaflet contained, and a clear statement of the aim of the complaints procedure: 'We need to know if you are not happy with the service you get.' Other landlords that used plain English especially well included larger RSLs and local authority landlords. Some leaflets carried the Clear English Standard from Plain Language Commission or the Crystal Mark from the Plain English Campaign.

Some landlords failed to use plain English and appeared critical of complainants. An example was: 'The complainant's action may be considered unreasonably persistent if all stages of the landlord's complaints policy have been exhausted, and the complainant continues to dispute the landlord's decision relating to their complaint.'

The complaints forms and procedures had a range of styles and layouts. The most useful forms had a clear and concise layout and limited amounts of text. Leaflets with a simple colour format and large text were easiest to read.

Some forms contained vast amounts of text and were very confusing. Some procedures were difficult to understand because there were too many pages about the complaints procedure and confusing sentences such as: 'If your informal complaint has not been resolved to your satisfaction or you wish to register a formal complaint due to the severity of the problem then you should make a formal complaint by putting your complaint in writing.'

This was in contrast to the succinct statement that: 'While we would hope that most problems can be sorted out quickly and informally, you do have the right to make a formal complaint in writing.' Some complaints forms were too short and lacked sufficient information, for example failing to state how long it should take to resolve the complaint and the next steps to be taken.

All the complaints forms mentioned the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman and that this service should be used if need be. But landlords varied in the amount of guidance they gave about this part of the process and when it should be used.

Several landlords' complaints documents failed to offer alternative formats. Some complaints procedures and forms were either not publicised as being available in other formats or were simply not available in other formats.

## 10.6 Positive practice for complaints information

### *Complaints procedures*

- ✓ Provide a complaints procedure leaflet and form to assist tenants and service users making complaints.
- ✓ Make sure the complaints procedure leaflet contains information about timescales for dealing with complaints and determining outcomes, and describes how the process works.

### *Publicise the complaints system*

- ✓ Publicise the complaints procedure.
- ✓ Remind tenants periodically about the complaints procedure through newsletters.
- ✓ Make sure the tenants handbook contains information about the complaints procedure and spare forms for making complaints.
- ✓ Make sure there is a link to the complaints procedure and complaints form from the landlord website or, preferably, enable tenants to make complaints using an online form.
- ✓ Make sure complaints procedures and forms are accessible and let people know they are available in other languages and formats.

### *Complaints forms – provide a complaints form which includes:*

- ✓ space for details about the complaint and complainant
- ✓ space for an advocate's details
- ✓ an outline of the procedure
- ✓ a freepost address for contact

- ✓ space on the complaints form for complainants to state how they think the issue could be resolved
- ✓ space to indicate if the issue may be related to discriminatory behaviour
- ✓ details of the role of the SPSO, and when to take a complaint to them
- ✓ contact details for the SPSO.

#### *Complaints performance*

- ✓ Publish statistical information about complaints performance.
- ✓ Highlight particular areas of complaint and provide background explanations.
- ✓ Explain any trends and how the landlord is responding.
- ✓ Highlight and explain how complaints have influenced service improvement.

## 11 Conclusions

This thematic study has sought to consider the openness and accessibility of registered social landlords (RSLs) and local authority (LA) landlords with regard to information about governance, performance and complaints. Overall, we found a mixed picture of openness and accessibility. We addressed four key questions, and we summarise our conclusions for each of these below.

### **What kinds of information do landlords provide, and how far is it openly available?**

- There are some positive examples of governance, performance and complaints information. But the availability of such information across the sector varies.
- A culture of openness about governance information is more embedded among local authorities than RSLs.
- Local authorities have legal duties to publish and release information, and these obligations contribute to the culture of openness.
- One quarter of RSLs either provide performance information in minimal detail, or do not provide performance information at all. Twenty-seven per cent of local authorities do not publish any performance information over and above their current statutory performance indicator obligations.
- Among those making performance information available many provide it in interesting and attractively presented formats. But there is no agreed, consistent approach to performance reporting that would enable tenants, service users and stakeholders to scrutinise performance more effectively.

- There were examples of positive practice in conveying complaints procedures and processes. But 24 per cent of the landlords did not provide a complaints form and 12 per cent did not provide a leaflet on their complaints procedure.
- There was a general lack of published information about the number of complaints received. Only 26 per cent of landlords said they included this information in newsletters.

**Are they providing the right sort of information for their tenants and other service users (that is, the sort of information that tenants and other service users want)?**

- Tenants are keen to understand the range of information that could be made available to them and they see openness as an essential component of a strong landlord–tenant relationship.
- Landlords with a greater knowledge of their tenant and service user profile and an ongoing commitment to service improvement are best placed to meet the needs of tenants and service users. These landlords tend to take the initiative in supplying information rather than only responding to requests for particular types of information or information in particular formats.
- Landlords do research tenants' information needs but should involve tenants more in deciding what information to publish. Tenants in the study expressed most interest in information about performance and service standards.
- Information about statutory performance and key performance indicators alone is unlikely to give tenants, service users and stakeholders a sense of how an organisation is performing.

The feeling from landlords that tenants lack interest in governance, performance and complaints information does not justify lack of openness. Providing more information in these areas could enhance accountability.

## **Do they provide the information promptly and in a timely way?**

- Tenants would have better access to information if RSLs were expected to publish governance and performance information and a publication scheme similar to those of local authorities. This would not necessarily require new legislation.
- There appears to be some merit, where landlords are not already doing so, in producing an annual landlord summary based on a list of key information for tenants. This could contain meaningful governance and performance information along with other useful information and would make sure that all tenants across the sector receive a minimum standard of information.
- The annual landlord summary could be incorporated into or sit alongside publications most landlords already provide, such as annual reports or tenants newsletters.

## **How easy is it for tenants, other service users and stakeholders to get the information they need?**

- Barriers to access include disability, language, age, literacy, digital exclusion, distance from offices and, sometimes, a lack of openness on the part of landlords.
- A variety of tools and practices can enable landlords to remove many barriers to access. Most landlords are willing to provide, on request, information about governance, performance and complaints in alternative formats and languages.
- Landlords need to underline their commitment to removing these barriers and meeting the needs of the area they serve, as accessibility is essential to openness.

- Tenants in the study rated plain English as necessary for publications.
- More use of websites by RSLs to convey governance information would enhance openness.
- More openness in reporting information about complaints would increase accountability.

## 12 Recommendations

The main recommendations from the study are that landlords should:

- make sure they understand accessibility and information needs by building up a profile of the tenants and other service users in their areas of operation, and by involving tenants
- maximise their openness in providing information about governance, performance and complaints by reviewing current practice against the checklists in this report, and by making sure that service users and stakeholders have access to a range of meaningful information
- consider the merits of a guiding set of landlord information (including a minimum standard of performance information) for annual distribution to tenants, other service users and stakeholders.

The positive-practice checklists in the report are intended to help landlords increase their accessibility and openness.

Many of the positive-practice recommendations identified through the study are relatively simple and inexpensive to apply. More important, they would improve services and enhance landlord's accountability to their service users and stakeholders.

## Annex 1 References

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<http://www.scotconsumer.org.uk/publications/responses/resp06/rs06risk.pdf>

Office for Public Management (OPM®) and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), in partnership with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation – The Independent Commission for Good Governance in Public Services (2005) – **The Good Governance Standard for Public Services**

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[www.literacytrust.org.uk/Informationbase/stats/keystatsadult.html#Scotland](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/Informationbase/stats/keystatsadult.html#Scotland)

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## Annex 2 Useful websites on language and accessibility

**Ability Net** – charity helping disabled people with access to the internet

[www.abilitynet.org.uk/](http://www.abilitynet.org.uk/)

**Accessibility 101** – [www.accessibility101.org.uk](http://www.accessibility101.org.uk)

The UK Government's standards on access keys:

**Disability Rights Commission** [www.drc.org.uk](http://www.drc.org.uk)

Their website guide is available at:

['PAS 78: A guide to good practice in commissioning accessible websites'](#)<sup>1</sup>.

**Happy to Translate** [www.equalityscotland.com/happytotranslate](http://www.equalityscotland.com/happytotranslate)

Supported by Communities Scotland and the Scottish Executive, a number of housing associations formed the Happy to Translate Initiative. This is presently being piloted by several bodies including one police force and one council as well as several housing associations. 'Participating public sector organisations will display the official logo on their literature and in reception areas to let non-English readers and speakers know they will provide quality translation and interpreting services. The use of the logo will include good practice guidelines and monitoring and evaluation techniques in order to establish and maintain a customer-oriented approach for the provision of language assistance.'<sup>2</sup>

**HomePoint** [www.homepoint.communitiesscotland.gov.uk](http://www.homepoint.communitiesscotland.gov.uk)

Provides assistance with basic translation for landlords from their website.

Plain English Campaign [www.plainenglish.co.uk](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk)

Plain Language Commission [www.clearest.co.uk](http://www.clearest.co.uk)

Both websites provide advice on good writing style. They also offer recognised accreditation of publications that meet their standards of plain English.

**RNIB** [www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk)

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<sup>1</sup> [www.drc-gb.org/library/website\\_accessibility\\_guidance.aspx](http://www.drc-gb.org/library/website_accessibility_guidance.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> [www.equalityscotland.com/happytotranslate/happytotranslate.php#whatisthehappy](http://www.equalityscotland.com/happytotranslate/happytotranslate.php#whatisthehappy)

See it Right guidelines – practical advice on designing, producing and planning for accessible information

**The Scottish Accessible Information Forum** [www.saifscotland.org.uk](http://www.saifscotland.org.uk)

SAIF works to improve accessible information for disabled people by producing and promoting standards and guidelines.<sup>3</sup> It also acts as an advisory body to the Scottish Executive on issues relating to disabled people and their carers and their right to access information.

**The Shaw Trust** [www.shaw-trust.org.uk](http://www.shaw-trust.org.uk)

A disability-related charity that provides a website testing and accreditation service

**Useful website links on complaints information**

**Communities Scotland**

How to gather views on service quality

[www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/webpages/rics\\_011798.hcsp](http://www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/webpages/rics_011798.hcsp)

**Scottish Public Services Ombudsman**

Valuing Complaints

[www.valuingcomplaints.org.uk/valuing-complaints/](http://www.valuingcomplaints.org.uk/valuing-complaints/)

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<sup>3</sup> [www.saifscotland.org.uk/index.htm](http://www.saifscotland.org.uk/index.htm)

## Annex 3 Landlord Survey Participants

The 156 landlords who took part in the survey were:

Local authorities	RSLs	RSLs	RSLs	RSLs	RSLs
Aberdeen	Abertay HA	Clydebank HA	Grampian HA	Moledinar Park HA	Scottish Veterans HA
Aberdeenshire	Abronhill HA	Clydesdale HA	Great Western Tenant Partnership Ltd	Moray Housing Partnership	Shettleston HA
Angus	Albyn Housing Society	Clydeside Tenants Partnership	Hanover HA	Mossspark HA	Shire HA
City of Edinburgh	Almond HA	Compass LHO Ltd	Hawthorn Housing Co-operative	New Gorbals HA	Southside HA
Clackmannanshire	Antonine Housing Cooperative	Copperworks Housing Co-operative	Hillcrest HA	New Shaws Housing Organisation	Spireview HA
Dundee City	Ardenglen HA	Cordale HA	Hillhead HA	North Glasgow HA	St John (Glasgow) HA Ltd
East Ayrshire	Argyll Community HA	Craigdale HA	Hjatland HA	North View HA	Tenant Controlled Housing Ltd
East Dunbartonshire	Ark HA	Cube HA	Home in Scotland Ltd	Oak Tree HA	Tenants First Housing Co-operative
East Lothian	Atrium HA	Cunninghame HA	Horizon HA	Ochil View HA	Thenew HA
East Renfrewshire	Ayrshire HA	Drumchapel Housing Co-operative	Hunters Hall Housing Co-operative	Orchard Grove HA	Tollcross HA
Falkirk	Ayrshire North Community Housing Organisation	Dunbritton HA	Kennishead Avenue Local Management	Ore Valley HA	Trust HA
Fife	Barony HA	Dunedin Canmore HA	Keystone Tenant Managed Homes	Orkney HA	Unity HA
The Highland	Barrhead HA	East Kilbride and District HA	Kincardine Housing Co-operative	Paisley South HA	Viewpoint HA

<b>Local authorities</b>	<b>RSLs</b>	<b>RSLs</b>	<b>RSLs</b>	<b>RSLs</b>	<b>RSLs</b>
Inverclyde	Bellsmyre HA	East Lothian HA	Kingdom HA	Paragon HA	Waverley HA
Midlothian	Berwickshire HA	Easthall Park HA	Kingsridge Cleddans HA	Parkhead HA	West Granton Housing Co-operative
Moray	Bield HA	Eildon HA	Knowes HA	Partick HA	West Highland HA
North Ayrshire	Blairtummock HA	Elderpark HA	Lambhill HA	Pentland HA	West Lothian Housing Partnership
North Lanarkshire	Blue Triangle HA	Faifley HA	Lanarkshire HA	Perthshire HA	West of Scotland HA
Orkney Islands	Bridgewater HA	Ferguslie Park HA	Linstone HA	Pineview Housing Co-operative	West Whitlawburn Housing Co-operative
Perth and Kinross	Cadder HA	Fife Special HA	Lister Housing Co-operative	Port Glasgow HA	Williamsburgh HA
Renfrewshire	Calvay HA	Forth HA	Lochaber HA	Port of Leith HA	Yoker HA
Shetland Islands	Cassiltoun HA	Fyne Homes	Lochfield Park HA	Provanhall HA	
South Ayrshire	Castle Rock Edinvar HA	Gardeen HA	Loretto HA	Reidvale HA	
South Lanarkshire	Castlemilk Tenants HA	Glasgow West HA	Manor Estates HA	Rural Stirling HA	
Stirling	Cathcart and District HA	Glen HA	Margaret Blackwood HA	Rutherglen and Cambuslang HA	
West Dunbartonshire	Cernach HA	Govan HA	Melville HA	Sanctuary HA	
West Lothian	Charing Cross HA	Govanhill HA	Milnbank HA	Scottish Borders HA	

## Annex 4 Landlord survey: Local authorities

### “Openness and access to information”

This survey has been sent by ERS Ltd ([www.ers.org.uk](http://www.ers.org.uk)) on behalf of Communities Scotland. The responses will be used as part of a *thematic study* of openness and access to information provided by social landlords to tenants, service users and stakeholders.

All survey responses shall be kept confidential, unless otherwise agreed with the respondent. Any enquiries about the questions should be directed to Moira Saunders at ERS on 01228 595051 or [msaunders@ers.org.uk](mailto:msaunders@ers.org.uk). The return date for the survey is **Friday 2 February**, a freepost envelope is enclosed.

#### 1. Local Authority Landlord Information

1.1 Name of landlord	
1.2 Housing stock size as at 31.3.06	
1.3 Person completing form – name, email and telephone number	Name Email Tel
1.4 Landlord’s website address	www.
1.5 If your organisation has no website are there plans to develop one within the next year?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
1.6 Can your housing department be contacted by tenants and service users via a designated freephone or local rate number?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Out of hours only <input type="checkbox"/> If yes, freephone <input type="checkbox"/> local rate <input type="checkbox"/>
1.7 Does the housing department produce any documents in alternative languages or formats as standard?	Languages: Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Formats: Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
1.8 Does your organisation produce some documents in alternative languages or formats on request?	Languages: Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Formats: Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
1.9 If the housing department does publish documents in alternative languages please tick which ones.	Arabic <input type="checkbox"/> Bengali <input type="checkbox"/> Cantonese <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese simplified <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese traditional <input type="checkbox"/> Farsi <input type="checkbox"/> French <input type="checkbox"/> Gaelic <input type="checkbox"/> Gujarati <input type="checkbox"/> Italian <input type="checkbox"/> Hindi <input type="checkbox"/> Lithuanian <input type="checkbox"/> Malay <input type="checkbox"/> Punjabi <input type="checkbox"/> Polish <input type="checkbox"/> Portuguese <input type="checkbox"/> Russian <input type="checkbox"/> Spanish <input type="checkbox"/> Somali <input type="checkbox"/> Turkish <input type="checkbox"/> Ukrainian <input type="checkbox"/> Urdu <input type="checkbox"/> Other – please specify .....
1.10 Are your organisation’s public areas compliant (regarding access) with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> On track to become compliant by..... <input type="checkbox"/> Not known <input type="checkbox"/>

## 2. Governance of Housing

Governance refers to the council committee responsible for housing. *(Please tick as appropriate or put N/A where not applicable.)*

**2.1 What is the name of the committee responsible for housing?**

**2.2 If responding as a council which has a cabinet system, please tick here**

2. Does your organisation make governance information available in the forms below?	2.3 Notification of dates and times of committee meetings		2.4 Committee papers for committee meetings		2.5 Minutes of committee meetings		2.6 Details of committee membership		2.7 Details of how committee members are appointed	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
By tenants' newsletter										
Individual response to each enquiry										
Landlord's website										
Public notice boards in landlord's offices										
Publicly available information in landlord's offices										
Through the public's attendance at committee meetings										
Other, please state..... ..... ..... ..... .....										

2.7 Does your organisation make information relating to governance available in the following formats?	Notification of dates and times of committee meetings			Committee papers for committee meetings			Minutes of committee meetings		
	Yes	No	On req	Yes	No	On req	Yes	No	On req
Braille									
Moon – embossed reading code									
Large print									
Audio tape									
Other languages as stated in Q1									

**3. Complaints and Appeals - Please tick as appropriate or put N/A if not applicable**

3. How can tenants and service users obtain information about your complaints and appeals procedures?	3.1 Complaints procedure		3.2 Complaints forms		3.3 Appeals procedure/ final stage of complaints procedure		3.4 Statistical data on complaints/ appeals e.g. no of complainants satisfied etc		
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	
By tenants' newsletter									
Personal enquiry									
Landlord's website (read only)									
Landlord's website (online form)									
Public notice boards in landlord's offices									
Publicly available leaflet in landlord's offices									
Recent topic at tenants' conferences (last 2 years)									
Tenants' handbook									
Other information sent out to tenants, please state .....									
3.5 Does the housing department make the complaints procedure, complaints form and appeals procedure available in the following formats?	Complaints procedure			Complaints form			Appeals procedure		
	Yes	No	On req	Yes	No	On req	Yes	No	On req
Braille									
Moon (embossed reading code)									
Large print									
Audio tape									
Other languages as stated in Q1									

#### 4. Performance Information

4.1 Do you make performance information related to Statutory Performance Indicators (SPIs) publicly available? Yes  No

4.2 Do you produce publicly available performance information over and above SPIs? Yes  No

4. What performance information do you make available to tenants and service users and in what form? (Please tick as appropriate)	4.3 Housing management - service standards and monitoring		4.4 Maintenance service standards and monitoring		4.5 Homelessness service standards and monitoring				
	Published standards	Published performance monitoring against standards	Published standards	Published performance monitoring against standards	Published standards	Published performance monitoring against standards			
By press releases to local media									
By tenants' newsletter annually									
By tenants' newsletter more than once per year									
Individual response to each enquiry									
Landlord's website									
Public notice boards in landlord's offices									
Publicly available information/ leaflets in landlord's offices									
Recent topic at tenants' conferences (last 2 years)									
Other – please specify .....									
4.6 Does your organisation make performance information available in the following formats?	Housing Management			Maintenance			Homelessness		
	Yes	No	On req	Yes	No	On req	Yes	No	On req
Braille									
Moon – embossed reading code									
Large print									
Audio tape									
Other languages as stated in Q1									

#### 5. Information for Stakeholders

This question deals with the dissemination of information about the housing department to wider groups, examples may include the police, local political representatives, health trusts, tenants' groups, the local citizens advice bureaux, community planning partners etc. The reply does not need to identify which stakeholders are sent information, but whether or not you do this as a matter of

practice. If any of the documents are not applicable to you please put N/A, otherwise tick as appropriate.

5. How is information about your organisation made more widely available to stakeholders?	5.1 Annual Report		5.2 Business or Service Plan		5.3 Performance Information		5.4 Local Housing Strategy		5.5 Homelessness Strategy	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Individual response to each enquiry from stakeholder(s)										
Landlord's website										
Mailing to a list of stakeholders on an annual basis										
Publicly available information in landlord's offices										
Distributed as part of partnership or planning agreements										
Other, please specify										

5.5 Are the housing department's annual report, business plan and housing strategy available in the following formats?	Annual Report			Business Plan			Local Housing Strategy			Homelessness Strategy		
	Yes	No	On req	Yes	No	On req	Yes	No	On req	Yes	No	On req
Braille												
Moon – embossed reading code												
Large print												
Audio tape												
Other languages as stated in Q1												

## 6. Internal Processes

Question	Answer - Please tick (more than one if needed) or give other detail
6.1 Which post is responsible within the housing department for public information such as leaflets and tenants' newsletters?	Public Relations Officer <input type="checkbox"/> Director's Office <input type="checkbox"/> Housing Manager <input type="checkbox"/> Service Development Manager <input type="checkbox"/> Performance Manager <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/> Please state.....
6.2 Is the design and editing of publications by the organisation done in-house or contracted out?	In house design <input type="checkbox"/> Contracted out design <input type="checkbox"/> In house printing <input type="checkbox"/> Contracted out printing <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/> please state .....
6.3 Do you have a written procedure or internal guidance on information requests and publications?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> If yes, please enclose a copy if convenient to do so. Copy enclosed? <input type="checkbox"/>
6.4 Are staff made aware of the types of information that may be readily accessible to the public?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> If Yes, how? They are trained <input type="checkbox"/> They follow a procedure <input type="checkbox"/> They check with their manager <input type="checkbox"/> Other..... If No, is this because – Few/no requests for this type of information are received <input type="checkbox"/> No policy or procedure is in place <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify).....
6.5 What is your estimated annual budget (per tenant) for production of information on governance, performance and complaints?	Per tenant per year £..... Overall budget £..... No budget <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown <input type="checkbox"/> If you believe there to be other unspecified staff costs please note.....
6.6 How many Freedom of Information requests did the housing department receive in 2005/06? Are you aware of how many these were in relation to governance, performance?	Number..... Number related to governance and performance..... Not known <input type="checkbox"/>
6.7 What do you think are the main barriers to the release of information? Tick as many as applicable.	Lack of resources <input type="checkbox"/> Data protection constraints <input type="checkbox"/> Commercial sensitivities <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of organisational priority <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of interest from tenants <input type="checkbox"/> Others <input type="checkbox"/> Please state .....
6.8 If you have a website is the number of visits to the housing section monitored?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> If yes, how do you use this information.....
6.9 Do you monitor the take-up of housing leaflets in your offices, or requests for alternative formats?	Leaflets Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Format requests Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
6.10 Have you ever done market research on how tenants like to be kept informed of decisions / landlord news / performance?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> If yes, how has this affected the way you work.....
6.11 How did your organisation choose any alternative languages for communication?	
6.12 How can details be found of your Publications Scheme?	
6.13 Do you provide a language interpretation or sign language service for governance meetings?	Language Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> On request <input type="checkbox"/> Sign language Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> On request <input type="checkbox"/>
6.14 Do staff ever refer people with health, disability or other needs to advocacy services to assist with making complaints or appeals?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

6.15 Has your organisation ever undertaken research into the format needs of tenants, service users or stakeholders?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> If yes, how did this affect the way you work..... ..... .....
6.16 Has your organisation ever sought advice on publications from the Plain English Campaign?	Yes we are a corporate member <input type="checkbox"/> Yes we have used their services <input type="checkbox"/> Our publications are so few that we do not think it necessary <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

## 7. Document Samples

It would be helpful if you could provide some samples of literature your organisation produces in relation to *governance, performance information and complaints*. Please can you tick which types of information your organisation produces and also tick which samples you have enclosed.

Document	Is produced by the organisation – please tick as appropriate	Sample enclosed – please tick as appropriate
Annual Report		
Complaints form		
Complaints procedure – leaflet		
Leaflet on governance structure for tenants, service users and/or stakeholders		
Service standards customers may expect		
Tenants' Handbook		
Tenants' newsletter – a recent edition		
Tenants' newsletter or other document containing published performance information – a sample		

**Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire.**

Please return it by **Friday 2 February** using the enclosed freepost envelope.

Moirsa Saunders, ERS Ltd, Fisher Street Galleries, 18 Fisher Street, Carlisle, Cumbria, CA3 8RH

Tel 01228 595051 Fax 01228 594981 Email [msaunders@ers.org.uk](mailto:msaunders@ers.org.uk) [www.ers.org.uk](http://www.ers.org.uk)

## Annex 5 Landlord survey: RSL questionnaire

### “Openness and access to information”

This survey has been sent by ERS Ltd ([www.ers.org.uk](http://www.ers.org.uk)) on behalf of Communities Scotland. The responses will be used as part of a *thematic study* of openness and access to information provided by social landlords to tenants, service users and stakeholders.

All survey responses shall be kept confidential, unless otherwise agreed with the respondent. Any enquiries about the questions should be directed to Moira Saunders at ERS on 01228 595051 or [msaunders@ers.org.uk](mailto:msaunders@ers.org.uk). The return date for the survey is **Friday 2 February**, a freepost envelope is enclosed.

#### 1. Registered Social Landlord Information

1.1 Name of landlord	
1.2 Housing stock size as at 31.3.06	
1.3 Local authority areas of operation	
1.4 Person completing form – name, email and contact telephone number	Name Email Tel
1.5 Landlord’s website address	www.
1.6 If your organisation has no website are there plans to develop one within the next year?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
1.7 Can your organisation be contacted by tenants and service users via a designated freephone or local rate number?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Out of hours only <input type="checkbox"/> If yes, freephone <input type="checkbox"/> local rate <input type="checkbox"/>
1.8 Does your organisation produce any documents in alternative languages or formats as standard?	Languages: Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Formats: Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
1.9 Does your organisation produce some documents in alternative languages or formats on request?	Languages: Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Formats: Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
1.10 If your organisation does publish documents in alternative languages please tick which ones.	Arabic <input type="checkbox"/> Bengali <input type="checkbox"/> Cantonese <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese simplified <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese traditional <input type="checkbox"/> Farsi <input type="checkbox"/> French <input type="checkbox"/> Gaelic <input type="checkbox"/> Gujarati <input type="checkbox"/> Italian <input type="checkbox"/> Hindi <input type="checkbox"/> Lithuanian <input type="checkbox"/> Malay <input type="checkbox"/> Punjabi <input type="checkbox"/> Polish <input type="checkbox"/> Portuguese <input type="checkbox"/> Russian <input type="checkbox"/> Spanish <input type="checkbox"/> Somali <input type="checkbox"/> Turkish <input type="checkbox"/> Ukrainian <input type="checkbox"/> Urdu <input type="checkbox"/> Other – please specify
1.11 Does your organisation have offices open to the public?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
1.12 Are your organisation’s public areas compliant (regarding access) with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> On track to become compliant by..... Not known <input type="checkbox"/>

## 2. Governance

In the box below 'governance meetings' refers to the governing board.

(Please tick as appropriate or put N/A where not applicable.)

2. Does your organisation make governance information available in the forms below?	2.1 Notification of dates and times of board meetings		2.2 Committee papers for board meetings		2.3 Minutes of board meetings		2.4 Details of board membership		2.5 Details of how board members are appointed	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
By tenants' newsletter										
Individual response to each enquiry										
Landlord's website										
Public notice boards in landlord's offices										
Publicly available information in landlord's offices										
Through the public's attendance at board meetings										
Other, please state..... ..... ..... ..... .....										

2.6 Does your organisation make information relating to governance available in the following formats?	Notification of dates and times of board meetings			Committee papers for board meetings			Minutes of board meetings		
	Yes	No	On req	Yes	No	On req	Yes	No	On req
Braille									
Moon – embossed reading code									
Large print									
Audio tape									
Other languages as stated in Q1									

**3. Complaints and Appeals** - Please tick as appropriate or put N/A if not applicable

3. How can tenants and service users obtain information about your complaints and appeals procedures?	3.1 Complaints procedure		3.2 Complaints forms		3.3 Appeals procedure/ final stage of complaints procedure		3.4 Statistical data on complaints/ appeals e.g. no of complainants satisfied etc.	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
By tenants' newsletter								
Personal enquiry								
Landlord's website (read only)								
Landlord's website (online form)								
Public notice boards in landlord's offices								
Publicly available leaflet in landlord's offices								
Recent topic at tenants' conferences (last 2 years)								
Tenants' handbook								
Other information sent out to tenants, please state								

3.5 Does your organisation make the complaints procedure, complaints form and appeals procedure available in the following formats?	Complaints procedure			Complaints form			Appeals procedure		
	Yes	No	On req	Yes	No	On req	Yes	No	On req
Braille									
Moon – embossed reading code									
Large print									
Audio tape									
Other languages as stated in Q1									

#### 4. Performance Information

4.1 Do you make performance information related to Annual Performance Statutory Return (APSR) publicly available? Yes  No

4.2 Do you produce publicly available performance information over and above APSR? Yes  No

4. What performance information do you make available to tenants and service users and in what form? <i>(Please tick as appropriate)</i>	4.3 Housing management - service standards and monitoring		4.4 Maintenance service standards and monitoring	
	Published standards	Published performance monitoring against standards	Published standards	Published performance monitoring against standards
By press releases to local media				
By tenants' newsletter annually				
By tenants' newsletter more than once per year				
Individual response to each enquiry				
Landlord's website				
Public notice boards in landlord's offices				
Publicly available information/leaflets in landlord's offices				
Recent topic at tenants' conferences (last 2 years)				
Other – please specify ..... .....				

4.5 Does your organisation make performance information available in the following formats?	Housing Management			Maintenance		
	Yes	No	On req	Yes	No	On req
Braille						
Moon – embossed reading code						
Large print						
Audio tape						
Other languages as stated in Q1						

## 5. Information for Stakeholders

This question deals with the dissemination of information about your organisation to wider groups, examples may include the police, local authority, local political representatives, health trusts, tenants' groups, the local citizens advice bureaus, community planning partners etc. The reply does not need to identify which stakeholders are sent information, but whether or not as an organisation you do this as a matter of practice.

*If any of the documents are not applicable to you please put N/A, otherwise tick as appropriate.*

5. How is information about your organisation made more widely available to stakeholders?	5.1 Annual Report		5.2 Business or Service Plan		5.3 Performance Information	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Individual response to each enquiry from stakeholder(s)						
Landlord's website						
Mailing to a list of stakeholders on an annual basis						
Publicly available information in landlord's offices						
Distributed as part of partnership or planning agreements						
Other, please specify .....						

5.4 Are your organisation's annual reports and business plans available in the following formats?	Annual Report			Business Plan		
	Yes	No	On req	Yes	No	On req
Braille						
Moon – embossed reading code						
Large print						
Audio tape						
Other languages as stated in Q1						

## 6. Internal Processes

Question	Answer - Please tick (more than one if needed) or give other detail
6.1 Which post is responsible within the organisation for public information such as leaflets and tenants' newsletters?	Public Relations Officer <input type="checkbox"/> Chief Executive's Office <input type="checkbox"/> Housing Manager <input type="checkbox"/> Service Development Manager <input type="checkbox"/> Performance Manager <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/> Please state.....
6.2 Is the design and editing of publications by the organisation done in-house or contracted out?	In house design <input type="checkbox"/> Contracted out design <input type="checkbox"/> In house printing <input type="checkbox"/> Contracted out printing <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/> please state .....
6.3 Do you have a written procedure or internal guidance on information requests and publications?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> If yes, please enclose a copy if convenient to do so. Copy enclosed? <input type="checkbox"/>
6.4 Are staff made aware of the types of information that may be readily accessible to the public?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> If Yes, how? They are trained <input type="checkbox"/> They follow a procedure <input type="checkbox"/> They check with their manager <input type="checkbox"/> Other..... If No, is this because – Few/no requests for this type of information are received <input type="checkbox"/> No policy or procedure is in place <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify).....
6.5 What is your estimated annual budget (per tenant) for production of information on governance, performance and complaints?	Per tenant per year £..... Overall budget £..... No budget <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown <input type="checkbox"/> If you believe there to be other unspecified staff costs please note.....
6.6 How many data protection related requests did you receive in 2005/06? Are you aware of how many these were in relation to governance, performance?	Number..... Number related to governance and performance..... Not known <input type="checkbox"/>
6.7 What do you think are the main barriers to the release of information? Tick as many as applicable.	Lack of resources <input type="checkbox"/> Data protection constraints <input type="checkbox"/> Commercial sensitivities <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of organisational priority <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of interest from tenants <input type="checkbox"/> Others <input type="checkbox"/> Please state .....
6.8 If you have a website is the number of visits monitored?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> If yes, how do you use this information

<b>6.9 Do you monitor the take-up of leaflets in your offices, or requests for alternative formats?</b>	Leaflets Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Format requests Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>6.10 Have you ever done market research on how tenants like to be kept informed of decisions / landlord news / performance?</b>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> If yes, how has this affected the way you work..... ..... .....
<b>6.11 How did your organisation choose any alternative languages for communication?</b>	
<b>6.12 Do you have a publications scheme similar to that provided by local authorities which lists the information you make available to the public?</b>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> If yes, please how can this be accessed..... ..... .....
<b>6.13 Do you provide a language interpretation or sign language service for governance meetings?</b>	Language Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> On request <input type="checkbox"/> Sign language Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> On request <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>6.14 Do staff ever refer people with health, disability or other needs to advocacy services to assist with making complaints or appeals?</b>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>6.15 Has your organisation ever undertaken research into the format needs of tenants, service users or stakeholders?</b>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> If yes, how did this affect the way you work..... .....
<b>6.16 Has your organisation ever sought advice on publications from the Plain English Campaign (or similar organisations – such as the Plain Language Commission)?</b>	Yes we are a corporate member <input type="checkbox"/> Yes we have used their services <input type="checkbox"/> Our publications are so few that we do not think it necessary <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

## 7. Document Samples

It would be helpful if you could provide some samples of literature your organisation produces in relation to *governance, performance information and complaints*. Please can you tick which types of information your organisation produces and also tick which samples you have enclosed.

Document	Is produced by the organisation – <i>please tick as appropriate</i>	Sample enclosed – <i>please tick as appropriate</i>
Annual Report		
Complaints form		
Complaints procedure – leaflet		
Leaflet on governance structure for tenants, service users and/or stakeholders		
Service standards customers may expect		
Tenants' Handbook		
Tenants' newsletter – a recent edition		
Tenants' newsletter or other document containing published performance information – a sample		

**Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire.**

Please return it by **Friday 2 February** using the enclosed freepost envelope.  
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