

The Scottish Social Housing Charter

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About the author

Anna Evans has 18 years' experience working in the affordable housing sector in Scotland. She has worked in local government, Scottish Homes and housing associations in a range of research, policy and development roles. Most recently she led the affordable housing policy and research business at DTZ where she worked for eight years. Her work at DTZ included a large range of housing research projects, stock option appraisal and stock transfer consultancy, and inspection preparation and support. Her specialisms are bespoke research and strategy development; governance, performance management and improvement; and affordable housing advice for developers. She has acted as a board member and chair of a number of Scottish housing associations, and in one case led the merger of two community-based associations in Edinburgh. She contributed to the development of the HQN Scottish governance toolkit in 2009.

In addition to her authorship role with HQN, Anna also works independently and with others in housing research and policy development projects.



Introduction

The Scottish Government is currently developing a Scottish Social Housing Charter (the Charter). The purpose of this briefing is to analyse the key themes arising from the initial stakeholder discussions and consider what the Charter is likely to include.

Development of the Charter

The purpose of the Charter is to set outcomes that all Scottish social landlords and local authorities should achieve for their tenants, homeless people and other service users. It will provide the framework against which the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) will assess landlords' performance and so will replace the existing Performance Standards.

The Scottish Government has emphasised that it is starting with a blank sheet of paper, and is working hard with stakeholders to ensure an open and inclusive process to develop the new Charter. It ran a series of consultation events in late 2010 and has encouraged landlords, individuals and interested organisations to join the conversation by posting their ideas, comments and 'guest blogs' on the Charter website – see <http://housingcharter.scotland.gov.uk/>. The website now features 27 reports from 12 different roadshow events and 14 other tenant and service user conferences, consultation meetings and surveys held across the country.

The Scottish Government has established a Charter Sounding Board, chaired by William Fleming, Head of the Scottish Government's Tenant Priorities Team. The purpose of the board is to advise on the process and offer opinions and ideas as the Charter develops.

The timescales for the development of the Charter are as follows:

- Autumn 2010 – initial stakeholder discussions held across the country, starting in August and ending in December 2010
- Early 2011 – a Scottish Government discussion paper will set out the Government's intended approach
- Spring 2011 – discussion groups to consider the proposals
- Summer 2011 – first draft Charter
- April 2012 – first Charter to come into effect.

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Criticisms

The process has not gone without criticism, particularly from the Chartered Institute of Housing in Scotland, which argues that tenants must wonder why we still don't know what landlords are meant to be achieving, given that the Performance Standards have been in place for many years and were recently updated in 2006, coupled with even more recent and valuable Scottish Government research on tenants' priorities. It also argues the process is too long, speculating that it is likely to be 2013/14 before SHR guidance is available on the new Charter.¹

‘What should a good landlord be delivering?’ The key themes arising from initial stakeholder consultation

This briefing analyses all 27 reports available on the Charter website: those topics listed first are the most commonly raised by consultees. It also looks at the most common topics in comments and blogs posted on the website.

Stakeholders were asked: “What should a good landlord be delivering?”

Good quality, affordable homes

The most important issue for tenants and other stakeholders across all the consultation events was the desire to have a good quality home, which meets and is maintained to the Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS). Many of the discussions said it must also be affordable.

The definition of quality was expanded to include:

- Energy efficiency, to help people with the cost of fuel
- Consider people’s needs in terms of:
 - Size – neither too big which can cause affordability problems, nor too small for those with care requirements
 - Location – closely aligned to support needs and the need to be near family, friends and support networks
 - Accessibility – particularly for people with a disability or mobility issues.

Good quality maintenance and repairs

The priority for good quality homes was closely associated with the requirement for ongoing maintenance and a good repairs service. People want to see the SHQS achieved *and* maintained through a well-planned improvement and upgrading programme.

Delivering a good quality repairs services came a close second to having a good quality house in the first place. A good repairs service was defined as:

"People want to see the SHQS achieved and maintained through a well-planned improvement and upgrading programme"

- Customer-focused and considering tenants' varying needs
- Offering an appointment system
- Reliable – jobs completed well, on time, first time
- Involving good communication and clear timescales
- Providing value for money.

Information and communication

There is a strong desire for consistent, accurate and easily understood information and advice for tenants. Tenants want to have a landlord that has good, two-way communication systems. This means:

- Making it easy for tenants to get in touch with the right staff to get information and advice
- Providing regular, up-to-date information and advice, in a variety of formats, with no jargon
- Giving the opportunity for tenants to give their views, and for staff to talk and listen to tenants
- Ensuring internal landlord departments communicate with each other.

Taking on board tenants' ideas

Many stakeholders suggested a good landlord should not just inform, but should listen to, and take on board, tenants' ideas. Many called for more, and genuine, tenant participation, whilst others defined it more specifically as:

- Customer/tenant focus
- Listening to tenants' views about a specific service, and using feedback to improve a service
- Involving tenants in monitoring services
- Providing information on performance/being honest with tenants
- Tenants and landlords working together
- Local service standards to be agreed with tenants.

Customer focus and service

According to the consultees, a good landlord is characterised by high quality customer care – listening to tenants and treating them all as individuals. Many stakeholders discussed what they expect from their landlord’s employees, emphasising that they should be well-trained, knowledgeable and courteous. This reflected a strong desire for more tenant focus. Comments include:

“Operate a good quality, responsive customer care service – it’s helpful when tenants have a named member of staff they can speak to.”

“Tenant focus, a service that meets individual’s needs, and staff who are aware of local issues.”

“Encourage flexibility of staff – be approachable.”

“Listens and gets to know its tenants and their needs, not telling them what to expect.”

[The landlord should have] “well-trained staff who listen to tenants and have a helpful attitude”.

Safe and secure homes and communities

All consultation events called for landlords to help create safe and secure communities. This was centered on people’s own homes, including provision of basic security measures (lighting, secure door entry, etc), but also on having effective and quick methods to deal with anti-social behaviour. Many stakeholders see landlords as having a role in improving community safety, in partnership with other organisations such as the police and local authority.

Supporting tenants

The majority of respondents felt that a good landlord should provide support to tenants to sustain their tenancies. This was mainly about young, new and vulnerable tenants, but it was also suggested that less able and older tenants need occasional help, for example with decoration and garden maintenance, to help maintain independence and stay in their own home.

Closely associated with the theme of housing support is the need for landlords to ensure tenants are informed about their tenancy rights and responsibilities, and for landlords to fairly but firmly enforce these.

“All consultation events called for landlords to help create safe and secure communities”

Fair and open allocation systems

Most stakeholders want to see a fair balance achieved between the needs of current tenants, waiting list applicants and homeless people to create balanced, safe and secure communities: this continues to be a contentious area.

Providing value for money

Tenants want to see landlords 'being transparent in their accounting' and providing value for money in all service delivery. For local authority landlords in particular there is concern about Housing Revenue Account money being transferred to the General Fund for non-housing local authority activity.

Partnership working and building local communities

Stakeholders wish to see more partnership working to help build and regenerate local communities, and also sharing of good practice for the benefit of tenants and the wider community.

Homeless services

Specific feedback was received from homeless service users who identified the following top priorities:

- Provision of safe and secure accommodation when it is needed
- Homeless services users to be treated with dignity and respect
- Access to support
- Landlords and homeless services to listen to homeless people
- Provision of good quality information and advice.

Other issues

A number of service-specific topics were raised by tenants, including the need for effective:

- Estate management
- Rent collection and debt advice
- Complaints procedures
- Homelessness services.

Conclusion

The initial consultation exercise has provided a comprehensive, open and transparent means of developing the first draft for the new Charter.

The top priorities identified by tenants, homeless service users and other stakeholders are perhaps not new, but they certainly should remind the Scottish Government and landlords of the importance of the fundamentals that a good landlord should provide:

- A good quality home which is maintained to a high standard
- Customer focus, high quality customer service
- Value for money
- Community safety and security
- Supporting tenants to achieve and maintain independence.

¹ A Charter for Ten, CIH Scotland, November 2010, see:
[http://housingcharter.scotland.gov.uk/media/19414/charterpaper-nov10\[1\].pdf](http://housingcharter.scotland.gov.uk/media/19414/charterpaper-nov10[1].pdf)