

Charter Discussion

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5/12/2011

This document was prepared by Kevin Paterson Chair of WIFTRA.org and member of HHP's Board of Management. We agree to its publication on the Scottish Government's website and its distribution to any interested parties.

Western Isles Forum of Tenant and Residents' Associations and Hebridean Housing Partnership – Scottish Social Housing Charter Consultation.

This paper was produced after a postal survey of all HHP tenants within the Western Isles.

Customer participation – People want to see a range of participation options to enable all types of customer, including those who are seldom heard or hard to reach, to get involved at a level they feel comfortable with. The remoteness of HHP's tenants was often the most difficult barrier to overcome when trying to encourage greater participation. (32% of WI respondents prioritised this).

Communication – People told us that two-way communication is essential. Effective communication has to become part of the culture of an organisation. If a landlord and its staff can communicate well with tenants and others, and listen and respond to what they are being told, levels of customer satisfaction with almost every service the landlord provides can be improved. Questionnaires and surveys have proven very popular with many tenants whether by phone or post. Taking our housing staff back into the community is also a priority. (72% of WI respondents prioritised this)

Customer service – Customers want to deal with friendly, knowledgeable, well-trained staff who are accessible, who treat customers with respect and without discrimination, who understand their varying needs, and who listen and respond accordingly. Many tenants have suggested they would find it helpful to have a single point of contact so they don't get passed from department to department. This is already the case in the Western Isles. (88% of WI respondents prioritised this)

Housing quality – People want good-quality, well-maintained homes, which will meet the Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) by 2015 at the latest and continue to do so beyond that date. Western Isles respondents felt this was one of the most important aspects of any charter, but then again who is going to say they don't want a good quality, well maintained home. (98% of WI respondents prioritised this)

Value for money – Customers want good value for the rent and other charges they pay, and honest and accurate reporting of how money is spent and the value it is achieving for them. This is probably a throw-back to the HRA days but value can be difficult to quantify whilst it may be cheaper to procure services and goods from the mainland the value of maintaining a good range of services locally cannot be discounted. (92% of WI respondents prioritised this)

Repairs and maintenance – Tenants want a customer focused service achieving standards that have been set in consultation with them. Ideally, this should offer an appointments system, good-quality workmanship, a first time fix wherever possible, and good communications throughout the process. This should already be implemented under the Guidelines and as good practice. (98% of WI respondents prioritised this)

Estate management – People want common areas that are well maintained, and neighbourhoods that are clean, safe, attractive places to live. Many suggested that housing officers should be more visible and should hold regular neighbourhood walkabouts. As discussed earlier this is already being implemented. We also think that disused ground should be turned over to the community with small amounts of funding for allotments etc.. (64% of WI respondents prioritised this)

Allocations – People want to see a fair, easy-to-understand allocations policy that reflects the needs of the local community. Houses should be clean and tidy at the point of allocation. Two-way street houses should be handed back in a clean condition and charges on the rent account to cover excessive change of tenancy works. (69% of WI respondents prioritised this)

Homelessness – Homeless people and their representatives want advice on housing options to be available and accessible; temporary accommodation to be of decent quality; and good-quality information and support for those who need it. Although a low priority amongst Western Isles respondents who already have housing it was felt that all advice should be available in one place rather than the client being sent here, there and everywhere. (34% of WI respondents prioritised this)

Tenancy support – Tenants and landlords recognise the value of providing support and information to new or vulnerable tenants to help them keep their tenancies, meet their tenancy obligations and become valued members of their local community. Tenancy support and working with charities and organisations like the Foyer Projects was seen as the best way to support people through their tenancies.(76% of WI respondents prioritised this)

Anti-social behaviour – Tenants feel very strongly that landlords should take swift and effective action against antisocial behaviour, and should work in partnership with other agencies where this is necessary to deal with a particular problem. They say landlords should be firmer in enforcing the tenancy agreements of those committing anti-social behaviour. Again a priority with Western Isles respondents even though the incidents of Anti-social Behaviour are relatively low. Joined up working and the sharing of information amongst agencies was again seen as a priority in supporting communities to combat anti-social behaviour. (98% of WI respondents prioritised this)

Transparency – People want to be able to access information about their homes and neighbourhoods; how rent money is being spent; and how decisions are taken. In particular, many council tenants want more transparency in housing revenue account (HRA) transactions, for example by publishing all records of spending over £500. The low priority this was given by Western Isles respondents as probably due to the lack of an HRA and the publication on HHP's website of annual spending. (20% of WI respondents prioritised this)

Some Observations on the Charter Discussion Document a Joint Paper by Western Isles Forum and Hebridean Housing Partnership.

Landlord and Tenant Groups within the Western Isles welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Scottish Social Housing Discussion Paper. We recognise the need for guidelines and activity standards and best practice procedures to be amalgamated into one document. The discussion around the Charter during a period of cuts and rationalisation of services seems to be rather lengthy and costly. It was felt that whilst a blank sheet of paper is as good a place to start as any the cost of the Charter could have been used to beef up the current guidelines and to supply funding to organisations to provide better services. It begs the question of what is missing from the current guidelines and standards that needs a full blown Charter to address it.

In the Customer Services section of the Charter we would like to see practices agreed as best practice by those “good landlords” to become the norm. The Charter should provide a minimum standard not be aspirational and have regulatory backing with teeth to ensure these standards are maintained. Having the charter as a purely outcomes based agreement would leave it open to too much local interpretation thus weakening its structure. The Charter should combine minimum standards, agreed targets and outcomes. We must be careful not to be seen to lower standards by not taking into account best practices and must not set the targets lower than the best practice standards. The key performance indicators on the core services should be available centrally to allow tenants to compare their landlord to a peer group. These indicators should include repairs and maintenance, allocations, voids control and customer consultation levels.

We concur with the general consensus that the Charter should set a minimum level of customer consultation and participation but also a minimum level of funding, whether as a percentage of gross receipts or a per head spending threshold. Communication with tenants is a difficult part to legislate as not all landlords can consult in the same ways and we should be careful not to stifle innovation in participation. We believe that landlords should use tenants to monitor their performance with tenant led inspections and consultations.

Landlords should always seek value for money when spending their receipts but again this should be monitored with deference to local circumstances and procurement opportunities.

The anti-social aspects of the charter are again fine but joined up working with other agencies should be encouraged.

The allocations policies of individual landlords would suffer if a central allocations policy was too rigid. Local differences must be taken into account; we all agree that access to housing must be fair and transparent.

We also believe that rent setting should be on the basis of house size and the amenities available we think rent setting should be at the local level in consultation with tenants.

With regard to the specific questions asked in the consultation we would comment as follows:

Have we missed anything?

No – we believe all areas are covered. However, we also believe that equalities should be covered as a specific outcome.

Is there anything you are particularly concerned about that would not fall within one of the above outcomes?

No.

Is the wording of any of these outcomes likely to cause problems? Do you have any suggestions that you would like us to consider?

Wording on rents implies that several other features of properties must be taken into account when setting rent levels – this may not be the case. The more features that are included, the less easy to understand a structure becomes. We do agree that rent setting should be on the basis of house size and the amenities available but we think rent setting should be carried out at the local level in consultation with tenants.

Value for Money – this wording is not necessarily easy for customers to understand and should be revised.

How do you define “content” as in the outcomes on Anti-Social Behaviour and Estate Management?
This wording should be reviewed.

Is the level of detail about right, or do we need more detail, or less?

We would be concerned if more detail was included. This would dilute the impact of the charter and make it more bureaucratic. There was also a view that having the charter as a purely outcomes based agreement could leave it open to too much local interpretation thus weakening its structure.

Are there too many outcomes? Are any unnecessary? Are there any we should drop, and why?

We believe the number is about right and covers the key areas.

This document was produced in a collaborative exercise between HHP and WIFTRA.org and after a consultation exercise with all our tenants.

About WIFTRA.org:

Wiftra are the umbrella organisation covering all of the tenant and resident's groups within the Western Isles. We are part of the Regional Network and feed into national and UK wide organisations. We have prepared reports for many organisations including Hebridean Housing Partnership and the Scottish Government.

Want to know more go to:

<http://www.wiftra.org> or contact Kevin@wiftra.org.

About Hebridean Housing Partnership:

Hebridean Housing Partnership became a Registered Social Landlord on 12th September 2006 following the transfer of the Comhairle's housing stock. HHP is a charitable not-for-profit housing association governed by a board of 15 members.

<http://www.hebrideanhousing.co.uk> or contact johnmaciver@hebrideanhousing.co.uk