

# Tenant Participation Strategy

**August 2007**

**Aberdeenshire Housing Partnership constantly strives to improve and develop its services and we see tenant participation as an essential tool in helping the organisation to become more efficient, accountable and responsive to changing needs.**



**Effective tenant participation can lead to better and more responsive management and this will help inform decisions about improving service delivery and providing value for money.**

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**TENANT PARTICIPATION STRATEGY**

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If you would like a copy of this document to be sent to you in Large Print or on audiotape, or if you need help with translation to another language please contact us.

A short summary of this strategy will be made available to all our tenants and the full document can be accessed from the office or on our website [www.a-h-p.org.uk](http://www.a-h-p.org.uk)

## **SECTION 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

A Strategy is a plan for future action and this strategy is our plan to ensure that all tenants of Aberdeenshire Housing Partnership can exercise their rights to influence the housing service and help us reach decisions that work effectively and fairly for tenants.

We recognise that tenants and their communities are at the heart of our business and also that effective tenant participation is a continuous and evolving process which requires our consistent support and commitment.

We will welcome partnership with AHP Tenants Panel and other tenant representative organisations which may be introduced through the implementation of this strategy.

## **SECTION 2**

### **BACKGROUND**

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 provides the legal framework for tenant participation.

The legislation places a duty on landlords to prepare a strategy for promoting the participation of tenants in the development of proposals for the management of the housing stock and the provision of related services, “so far as such proposals are likely to affect such tenants”

Landlords are also required to:

- \*ensure that barriers to participation such as language, accessibility, timing, travel and childcare costs for attendees have been considered;

- \*consider the needs of equalities groups and proactively involve traditionally excluded groups in the participation process;

- \*ensure registered tenant organisations promote equal opportunities and are open and accessible to all tenants.

Arrangements for informing and consulting with registered tenant organisations and individual tenants on a range of housing issues and for taking account of their views are at the heart of this strategy. Also included are an assessment of the resources required, and a statement of the resources proposed, to make the strategy effective.

## SECTION 3

### **AIMS and OBJECTIVES**

Aberdeenshire Housing Partnership constantly strives to improve and develop its services and we see tenant participation as an essential tool in helping the organisation to become more efficient, accountable and responsive to changing needs.

Effective participation can lead to better and more responsive management and this will help inform decisions about improving service delivery and providing value for money.

#### **Our objectives for successful tenant participation are to ensure that;**

- ❖ Our tenants recognise us as an approachable and listening landlord.
- ❖ As a natural part of our service we ensure equal access and fair delivery of services to all sectors of our communities including young people and families, older tenants, those with disabilities or illness and those with different cultural, language and communication requirements.
- ❖ We provide better housing management through improved service delivery and value for money;
- ❖ We support opportunities for tenants, Board members and staff to develop new knowledge and skills;
- ❖ We develop effective communication between staff, Board members and all tenants;
- ❖ Board members, staff and tenants become more aware of each others perspectives and organisational and financial limitations;
- ❖ Better links are created between us and the communities we serve.;
- ❖ Formal tenant organisations such as the Tenants Panel feel valued and supported in their work
- ❖ Tenants have access to developing the skills and confidence they seek to influence decisions;
- ❖ There is a culture of mutual respect and understanding between all those involved in participation;
- ❖ Tenants' satisfaction with their homes and neighbourhood is enhanced;
- ❖ Board, management and staff have increased motivation in delivering and developing services which meet tenant and community aspirations.

## SECTION 4

### **DEVELOPMENT OF THE STRATEGY**

Aberdeenshire Housing Partnership is committed to tenant participation and has sought to involve as many tenants as possible in the development of this strategy to ensure that it is inclusive and accurately reflects the tenants' views.

An initial strategy document was drafted and circulated to the following groups for their consideration and feedback;

- AHP Tenants Panel
- The Board and Committees
- Management and Staff

TIGHRA, a voluntary organisation which promotes tenant participation and works with AHP provided guidance on the content of the strategy.

After initial changes to reflect this stage of consultation, the document was made accessible to all tenants through the Tenants Panel News Sheet and on the website. Comments received in response to the draft document were given full consideration in the preparation of the final strategy and incorporated where appropriate.

## SECTION 5

### **KEY ELEMENTS OF THE STRATEGY**

#### **A Communication and Information**

Clear and effective communication is an important part of a successful participation plan. In this section we describe the ways in which we will communicate with tenants to ensure that information can flow effectively and easily between us.

Currently we use a variety of ways of communicating with tenants and we will seek to add to this in response to tenants' changing needs.

When we provide information to our tenants we will make sure that it conforms to our *Customer Charter* and in particular we will ensure that it is;

- Clear and straight- forward, avoiding 'jargon'.
- Delivered in a way that all tenants can use (for example, in large print or on audiotape).
- Offers opportunities for tenants to give a response or get more details.

## Methods of Communication and Information.

Newsletters	<p>Four newsletters will be provided to all tenants each year. Newsletters are issued to keep our tenants updated with information about activities such as new housing developments, staffing or Board changes and proposed revisions to policies or services, some of which will be the subject of consultation.</p> <p>Once a year the newsletter will include information for tenants about how we have performed over the past year in providing services, meeting targets and being financially careful and effective.</p>
Tenants Panel News sheet	At least two each year will be issued. Information is provided directly from the members of the Panel to tenants.
Tenants Handbook	<p>A guide with essential information for every tenant about how their tenancy works and about their rights and responsibilities.</p> <p>Issued to everyone at the start of their tenancy and regularly updated as changes become necessary.</p>
Information Leaflets	AHP has a range of information leaflets which are available on particular subjects or which provide additional advice and guidance to the handbook . Available from the office or on request.
Website www.a-h-p.org.uk	We plan to fully develop our website to incorporate information, advice and guidance to tenants who use the internet. Many of our policy documents and consultation opportunities will be included and updated on the website once development is complete. Tenants will be invited to get involved in this development.
Home Visits	<p>Our housing staff will make regular visits to estates and communities and tenants can make appointments to see a member of staff at home if their situation requires this. Additionally housing staff will call on new tenants once they are settled into their new home.</p> <p>Where properties are undergoing improvements (eg. new windows or kitchens), or major repairs we will visit tenants to ascertain their views and requirements on the work to be carried out.</p>
Sheltered and Supported Housing Meetings	Staff will call regularly at housing complexes where tenants receive support from an officer on-site. Tenants or their advocates are welcome to meet staff if they have an issue which they wish to discuss.
Public Meetings	Where there is a community issue which requires discussion between local residents and AHP staff, a public meeting can be arranged at a suitable time and convenient local location.

Satisfaction Surveys	We will periodically test tenant satisfaction about various parts of our service by issuing some or all tenants with a questionnaire. Every tenant who has a repair carried out will be provided with a satisfaction slip to return to the office to indicate their opinion about the work and contractor.
Consultation Surveys	As issues arise which require general or local consultation, surveys may be considered to be the most appropriate way to gauge views. Survey questionnaires will be made available by post or email. Assistance to respond to a survey may be available to those who require this and who advise the office of their particular needs. Responses will be analysed, account properly taken of views and feedback provided.
Letters, Telephone Calls, Faxes  Email	Sometimes we require to communicate matters to tenants individually and we will use personal letters where this is appropriate. Telephone or fax contact will be made where this is required to meet the needs of the tenant and the staff addressing the issue. Increasing numbers of tenants are using email facilities and staff will be responsive to requests for communication by this service.
Annual Report	Once a year we will make available our Annual Report which provides information about how the organisation has performed in the last financial year and about it's plans for the future. The Annual Report will be featured on the website and copies made available on request .

## **5B - Consultation and Feedback**

We will consult on any issue which would significantly affect tenants and this consultation may be carried out in a variety of ways depending on the nature of the issue involved.

By the term 'significantly affect' we mean that the issue would:

- have an impact on the service which the tenant receives;
- change any of the rights or responsibilities of the tenant or AHP;
- increase any housing-related cost to the tenant, or;
- change facilities, equipment or amenities in or around the tenant's home.

As a guide, consultation will be undertaken where changes in policy are being considered in the following areas:

### Housing Services

- Allocations
- Tenancy agreements
- Tenancy management
- Rent management
- Anti-social behaviour policy
- Tenant participation

## Corporate Services

- Strategic Plan
- Equality and Diversity
- Tenant Compensation
- Customer Charter
- Housing Service Delivery and Performance Information

## Property Services

- Day to day Maintenance services
- Scottish Housing Quality Standard
- Improvements and upgrades
- Design briefs and specifications
- Maintenance of open spaces

## Financial Services

- Rent setting
- Rent increases
- Service charges

A reasonable timescale will be given for tenants to respond and their views will be taken into account as part of the decision-making process. Feedback will be given on the outcomes of the consultation and the reasons for the decisions being made.

By the term 'reasonable timescale' we mean that sufficient time would be provided to enable consultation to take place effectively, taking into account the requirements (for example; training, meeting and information schedules) of those engaged in the process.

Tenants will always receive feedback on the consultation process. They will be advised where their views have helped shape policy and service delivery. Where their views have not been incorporated into the final decision, an explanation will be given. This feedback may be given in a number of ways depending on the issues and the numbers involved. Taking into account all the circumstances, an assessment of the most appropriate method(s) of providing feedback will be made and the most effective means adopted.

As part of the Action Plan for this strategy we will, with the assistance of the Tenants Panel, develop a good practice template for the consultation process.

This will include guidance on the principles, support and scheduling of consultation and will act as a standard for all future consultation work.

Tenants will be actively encouraged to bring forward issues for consultation. We recognise that there may be times when we are not aware that things need to be changed or new ways of working or communicating developed. We will encourage tenants to bring forward issues for the attention of the Tenants Panel or to a staff or Board member who will then be responsible for raising the matter for further discussion.

This process is not applicable for a tenant who wishes to raise an individual complaint about AHP; it is there to ensure that issues which affect a community or tenants as a whole are brought onto the consultation agenda.

## **5C - Formal Structures For Consultation And Participation**

There are some issues which we will consult all our tenants about on an individual basis. Every year we will write to tenants individually and provide adequate information to enable them to give their opinion on our annual rent review proposals.

Other consultation opportunities will be offered through the newsletters, consultation surveys or meetings – as indicated in Section 5

Additionally we will support tenants to form collective group structures through which to engage in regular and direct contact with us and to help us to shape policies and services for the future.

Our strategy at this time recognises four routes for tenants to participate at a formal level. These routes are;

- i) AHP Board Membership
- ii) AHP Tenants Panel
- iii) Armchair Group
- iv) Local Tenant or Resident Organisations or Groups.

### **i) AHP Board Membership**

Tenants are actively encouraged to seek election to and thereafter participate as a full member of the AHP Board. Further details can be found in the AHP Board Membership Strategy.

### **ii) AHP Tenants Panel**

This Panel comprises tenants who are interested in meeting with us on a regular basis throughout the year to help set the agenda for participation and address on-going issues which require discussion, debate and consultation.

Any tenant can join the Panel and the views of Panel members are recognised as sample opinions of the general population of our tenants.

At this time the Panel has appointed a Chairperson and will develop a constitution in due course with the aim of becoming a Registered Tenant Organisation

Every effort will be made to expand the base of Panel membership and engagement with under-represented groups is particularly sought.

The Panel will;

- Meet every two months at a mutually convenient time and location
- Receive training and guidance to fulfil their role.
- Work towards Registered Tenant Organisation Status.
- Maintain minutes of their meeting which will be published on the AHP website and made available on request.
- Publish a news sheet for issue to tenants to keep them updated with the issues under discussion and the outcome of consultation completed.

Tenants wishing to raise a matter for the attention of the Panel can do so by contacting the AHP office. Staff there will direct their query or comments to the Chairperson on the Panel.

### **iii) Armchair Group**

The formation of this group is subject to further consultation with tenants.

It is intended that the Armchair Group would be a facility to enable consultation with tenants who would like to be on the Tenants Panel but who are unable to fully participate or attend meetings on a regular basis.

Consultation would be by post or email with links between the Tenants Panel and the Armchair Group being created to ensure an integrated forum. Group members could receive the minutes and reports sent to the Panel along with any background or guidance information and occasional consultation questionnaires. Feedback from the Armchair Group members would be brought to the attention of the Panel.

It is hoped that this group may also be used by those living in supported housing with the assistance of support and management staff.

### **iv) Local Tenant or Resident Organisations**

At the present time there are no local tenants' organisations within the stock owned by Aberdeenshire Housing Partnership, but it is recognised that if tenant participation is to develop through local groups it requires to be suitably resourced.

It would therefore be Aberdeenshire Housing Partnership's intention to provide support, wherever and whenever appropriate and in whatever form is required, to anyone wishing to establish such a group. The level of resources made available would be subject to the approval of the AHP Board and would depend on the geographical area covered by the group, the specific purpose of the group and the number of tenants who might potentially become members.

Groups will also be encouraged to access funding from other sources including the National Lottery, European Social Fund, Communities Scotland and charitable organisations. Assistance with applications will be given where practicable.

### **Registered Tenant Organisations**

There are benefits for a Tenant Organisation in becoming recognised as a Registered Tenant Organisation. In addition to the organisation having a legal right to be formally consulted by its landlord, it will also have the advantage of being eligible for grant funding from Communities Scotland (grants are available to stimulate interest in tenant participation, until 2009). Furthermore its representatives will have access to be involved in engagement on national housing policy issues through the programme known as National Tenant Engagement.

Any new or established tenants' organisation seeking to become registered will need to demonstrate compliance with the following requirements;

- they will require to have an appropriate Constitution;
- there must be an elected committee of at least 3 people who may co-opt other members on to the group;
- they must identify the defined area represented by the group;

- their membership policy must show that the group is open to all the tenants living within the defined area over the age of 16;
- they must provide evidence that the group's finances are used appropriately, properly recorded, reported and accounted for each year;
- they must show that the group has open meetings, consults with the wider membership and acts on the views of the tenants it represents.

### **Groups Who do Not Register**

Aberdeenshire Housing Partnership recognises that not all tenants will wish to join a tenants group and that not all tenants groups will wish to become registered. AHP will continue to work with individuals and non-registered groups to ensure that they are consulted and notified of any relevant issues.

## **SECTION 6** **MONITORING AND REVIEW**

Tenant participation is an ongoing and evolving process which should lead to benefits for all concerned. To ensure that agreed objectives are being met and to highlight which activities are working well and which are not and where adjustments to the process are required in the light of changing circumstances, Aberdeenshire Housing Partnership has established a system for the monitoring, evaluation and review of the Strategy.

A Tenant Participation Action Plan is in the process of being developed and will be reviewed by the Tenants Panel and the Board . This will ensure that the Plan is being updated on a regular basis, timescales are appropriate and being met and all proposed actions are being delivered.

A bi-annual review of the Strategy will also be undertaken with a view to assessing its effectiveness and appropriateness.

## **SECTION 7** **RESOURCES**

Aberdeenshire Housing Partnership has always regarded tenant participation as an important part of the day to day work of the organisation. In support of this commitment a figure will be allocated on an annual basis to ensure its continuing development.

In addition to the above budget we will provide funds to cover the cost of:

- Newsletter and leaflet production;
- Website updating;
- Stationery, photocopying and postage;
- Travel and attendance expenses, including childcare costs;

- Financial assistance to registered tenants groups;
- Conference and Event attendance of Tenant Panel representatives;
- Membership of advisory organisations.

## **SECTION 8** **TRAINING**

AHP is committed to ensuring that tenants, staff and Board members have the necessary skills to enable them to be involved in effective tenant participation. In consultation with our tenants, training needs will be assessed and steps taken to ensure that appropriate training is made available.

AHP Tenants Panel members will also be supported and encouraged to attend conferences and external events aimed at highlighting good practice and current issues relating to tenant participation and housing services. In the light of delegate costs for such events, the Panel and AHP will require to agree a reasonable and appropriate sum to be taken from the budget for these activities.

Consideration will also be given to holding joint training sessions bringing together tenants, staff and Board members. This would serve to provide an opportunity for the various partners to share experience, knowledge and perspectives about housing services and activities .

## **SECTION 9** **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY**

Aberdeenshire Housing Partnership wants to make sure that all of its tenants are treated in a fair and equal manner regardless of ethnic or national origins, race, colour, age, gender, sexuality, political or other belief, religion, marital status, illness, disability or other status.

So that everyone can access information about the organisation, arrangements will be made for information to be available, on request, in different styles, languages or formats. Translation and interpretation services will also be made available if this is required.

To ensure as far as possible maximum attendance from tenants, many of whom live in rural areas, every effort will be made to hold public meetings at times convenient to tenants and in locations which are fully accessible.

Where appropriate, transport and carer costs will be reimbursed to those wishing to attend meetings. The rates payable will be in accordance with our general policy on expenses.

## **TENANT PARTICIPATION ACTION PLAN**

<b><u>OBJECTIVE</u></b>	<b><u>TIMESCALE</u></b>
<b>Establish Residents Panel</b>	<b>Completed March 2007</b>
<b>Draft Tenant Participation Strategy.</b>	<b>Completed June 2007</b>
<b>Issue draft Tenants Participation Strategy document for consultation.</b>	<b>July/August 2007</b>
<b>Consider feedback on draft Tenant Participation Strategy document and amend as appropriate.</b>	<b>August 2007</b>
<b>Present final Tenant Participation Strategy document to Board for approval.</b>	<b>August 2007</b>
<b>Update Tenants Handbook</b>	<b>August 2007</b>
<b>Publish Tenant Participation Strategy</b>	<b>September 2007</b>
<b>Undertake second Tenants Satisfaction Survey</b>	<b>October 2007</b>
<b>Consultation on Annual Rent Setting.</b>	<b>November 2007</b>
<b>Consultation on Rent Restructuring</b>	<b>February 2008</b>