

tenant participation

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*does your strategy document
measure up?*



SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Communities
Scotland 

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1. The purpose of this guide

The purpose of this guide is to provide a practical checklist on what a good strategy document should look like and what it should cover. Landlords, tenants and tenant organisations can use this guide to assess the content and format of their strategy document. The guide provides good-practice examples of presentation and practice that you could consider including in your tenant participation strategy.

What is a tenant participation strategy?

The term ‘tenant participation strategy’ comes from the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. Under this Act, landlords must publish a tenant participation strategy in consultation with their tenants and tenant organisations.

A strategy is an action plan that:

- outlines landlords’ commitment to involving tenants and tenant organisations in the decisions about their homes and communities;
- says how this will be done; and
- sets out a range of targets that are meaningful and can be measured and achieved.

The strategy should be flexible and reflect local circumstances.

The strategy should include the following headings.

Introduction
The strategy’s background
Aims and objectives
How the strategy was developed and who was involved
The reasons for a strategy and the benefits of tenant participation
Links to other strategies and services
How to keep tenants informed
Consultation
Giving tenants feedback
How the strategy will be reviewed and monitored
Performance standards
Working with registered tenant organisations (RTOs)
Resources
Training
Time to communicate
Equal opportunities

The strategy should be a framework that allows everyone involved in delivering and receiving housing and associated services to work towards continuously improving these services.

Preparing the strategy document is no longer enough. Organisations, including directors, managers, frontline staff, elected members and management committee members, need to support tenants to be involved in the decision-making process. Effective tenant participation is about sharing information, ideas and power and where landlords and tenants together agree how their homes and the environment should be managed. The commitments and actions in the strategy should support the organisation’s commitment to work in partnership with its tenants.

The document should clearly set out the following.

○ Introduction

Many strategies include introductions or forewords by the convenor of housing (or equivalent), chair of the management committee, chief executive or director of housing. This shows the organisation's commitment at the most senior level.

One good example is the Moray Council.

"The Moray Council – its elected members, officers and tenants – welcomes the opportunity to publish this first Tenant Participation Strategy for Moray...We recognise that an essential part of this is increasing tenant participation in the decision-making process."

Vice Chairman – Community Services Committee Moray Tenant Participation Strategy, April 2003

It will be easier for the whole organisation to be committed if senior managers, elected members and management committees are committed to involving tenants in all areas of their business. By having the strategy approved by the most senior person in the organisation, the commitment should be more meaningful and run throughout the organisation.

Another good example to consider is from Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (the Western Isles Council)

"The first and most important thing to say about this document is that it is not finished – and if Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar is doing what it should do as a landlord then in one sense it will never be finished."

A tenant participation and consultation strategy is ongoing and open ended, it needs to be reactive to the changing needs of the tenants – and the communities within which those tenants live".

This shows the council recognises that tenant participation is a continuous process and under constant review.

○ The strategy's background

It is useful to provide an outline of the duties and responsibilities that the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 now places on landlords and the new rights for tenants to be involved in housing and related matters. This section can also highlight previous commitment and achievements in tenant participation, and give details of any current tenant participation structures and activity.

○ Aims and objectives

This section should set out the aims of the organisation in developing the strategy. It should recognise the benefits and importance of involving tenants in the decision-making processes and of committing to tenant participation, not simply meeting the minimum legal requirements.

The vision Renfrewshire Council has of tenant participation in the future is as follows.

“A culture where consultation with, and the participation of, our tenants is an integral and routine part of our activities and makes a significant contribution to ensuring the excellence of the housing service in Renfrewshire.”

Renfrewshire Tenant Participation Strategy, 2003

Consider providing details of the main objectives that will help your organisation achieve its aim. This will also help you to develop a focus for your activities. Renfrewshire Council sets out six objectives it will use – here is an example of one of these.

“Raise awareness of the benefits of tenant participation among staff, elected members and tenants.”

○ How the strategy was developed and who was involved

The Act says that landlords have to *“take account of and have regard to the views of tenants and registered tenant organisations in matters that affect them”*. The strategy could give examples of how you have involved tenants and registered tenant organisations and how this consultation has helped to influence the decisions and outcomes they were consulted on. This also recognises the hard work of those involved in developing the strategy and may encourage others to be involved in the future by showing tenants that their opinions matter.

It is also a good idea to identify the members of staff who tenants can contact about tenant participation issues.

○ The reason for a strategy and the benefits of tenant participation

You can use this section to explain to tenants, staff and the community the benefits of tenant participation. It is important that tenants understand and are able to be part of the processes involved in delivering housing and associated services. If tenants have a meaningful role in making decisions and understand the processes, a better working relationship and trust will develop and increase the levels of satisfaction with the services you provide.

There may be times when landlords and tenants have different views on how issues should be approached and progressed. In these cases, everyone involved will have to work together to reach an agreement.

○ **Links to other strategies and services**

When preparing your tenant participation strategy, think about how it can effectively link to other strategies, for example, the local housing strategy and the community plan. By making the links with other strategies, you can make the most of opportunities to consult people and increase tenants' awareness of issues that have been raised. This could result in making the most of limited resources. Tenant participation cannot be separate from other operational areas within the organisation, particularly within local authorities.

○ **How to keep tenants informed**

This section should set out the range of methods that you will use to keep your tenants informed. You have to show that you have asked tenants how they want to be kept informed and what information they want. Tenants' preferences may change and how they want to be kept informed may depend on the topic. When you consult your tenants, you should regularly review how they want to be kept informed. You should consider using a mix of:

- ▶ newsletters and information leaflets;
- ▶ a tenants' handbook;
- ▶ open days and conferences;
- ▶ road shows;
- ▶ consultation registers;
- ▶ website and IT developments;
- ▶ focus groups on particular topics;
- ▶ text messages; and
- ▶ village voice or street representatives.

○ **Consultation**

This section should set out what issues landlords must consult tenants on and what methods they should use. Landlords have to show that they have asked tenants what housing and related issues they want to be consulted on. Some organisations may have little or no formal history of asking for tenants' views, so this culture will not change overnight. This may be a gradual process which will have to be maintained over time. However, supporting and encouraging tenants to get involved can mean that information, ideas and power are shared successfully.

Many tenants will be interested in being consulted on other issues (such as collecting waste and cutting grass) that are often carried out by another department within the council or provided by the council for the landlord. Although in the past many other issues have been seen as a housing role, involving tenants in every area of the organisation's business will have benefits.

An example in the Albyn Housing Society Strategy acknowledges the following.

"In developing this strategy, it has become clear that it is not possible to address all the issues of consultation, participation and communication that the Society would like to address. We therefore expect this strategy to develop over time to fit the needs and aspirations of all the stakeholders. It is a starting point, not a conclusion."

Albyn Housing Society Strategy, 2003

You should ask tenants and tenant organisations about the range of issues they want to be consulted on – these should be clearly set out within the strategy. The Act gives tenants the right to ask for information, such as:

- ▶ managing estates;
- ▶ offering housing;
- ▶ repairs and maintenance;
- ▶ rent and service charges;
- ▶ the environment;
- ▶ service standards and performance;
- ▶ investment programmes;
- ▶ reviewing services; and
- ▶ welfare rights and tenants' advice.

An effective consultation strategy will use a wide range of methods so tenants can be involved if and when they choose to do so. You need to review consultation methods regularly to make sure they are working and that they meet the needs of all groups of people. You can use different methods, including:

- ▶ focus groups;
- ▶ postal, phone and door-to-door surveys;
- ▶ house visits;
- ▶ conferences;
- ▶ road shows;
- ▶ tenants' forums;
- ▶ consultation registers; and
- ▶ village voice and street representatives.

Many tenants do not want to be involved in forums or meetings, so a useful way of getting people's views is to set up a consultation register of interested tenants. You could invite every tenant to be included on a register so you can contact them when their specific area of interest arises. This allows people with a genuine interest in a topic to be involved and provides a database of interested people for you to use in the future.

○ Giving tenants feedback

This is one of the most important areas in the participation process. You must carefully consider how you will give tenants feedback following all consultation processes. This section should clearly set out how you will let tenants know how their opinions have helped shape policy and service delivery. Often, tenants take the time to respond but are not made aware of the outcome of their involvement. If you keep tenants informed, they may be more willing to continue their involvement. You should ask tenants how they want to receive information and consider using:

- ▶ individual letters;
- ▶ newsletters and information leaflets;
- ▶ open days;
- ▶ a website; and
- ▶ text messages.

○ How the strategy will be reviewed and monitored

This section should set out the arrangements to monitor and review the strategy. You should develop and agree these arrangements in consultation with tenants and tenant organisations. To begin with, it may be useful to review the strategy each year to make sure that you are actually achieving what the strategy document sets out to do. Tenants and those who developed the strategy must be involved in these processes. You should also develop ways in which you will test how the strategy is working and involve tenants and tenant organisations in this. One way of showing that the strategy is working would be to include an example of how and on what issue you involved tenants and the outcome of that involvement.

A good example is in Canmore Housing Association's strategy document. They have committed to an annual review that will be monitored by tenants, staff and board members and would meet to consider the cost implications for tenant and staff training, reports and recording of tenants and residents meetings (including tenants forums, etc), feedback and follow up on surveys and liaison with related groups and organisations. Financial information on all tenant participation activity will be provided in the annual review and regular newsletters and briefings will be provided for all tenants on the progress of the strategy

○ Performance standards

Landlords may want to consider referring to Communities Scotland's tenant participation performance standard, which Regulation & Inspection Division will assess you against. Guiding Standard 2.2 on Tenant Participation says:

"We have published and are implementing a sound strategy for encouraging and supporting tenants, residents and service users to participate actively in all areas of our work. We support tenants who take an active interest in managing their homes."

Communities Scotland Performance Guiding Standards, 2003

When Regulation & Inspection Division carries out the assessment, you will have to show how you are meeting this performance standard through developing your strategy and putting it into practice.

○ Working with registered tenant organisations (RTOs)

The Act gives tenant organisations who register with their landlord a recognised role in the tenant participation process. An RTO is an independent organisation set up to represent its tenants' interests on housing and related issues. It is not a replacement for consulting individual tenants but gives RTOs a legal right to be consulted.

Landlords have to maintain a public register that is available for inspection at reasonable times (for example, during office hours).

The register should contain:

- ▶ the name of your organisation;
- ▶ the area it covers;
- ▶ a contact address; and
- ▶ any other relevant information (for example, a website address).

This section should set out the ways in which your landlord will work and support new, developing and established tenant organisations in terms of staff and financial resources (for example training, administration support, and making premises available to hold meetings).

The strategy should set out the arrangements for registering tenant organisations. It should also set out the procedure for appealing against an organisation not being registered, being removed from the register, or not being removed from the register.

○ Resources

When consulting your tenants and registered tenant organisations, you must consider the resources you will need for tenant participation. The document should set out the resources you will give to tenant participation. You should consider:

- ▶ hiring meeting rooms;
- ▶ the cost of providing lunches, teas and coffee;
- ▶ providing crèche facilities;
- ▶ special requirements for people's needs;
- ▶ travelling expenses for tenants going to meetings;
- ▶ printing and posting newsletters and other information papers;
- ▶ grants to help new, developing and established tenant organisations;
- ▶ access to IT and support networks;
- ▶ staff time; and
- ▶ training.

○ Time to communicate

It is essential to plan and include enough time to consult tenants and RTOs on all your activities so that tenants can have a real opportunity to influence the organisation's service and performance. You should involve tenants and RTOs in setting acceptable timescales for consultation. One effective way of doing this is to produce a yearly action plan or a participation calendar that clearly sets out achievable priorities for the year ahead. These should reflect your and tenants' priorities and include enough time to provide information, consult tenants and give them feedback.

○ Training

This section should set out your commitment to make sure that tenants and staff have the necessary skills and resources to allow them to get involved. You should assess training needs and make the appropriate training courses available. An effective way of breaking down barriers is to hold joint training sessions that bring together tenants, staff, elected members and management committee members in a positive environment. You should regularly monitor and review training needs to develop, build and maintain confidence and knowledge.

○ Equal opportunities

Under the Act, you must assess the needs of equalities groups living in your area. Everyone has a responsibility to break down barriers and to involve as many people as possible. It is much better to find out your tenants' needs and to meet these needs.

Some landlords are now using DVDs and CD-ROMs as an alternative way of getting messages effectively across to a wider audience. One very positive example to communicate policies and encourage involvement has been produced through a joint venture by Kirk Care, Bield and Hanover Housing Associations. They produced a DVD in the four recognised languages (that is, Cantonese, Urdu, Bangladeshi and Arabic) to encourage black and ethnic-minority communities to consider the benefits of living in supported housing. This is an attempt to encourage black and ethnic-minority groups to apply for sheltered housing and tackle the imbalance of black and ethnic-minority people living in supported accommodation.

You should give an example of the information you can give in minority languages, large print and so on. Assess what arrangements you have in place for providing information in Braille, in other languages, on audio tape, on CD and so on, and how quickly you can make these available if someone asks for them.

Communities Scotland HomePoint has developed a translation website which provides a free service (in languages other than English) on a range of housing issues for anyone who has to give clients information. They provide information in the most common languages used in Scotland.

Visit www.homepoint.communitiesscotland.gov.uk for more details.

4. What the document will look like

When you write the strategy, you should consider who will be reading the document. You should have the full strategy available when anyone asks for it but you could also have a smaller, easy-to-read leaflet that you can send to all your tenants. Make the documents look appealing and be something that tenants will be interested in to pick up and read. Think about the text type and the font size (consider using at least 12 point). Do not use jargon. Consider applying for Plain English Campaign's Crystal Mark for your documents.

It may be appropriate to break the strategy down into individual documents so that they can be read easily. You could separate out details of:

- ▶ registering tenant organisations;
- ▶ your action plan;
- ▶ the consultation timetable; and
- ▶ an assessment of resources and budget details.

It may be useful to develop a symbol that you can put on all tenant participation strategy documents and related documents so that they can be easily identified.

You can get good-practice guidance on how to provide information in an accessible way from the Scottish National Standards for Housing Information and Advice Services. HomePoint publishes the guidance. Your organisation may already be working to put the standards into practice, but you can get more copies of the manual containing the good-practice guidance by contacting HomePoint on 0131 479 5251.

Now check that your strategy document includes the following.

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Resources	
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Time to communicate	
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Contact the team



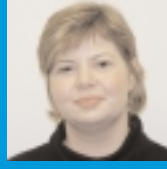
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Availability in other formats

This newsletter is also available on tape, in Braille, large print and community languages. For information, contact Janette Campbell on 0131 479 5162 or email: campbellj@communitiesscotland.gov.uk.

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অনুবাদ করার ব্যাপারে তথ্য পেতে হলে জানেট
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ই-মেইল পাঠান।

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جیٹ کیمپبل سے ٹیلیفون نمبر 0131 479 5162 پر رابطہ کریں۔
یا پھر ای میل کریں۔

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