

# Accessible information to tenants

March 2025

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# 1. Summary

- 1.1 In 2024, the Scottish Government (SG) commissioned TPAS Scotland (TPAS) to carry out a thematic study with the aim of researching and reporting on the accessibility of information and literature aimed at tenants.
- 1.2 TPAS has been supporting tenants' groups and landlords for over 40 years, providing services that help upskill tenants to become involved in a range of housing issues, and supporting landlords in making this happen.
- 1.3 The basis of this research comprised a series of discussion groups with tenants and officers, which took place during spring 2024, via Teams. In addition, a survey was issued to a random sample of landlords to capture additional information.
- 1.4 From these discussion groups, we were able to collate a range of documents that landlords provide to their tenants, and to capture the views of tenants on how accessible this information is.
- 1.5 During this research, examples of good practice have been identified, including instances of tenants being part of editorial panels for newsletters, and some landlords creating a "tenant approved" badge to display on their publications.
- 1.6 A number of landlords have produced Easy Read documents, which are free of jargon and with simple clear images, however it should be noted these are not easy to produce due to the experience required to develop these, and the fact that original publications must be written in a way that allows straightforward translation to Easy Read. Landlords should still be encouraged to consider how they can create good quality documents that are accessible for their tenant base.
- 1.7 In recent years, landlords have increased their use of digital information sharing, either on websites, social media or via on-line meetings. These often increase accessibility for tenants, and for many landlords, they are a cost-effective way of producing and disseminating information.

1.8 Landlords' websites should contain up to date information on the organisation, governing body/committee, and staff. The websites reviewed as part of this research were accessible, with the option to translate or read aloud the text. It should be noted that this was a visual review and not a compliance audit to check if sites were fully accessible in accordance with regulations.

## 2. Background

2.1 The introduction of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 created a legal requirement for landlords to actively develop and support tenant participation.

2.2 All social landlords, i.e. local authorities and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) in Scotland must have a Tenant Participation strategy which will enable continuous improvement in landlords' performance in supporting and enabling tenants to participate.

2.3 The Scottish Social Housing Charter was introduced in March 2012, setting the standards and outcomes that all social landlords should aim to achieve when performing their housing activities.

2.4 Landlords must provide information on outcomes and indicators through the Annual Return on the Charter (ARC), which must be submitted annually to the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR). The Charter includes communication outcomes in recognition of the fact that landlords need to manage their businesses in a way that ensures tenants and other customers find it easy to communicate with them. It is clear that the accessibility of information and literature aimed at tenants and service users has the potential to impact on performance; in particular the indicators that relate to tenant engagement and satisfaction.

2.5 Social landlords must comply with accessibility regulations for public sector bodies that came into force in September 2018:

Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No.2) Accessibility Regulations 2018

These regulations build on existing obligations within the Equalities Act 2010:

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>

## 3. Methodology

- 3.1 A variety of methods were used to gather evidence for this research, with the primary method a series of discussion groups via Teams using open ended questions and Teams Polls.
- 3.2 The groups that were specifically targeted for participation in the discussion groups were:
  - Tenants;
  - Tenant scrutiny panel members;
  - Regional Network members (now Tenants Together Scotland);
  - Tenant Participation Officers (TPOs);
  - Housing managers/Directors.
- 3.3 The discussions followed a set format, and additional questions focusing on landlord support were included for the groups aimed at tenants, scrutiny panel and Regional Network members.
- 3.4 Desktop research was carried out by viewing landlords' websites and newsletters checking for translation and read aloud functions which make the site more accessible. A review of newsletters (where these were available on websites) was also carried out.
- 3.5 To supplement the discussion groups and desktop research, a high-level survey was set up using Smart Survey software. The results of the survey can be seen later in this report.

## 4. Evidence

### Discussion Groups- Housing Staff

- 4.1 Staff were asked about the range of information provided for tenants, and the list included:
  - Leaflets;
  - Charter report;
  - Maintenance information;
  - Condensation/damp information;
  - Tenancy agreement;

- Policies;
- Newsletters;
- Consultations;
- Short videos;
- Annual report;
- Website feed;
- Tenancy handbook.

4.2 Most of the documents listed are available on landlord websites in order to make them more accessible to tenants. Staff who participated in the group discussion sessions felt that landlords are generally good at ensuring documents are accessible and are willing to adapt and try new approaches to improve accessibility. Participants highlighted practice examples as follows:

- **Aberdeen City Council** have published a document, “Moving into Sheltered Housing”, which was developed by the citywide sheltered housing group whose remit is to consider policies and procedures that affect sheltered housing complexes, and issues of importance to tenants living in sheltered housing.
- **North Ayrshire Council** introduced a ‘tenant approved’ badge on their publications aimed at tenants. These include the Tenant Group Manual, e-newsletter ‘Tenant Chat’, Sheltered Handbook and a new newsletter, ‘Redburn Record’, which is specifically aimed at the Gypsy/Traveller community.
- **Ochil View Housing Association** have, through training and tenant feedback, ensured that all their documents are delivered in an easy-read format, reducing text on colour backgrounds and using language that is easily understandable. They also provide large print text for tenants who require this.
- After their last rent review, **Highland Council** tried multiple options for reaching as many tenants as possible using channels that could be easily accessed to boost tenant engagement. The Council sent email and text messages to all tenants for whom they held contact information. Where no current contact details were held, the Council sent paper copies and spent time with tenant groups to discuss in person. The Council also requested that elected members use their platforms to promote the consultation.

4.3 Some landlords are focusing on digital inclusion and using technology to make their information more accessible. Examples include:

- **Ochil View Housing Association** have digital champions and run open days where tenants can bring along their devices and get help with using devices and software.
- **West Lothian Council** have Tea and Tablet events where tenants can get support to use their devices.
- **Williamsburgh Housing Association** are introducing Tea and Tech events for tenants in partnership with AbilityNet.

### Discussion Groups – Tenants

4.4 Tenants were asked about the range of information that their landlord provides to them and they highlighted the following:

- Rent statements;
- Newsletters;
- Handbook;
- Tenancy agreement;
- Repairs;
- Service level agreement;
- Consultations;
- Letters.

A number of participants also told us that open days/roadshows are an informal and enjoyable way of hearing information from landlords which also helps to develop and improve relationships between tenants and landlords.

4.5 Tenants were asked about the main formats in which they receive information from their landlord:

- Paper;
- Digital;
- Other.

4.6 The majority of discussion group participants mainly receive paper-based information, however noted a recent increase in use of digital information. Where tenants responded 'Other', most noted that they receive most information from their landlords via face-to-face meetings.

4.7 When tenants were asked if they thought that the information they receive is fully accessible the majority said yes, however participants also highlighted that in some instances, more work is required to ensure information is fully accessible. One example given:

- A tenant who had an issue with reading and writing and didn't have access to internet was therefore unable to access the information that their landlord issued.

More positive examples outlined during the discussion group sessions included:








- One participant stated that their landlord had used videos for sharing information on repairs. They felt this was an excellent way of sharing information with tenants in an accessible way and highlighted that this could be expanded to other information.
- Some landlords provide newsletters digitally, with an option to receive a paper copy on request. The discussion group acknowledged that digital newsletters are both accessible and economical to produce, but most participants wanted to retain a degree of choice in terms of format.
- A participant described the role tenants play in producing their landlord's newsletter, where an editorial panel of tenants review newsletters to ensure they are clear and free of jargon. A badge on the newsletter states these are "tenant approved".

## Smart Survey




4.8 A Smart Survey was developed to capture additional information to augment the responses from the discussion groups. The survey was issued to TPAS members and completed by 25 landlords, comprising 9 local authorities and 16 housing associations.



4.9 The landlords who responded manage a range of property types, and a breakdown is set out at Table 1. This allowed for comparison between general needs and specialist landlords in establishing any differences in the accessibility of information, and support provided by landlords to access information. Ultimately however, no significant differences were identified.

Table 1 Property types			Response Percent
1	General		96.00%
2	Sheltered		56.00%
3	Very Sheltered		20.00%
4	Sheltered Wheelchair		16.00%
5	Amenity Housing		52.00%
6	Wheelchair		52.00%
7	Ambulant Disabled		12.00%






4.10 The most important document tenants receive from their landlord is their tenancy agreement, and as this is a legal document it is important that tenants understand the contents of the agreement. Landlords were asked in what format(s) they provide their tenancy agreements, and the results are set out at Table 2.

Table 2 In what form do you provide your tenancy agreement and tenancy information			Response Percent
1	Paper		92.00%
2	Digital		44.00%
3	Video		0.00%
4	Other (please specify):		12.00%

4.11 Whilst there has been a shift to digital methods of information sharing in many landlords' work, the vast majority of respondents continue to provide paper copies of tenancy agreements and tenancy related paperwork.

4.12 Video was included as an option in recognition of the fact that this can offer a means of sharing detailed information in accessible ways- for example, for those with literacy issues- and through subtitles and translation. None of the landlords that responded however use video.

4.13 Landlords were asked in the discussion groups about the information that they provide to tenants. All stated that they provide newsletters. The survey asked respondents to provide information on the format of their newsletters and respondents were able to select all the options that applied to them:

Table 3 In what form do you issue newsletters			Response Percent
1	Paper		84.00%
2	Digital		64.00%
3	Website		80.00%
4	Translated		24.00%
5	Other (please specify):		28.00%





4.14 Those who selected 'Other' were asked to supply more detail, with many highlighting that newsletters are provided via social media. Some respondents offer a choice of paper or digital newsletters. Of those respondents who primarily use digital formats for their newsletters, all stated that paper copies are available on request.

4.15 Landlords were asked if tenants are involved in the production of newsletters, building on the examples shared in the discussion groups. Half stated that tenants had some involvement in developing and producing newsletters.

4.16 Landlords who involve tenants in producing newsletters were asked to supply more detail on how tenants participate, with respondents indicating the main way is for individual tenants or a panel of tenants to review articles and give feedback prior to publication.

4.17 Another method of communication is through satisfaction surveys, including online or traditional surveys. Table 4 shows that there is






now a slight shift to on-line surveys rather than face-to-face (respondents were able to select more than one option):

Table 4 In what form do you complete satisfaction surveys			Response Percent
1	Face to face		64.00%
2	Paper		52.00%
3	On-line		80.00%
4	Other (please specify):		36.00%

4.18 The other methods used are text, telephone, and social media.





4.19 Landlords also carry out a variety of consultations and respondents were asked about the methods used to carry these out. Again, respondents could select all options which apply to them. The results are noted in table 5 below.

4.20 Most respondents indicated that they use online methods and targeted groups to consult with their tenants. One-to-one meetings were the least commonly used method.

Table 5 How do you carry out consultations			Response Percent
1	One to one meeting		52.00%
2	Targeted groups		84.00%
3	On-line		88.00%
4	Public meetings		64.00%
5	Other (please specify):		36.00%





4.21 Other ways of carrying out consultations included text message, via telephone, by post, surveys, via tenants' panels and good old-fashioned door knocking.

4.22 Several standard tenancy related letters are routinely issued by landlords e.g. arrears, anti-social behaviour, estate management and alterations letters. The majority of respondents indicated that these are issued in paper format.

Table 6 In what form do you issue tenancy letters			Response Percent
1	Paper		96.00%
2	Translated		44.00%
3	Email		52.00%
4	Other (please specify):		12.00%

4.23 Some landlords also provide information via text and in large print format.

4.24 Another key set of information which landlords issue to tenants is safety information, for example information and correspondence on gas safety. It is vital that this information is provided to tenants in an accessible and understandable way to ensure tenant health and safety. Respondents were asked about the range of ways by which safety information is issued to tenants, and responses are set out at table 7:




Table 7 In what form do you issue safety information			Response Percent
1	Paper		88.00%
2	Translated		36.00%
3	Email		48.00%
4	Other (please specify):		16.00%

4.25 Responses in the 'Other' category included:

- Text;
- Website;
- Newsletters;
- Emails.

4.26 Landlords were asked if they had a system for recording tenants' preferences for communication format. 80% stated that they can store preferences on their housing management system.

4.27 Landlords were asked if their website was fully accessible, ensuring the site is useable by as many people as possible including those with visual impairment, motor difficulties, cognitive impairments and those without English as a first language. While the majority stated their website is fully accessible, over one quarter were unsure or responded ‘no’ to this question.

Table 8 Is your website fully accessible			Response Percent
1	Yes		76.00%
2	No		4.00%
3	Unsure		20.00%

4.28 Landlords were asked how they ensure their website is fully accessible. For some, it is a corporate function to review, while others have external hosting of their website with accessibility considerations included as part of the contract.

Some examples of current practice include:

- **Aberdeenshire Council** ensure screen readers can be used with their website and also ensure colours used are suitable for persons with colour blindness or other visual issues.
- **Link Housing** have an accessibility plug-in to provide a range of features including multiple languages, screen readers alongside colour and size options. Their website provider has also optimised the platform for accessibility, and tenants are involved in sense checking information published on the site.
- **Aberdeenshire Council’s** website is a corporate responsibility allocated to the user experience team. If a service submits information which is not accessible, they will not upload it.
- **Fife Council** consult on key issues including rent setting through their newsletter (postal return and option to QR scan code). They have a Tenants Conference in November and face to face meetings with Tenant Federations.

4.29 Finally, landlords were asked to share any practice examples on making information accessible.

- **Wheatley Homes South** have conducted customer surveys, focus groups, and equalities impact assessment recently on new policies, frameworks, communications, and services. This has significantly improved their services with customer involvement.
- During the pandemic, **Link Housing** introduced a new tenant armchair panel to allow tenants to provide feedback on online information and to test new services such as 'Near Me'- the NHS video call service that was made available for the social housing sector to use. They also involved their tenant scrutiny panel in reviewing standard letters sent to tenants for gas safety checks, electrical safety checks and other routine letters.
- **Viewpoint Housing Association's** newsletter is in paper format, but over the last two years this has been available in large print, braille and audio where requested.
- **Falkirk Council** have an Editorial Panel for their newsletter, made up of tenant representatives and is open to anyone to join. The panel actively seeks views and opinions of readers.

4.30 A random sample review of landlord websites was undertaken by TPAS's Communications officer to check if they are fully accessible and whether newsletters are easily available. The following were checked:

- Language could be changed;
- Font size could be changed;
- Web page could be read aloud;
- Checked use of images and videos;
- Newsletter availability.

4.31 Of the sites reviewed, all were accessible with options to have the site read aloud or translated into other languages including newsletters.

4.32 A comparison of the styles used by landlords who have adopted the "tenant approved" tick on their newsletters was also undertaken. However, there was no real difference observed between the styles; most newsletters are written without jargon

and in language which is easy to understand. The “tenant approved” badge is an example of positive practice.

## 5 Conclusion

- 5.1 Landlords are providing many different types of information to tenants, and they are using a variety of methods to make information accessible and understandable for tenants.
- 5.2 In line with recent expansion in the use of digital information, websites are increasingly being used to provide tenants and prospective tenants with information on the landlord, governing body, staff, tenancy information, advice, performance, policies and procedures.
- 5.3 During the focus group discussion held as part of this research, all participants indicated that this shift in approach towards digital was accelerated during the Covid pandemic. Evidence points to this becoming the default method of communication for newsletters, annual reports, performance reports etc. However, it should be noted that key information such as tenancy agreements mainly continue to be provided in paper form.
- 5.4 Participants also highlighted an increase in on-line meetings e.g. via Teams, Zoom etc for tenants’ groups, tenant consultations and governing body meetings.
- 5.5 The transition towards increased use of digital information also maximises accessibility in the sense that websites can incorporate a range of accessibility tools, including translation and features such as reading aloud etc. Nonetheless, this is predicated on the fact that tenants generally have internet access and appropriate equipment such as a phone, laptop or tablet which some tenants may not have. It should also be noted that some tenants simply have a preference to receive information in a hard copy form.
- 5.6 Similarly, the transition towards more on-line meetings can make taking part in consultations easier- again, provided there is access to internet and appropriate equipment.
- 5.7 Tenants did acknowledge that there were benefits to on-line meetings and digital engagement, however many participants

indicated they want to have a choice in how they receive information and in how they engage with their landlord, for example, the option for face-to-face meetings.

- 5.8 Several landlords are assisting tenants to access digital information; helping to ensure that information can be easily accessed by tenants e.g. provision of devices, training, staff support, and designated space in offices with equipment for on-line meetings.
- 5.9 Legal documents, such as tenancy agreements, and documents relating to arrears and court action all primarily remain as hard copies issued to tenants.
- 5.10 When specialist landlords were compared with mainstream landlords, no significant differences in the formats of information provided were observed.

## 6. Recommendations

- 6.1 Tenants should be consulted on how they receive information from their landlord, and landlords should ensure that tenants' preferences are taken into account.
- 6.2 Tenants should also be involved in regular reviews of accessibility of information, including websites.
- 6.3 Landlords should consider working with their tenants to develop a 'Tenant approved' scheme where tenants are involved in developing information, and for a "tenant approved" endorsement to be displayed on their documents.
- 6.4 Landlords should consider and demonstrate how they identify and communicate with tenants and prospective tenants who have issues with literacy.
- 6.5 As part of their internal audit process, landlords should ensure that their website is completely accessible and complies with current accessibility guidance.



- 6.6 Landlords should consider the use of short videos to present information as these can be sent individually to mobile phones and devices, and posted on websites. This would be beneficial to a range of tenants.
- 6.7 Landlords should assist tenants to access digital information, whether that be in house support or in partnership with organisations who can provide specialist support services, for example, AbilityNet who work in partnership with BT and give access to free webinars and fact sheets.



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The Scottish Government  
St Andrew's House  
Edinburgh  
EH1 3DG

ISBN: 978-1-83691-320-7 (web only)

Published by The Scottish Government, March 2025

Produced for The Scottish Government by APS Group Scotland, 21 Tennant Street, Edinburgh EH6 5NA  
PPDAS1558315 (03/25)

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