

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by Acting Executive Director of Housing, Environmental and Economic Development (Housing and Regeneration Services)

Housing, Environment and Economic Development Committee: 9 January 2008

Subject: Communities Scotland Study "Open and Accessible"

1. Purpose

1.1 This report advises the Committee of a thematic study prepared by Communities Scotland which aims to provide a national picture of landlords' openness and accessibility to their tenants, and other people who have an interest in their services. The study focused on information about governance, performance and complaints. Copies of the report have been placed in the Members' rooms.

2. Background

2.1 The aim of the study was to answer the following questions:-

- What kind of information do landlords provide?
- Are they providing the right sort of information for their tenants and other service users?
- Do they provide the information in a timely way?
- How easy is it for tenants and other people to get the information they need?

2.2 The study focused on landlords' openness and accessibility in the information they provided about their governance and performance, rather than information about services. The study looks at the type and quality of information landlords provide about their performance and how they manage their business. This includes information on the service standards tenants and other service users can expect and information about how to complain or appeal against a decision. Openness about these matters was considered to be a measure of accountability.

2.3 Communities Scotland appointed an independent consultant to carry out the national research for the study. The research included:-

- A review of relevant legal requirements and guidance
- A survey of 27 local authorities and 129 Registered Social Landlords (RSLs)
- Consultation with tenants and organisations about the kind of information they think is important

The consultant also carried out 13 case studies with nine RSLs and four local authority landlords. A group of Tenant Assessors who work with Communities Scotland also contributed to this study.

3. Main Issues

Kind of information landlords provide

3.1 The report summarised the findings from a survey of landlords in respect of the type of information provided and a review of their publications and websites. The findings included:-

- 9 out of 10 local authorities published committee papers and minutes on their website compared with 16% of RSLs.
- 95% of local authorities said they published details of governing body membership on their website compared to just fewer than 60% of RSLs although few said they included these details in tenants newsletters.
- RSLs were more likely than local authorities to say that they published a tenants newsletter or annual report.
- Fewer than half the landlords said that they published information about their service standards.
- RSLs thought that lack of interest from tenants was one of the main barriers to providing information while 15% of local authorities were of this view. Local authorities were more likely to say that lack of resources was a significant barrier to providing information.
- Few landlords reported on the number and nature of complaints they received.

Kind of information tenants want

3.2 The report summarised discussions at the two workshops with the tenant assessors on the kind of information tenants want. The report also includes results from consultation with tenants and findings from the report of the Tenant Involvement Commission. The summary from these consultations included:-

- Tenants wanted to know what standards of service they could expect and how well their landlord is doing against the standards.
- Knowing which staff are responsible for providing services was also important.
- Tenants were more interested in performance about rent collection, anti social behaviour, repairs, tenant participation and tenant satisfaction.
- Newsletters and annual reports were popular with tenants.
- A high priority was placed on use of plain language, availability in other languages or formats and size of lettering.

Recommendations of Report

3.3 The study did not find evidence of a deliberate lack of openness among landlords. However the study suggests landlords do not always provide the kind of information that tenants are interested in. The main recommendations from the study are listed below:-

- Gather and use information about service users' information and communication needs.
- Provide clear, well publicised information about how to get information in alternative formats and languages.
- In consultation with service users, set service standards and monitor and report performance against them.
- Talk to tenants about their information needs and preferences.
- Consider involving tenants more in the development of newsletters and other publications.
- Record, monitor and use information from complaints and other feedback to improve services, and tell service users how this information has been used
- Consider providing a summary of important decisions taken by the council committee.
- Review the language used in committee reports to make sure they are accessible to the public.

Kind of information West Dunbartonshire provides

3.4 The Council already provides the following range of information relevant to the content of this report.

- Local authorities have a duty to report publicly on their performance. West Dunbartonshire Council reports on its service standards and performance through the Council's newspaper. Citizens' Panel members have also been surveyed for their views on the Council's Public Performance Reporting methods.
- West Dunbartonshire Citizens' Panel is run in conjunction with West Dunbartonshire Community Planning Partners. The Citizens' Panel is used to survey residents on a regular basis about the policies and services of the community planning partners.
- Panel members are asked their views on standards and how services performed against those standards.
- Housing Services produce leaflets and documents which contains information on how to obtain documents in alternative formats and languages. The Service also distributes "Housing News" to all of its tenants twice per year.
- Tenancy Services and the Homelessness Service have both been successful in achieving Charter Mark accreditation. As part of the criterion for this quality award, both services demonstrated that they consulted with service users, had set service standards and monitor and report performance against those standards.

- Housing Services has an ongoing consultation programme with tenants and other people who have an interest in their service. The types of consultations within that programme include, service users' satisfaction surveys and exit surveys. The frequency of these surveys can vary between quarterly, twice yearly and annual. Results from these surveys are published in the Housing Newsletter.
- Throughout the year the Homelessness Service carries out a number of exit surveys to gather users views on the service provided. These surveys allow the service to assess the satisfaction levels of its users and if necessary make any changes to how the service is provided.
- As well as carrying out exit surveys Tenancy Services also consult service users on an annual basis. This consultation allows tenants and users of the service the opportunity to comment on how satisfied they are with the service provided and also to give their views on what they see as the priorities for the service.
- Repairs and Maintenance consulted on their service in 2006. This consultation gave tenants the chance to offer their views on the service currently being provided and also what improvements to the Repairs and Maintenance Service tenants would like to see. To capture the views of all its users Repairs and Maintenance also carried out a survey of owners to establish their perception of the Sold Property, Factoring and Repairs Service.
- The Anti Social Behaviour Task Force carries out a number of exit surveys with users of their services. As well as carrying out exit surveys, the service is reviewing its consultation process to ensure users of all areas of their business are asked for their views.
- Corporate complaints recorded by Housing Services are monitored through the departmental Quarterly Performance Review meetings and the Audit and Performance committee.

4. Financial Implications

4.1 There are no financial implications.

5. Personnel Issues

5.1 There are no personnel issues.

6. Risk Assessment

6.1 There are no risks associated with this report.

7. Conclusions

7.1 The study suggests while local authorities and RSLs provide tenants with information it may not always be the kind of information that tenants are interested in. Housing Services undertake a range of consultations and surveys and as part of the criterion for quality awards, tenancy and homelessness services

demonstrated that they consulted with service users, had set service standards and monitor and report performance against those standards.

8. Recommendation

8.1 The Committee is invited to note the contents of this report.

Irving Hodgson

**Acting Executive Director of Housing, Environmental and Economic
Development (Housing and Regeneration Services)**

Date: 19 December 2007

Person to Contact: Jeff Stobo, Manager of Strategy
Council Offices, Garshake Road, Dumbarton
Tel. (01389) 737580.
[Jeff.Stobo@west-](mailto:Jeff.Stobo@west-dunbarton.gov.uk) dunbarton.gov.uk

Appendix: None

Background Papers: Open and Accessible: Communities Scotland
November 2007

Wards Affected: All