

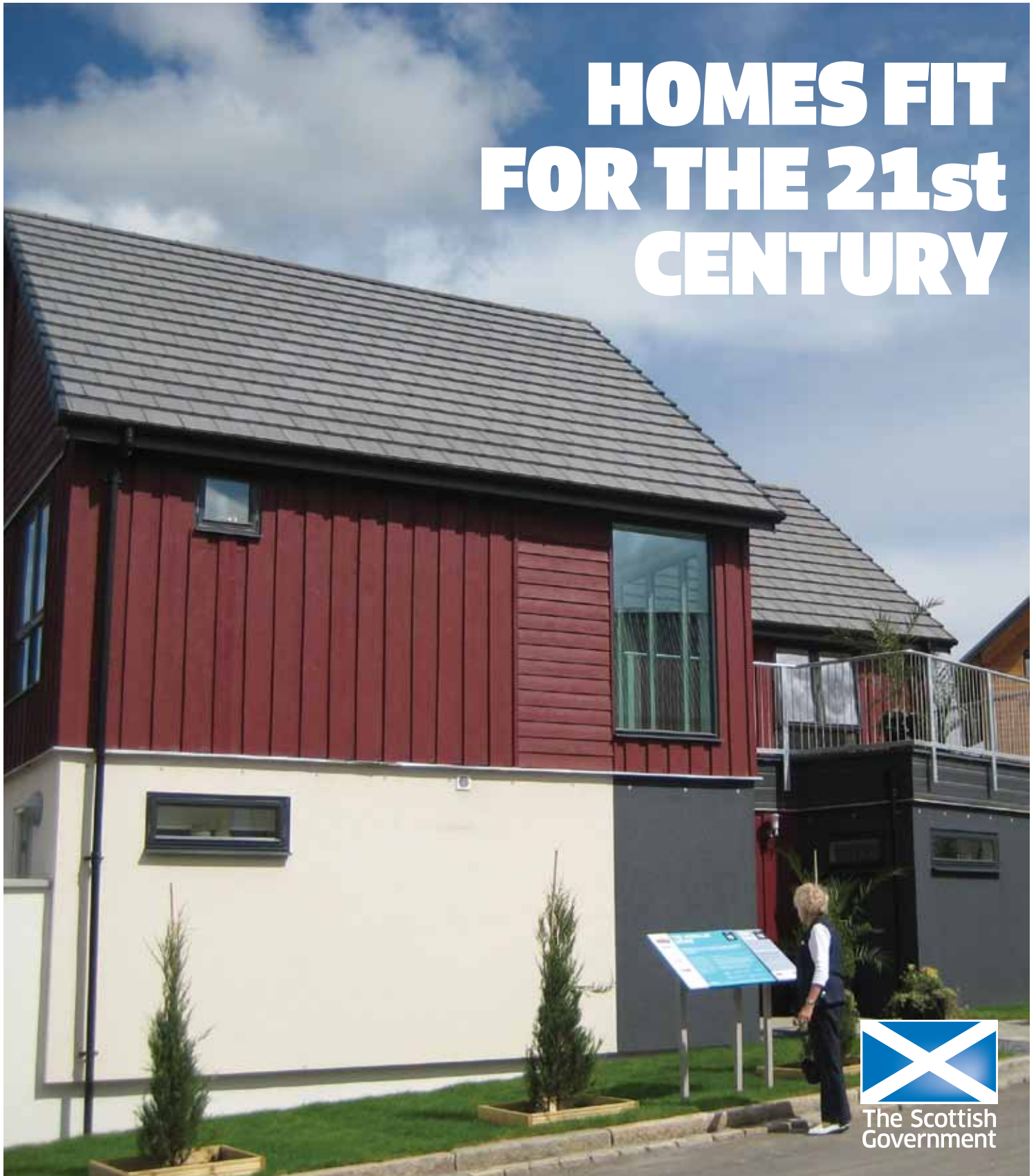
TENANT PARTICIPATION

012

MARCH 2011

✓ **MAKING A DIFFERENCE!**

HOMES FIT FOR THE 21st CENTURY



The Scottish
Government



Congratulations to Hugh Wilson Fraser, MBE!

Read all about Hugh receiving his MBE from the Queen at Buckingham Palace in December on p20

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editorial

Well here we are again! It seems like no time at all since the last edition of “Tenant Participation – *making a difference!*” was published with another busy year behind us.

A key theme last year was responding to the effects of the worst recession since the 1930s – not least the major challenges for housing in Scotland over the next decade.

The discussion paper *Fresh Thinking: New ideas generated a lively debate and diverse views on the future of housing policy in Scotland* and the recently published “Homes fit for the 21st Century” sets out the Government’s strategy and action plan for the next ten years (for more information see article on page 16).

At the end of last year we saw the passing of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 with its focus on protecting and safeguarding the interests of tenants, and safeguarding social rented housing for future generations. The development of the Act included consultation like never before and was also a real

example of how tenants and tenant organisations were able to influence and change the final legislation- (see articles on pages 10 and 11 for more information)

In this edition you can also find out more about the Scottish Housing Regulator, the RTO regional Networks and Housing Benefit changes.

2011, once again, promises to be a busy year for landlords and tenants alike – Already we have seen the publication of *Homes fit for the 21st century* and the Scottish Social Housing Charter discussion paper.

January also saw the Social Housing Division move to the new directorate of Housing, Regeneration and Commonwealth Games with a warm welcome to our new Director Francesca Osowska.

The 2010 Act introduced the Scottish Social Housing Charter and following on from the successful consultation events last year, the discussion paper was published on

21st February. The Charter will make it clear what tenants and other service users can expect from their landlord and landlord progress on achieving Charter outcomes will be reported on annually by the new Scottish Housing Regulator.

It was great to meet with so many of you last autumn at the Charter events across the country and we want to encourage you all to continue to get involved in helping us draw it up. There will be lots of opportunities to do so over the coming year so please get involved and let us have your views.

And finally congratulations to Hugh Wilson Fraser, from Dumfries and Galloway who received an MBE for services to his community. Well done Hugh!

**Anne Cook,
Tenant Priorities Team**



foreword

I am delighted to confirm that the first provisions of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 will come into force in spring 2011.

This is an important piece of legislation which will safeguard social housing for future generations by reforming the Right to Buy and improve value for tenants and taxpayers by modernising how social housing is regulated.

An important aspect of the legislation will be the development of the first Scottish Social Housing Charter. With the help of Registered Tenant Organisation Regional Networks and landlords across Scotland, an extensive series of successful initial consultation events were held last year in areas ranging from Dumfries & Galloway to Inverness.

These events brought some 650 tenants, landlord staff, Registered Social Landlord Board members and Local Authority councillors together to discuss what should be in the first Charter. I was very keen to ensure that this process began with a blank sheet of paper rather than with one we had prepared earlier. I appreciate

that this has been quite challenging for some but I am pleased to hear that tenants in particular found this a refreshing approach as it gave them an opportunity to influence development of the charter from the outset.

You can read more about the consultation events and the range of suggestions we have received on our website at <http://housingcharter.scotland.gov.uk>. My thanks to everyone who took the time to participate in these events and post your online suggestions.

A short discussion paper has now been published which summarises what you have been telling us and how we are taking forward work on the Charter. In light of that I would encourage you all to read this discussion paper and get involved in the next stages of developing the charter by letting us know your reaction to the paper. We also recently published our vision for housing for the coming decade ‘Homes Fit for the 21st Century’ drawing on the housing discussion which took place last year.

Scotland needs many more new houses and to significantly enhance the quality and sustainability of our existing housing stock and the surrounding neighbourhoods. The Scottish Parliament has also committed to a set of demanding targets on homelessness, fuel poverty and climate change, which must be met.

We need to find ways to achieve this despite the additional major challenges stemming from the credit crunch and the UK Government’s cuts to public spending. That is why we are setting out a radical agenda with profound implications for the way we invest, the way we make use of existing housing, and the way we support our people in their housing choices.

I do hope you enjoy this edition of the tenant participation newsletter.

**Alex Neil, Minister for
Housing and Communities**

a tenant's perspective

Since the regional networks were established in 2007 their primary aim has been to ensure developments in national housing policy significantly reflect the interests of tenants and service users throughout Scotland.

Over this time, the networks have gained a high degree of proficiency and accord in promoting this ideal. Working in partnership with government and other representative bodies on policy advisory groups and sounding boards, the tenant's voice is now being heard at the highest level. I have witnessed this at first hand through representing the networks on the Ministerial Sounding Board overseeing the passage of the draft Housing Bill, and by giving oral evidence to the Local Government and Communities Committee (LGCC).

In response to *Firm Foundations* and draft Housing Bill consultations, tenants generally stated they wished to work in partnership with landlords and the regulator to deliver tangible improvements in housing services, and these views were reflected in the draft bill. The draft Bill was perceived as a good starting point even if there remained a number of key areas where tenants had concerns. Tenants justifiably argued that only by having tenant members on the Regulation Board could the interests of tenants and service users be truly protected.

“Tenants justifiably argued that only by having tenant members on the Regulation Board could the interests of tenants and service users be truly protected.”

In my evidence to the LGCC and at Sounding Board meetings I made every effort to articulate and clarify tenants' concerns in a meaningful and constructive manner. I am pleased to report our arguments were generally well received and gained support from others. The Scottish Government was also listening and addressed the points raised by lodging a number of amendments at Stage 2 and Stage 3 of the Bill. I firmly believe that the end product of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 does reflect the genuine interests of tenants and is a testament to the competence of the networks in securing concrete results.

Notwithstanding this success, the networks continue in their efforts to influence national housing policy. All regional networks are currently stimulating tenant involvement in the development of the Scottish Social Housing Charter and our chairs meet quarterly with the Housing Minister to update him on network activity and to canvass his support. A major issue for discussion recently has been tenants' concerns on the operation of Housing Revenue Accounts (HRA) and cross-subsidisation. This was the first big policy issue to be raised by the networks directly with the Scottish Government and the Minister. A paper was prepared for the Minister outlining the issues, concerns and actions tenants wanted to see. It received a very positive reaction from Mr Neil and his officials and he has instructed that new guidance be drawn up and produced on how the HRA should be used. We look forward to helping develop the guidance.

“I firmly believe that the end product of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 does reflect the genuine interests of tenants.”



Danny Mullen

Our labours will soon be directed towards galvanising tenant opinion on the recently published Homes Fit for the 21st Century and Charter discussion paper.

By Danny Mullen
Secretary, Central Region Network

a year (10 months actually) in the life of the regional networks

It's difficult to do justice to all the work of the regional networks in a short newsletter article, particularly the work of individual committees, so here are just some of the highlights since March 2010.

Facts and Figures

With the support of the tenant participation team, the Regional Network Committees have produced 11 newsletters circulated to over 1,000 households, held over 50 individual committee meetings, three members events, eight AGMs and participated in a wide range of Scottish Government consultations and Advisory Groups. And had four meetings with the Minister of Housing and Communities.

MARCH 2010

This was a particularly busy month – First major policy issues raised with a paper submitted to the Housing & Communities Minister, raising concerns on the operation of Local Authority Housing Revenue Accounts.

Committee member training programme continued at pace with sessions in Glasgow and Edinburgh

on Housing policy and team working/leadership skills.

March also saw the networks host an exhibition stand at the Chartered Institute of Housing in Scotland conference at the SECC in Glasgow, and the first round of successful Annual General Meetings were held for West Strathclyde, South West Scotland, and Highland and Argyll & Bute.

Danny Mullen, Central Network, represented the networks on the Housing Bill Ministerial Sounding Board and was more than a match for housing professionals in getting across the interests of tenants. Kevin Paterson from the Glasgow and Eilean Siar network admirably represented the committees on the Housing Policy Advisory Group.

APRIL

Written evidence on the Housing Bill was submitted to the Local Government and Communities Committee with Danny giving evidence on behalf of the networks directly to this scrutiny committee. Danny provided a compelling case for the networks submission and for changes to the Bill which would protect tenant interests. Jim Maryniak, chairperson of the BEEM network also gave evidence to the committee.

Committee members attended a one day policy course in Glasgow, covering the Concordat between Scottish Government and Local Authorities and national outcomes for the Scottish Government, the operation of parliamentary committees, and relations between Scotland and the United Kingdom, a lot to fit in!

The AGM season continued with Central Network having their annual meeting in Livingston, with standing room only.

MAY

The big news for May was the Regional Network Event in Glasgow which brought all committee members together. It was a packed day covering progress of the housing bill, with a keynote speech from the Housing & Communities Minister, Mr Neil who also talked about the recently launched discussion paper, "Fresh Thinking, New Ideas", with the networks being the first tenant audience to hear directly from the Minister about this.

Glasgow and Eilean Siar and BEEM held their AGM's, with much discussion on the Social Housing Charter.

Some network committees submitted responses to the Scottish Government's consultation on 'Eviction of Tenants in the Social Rented Sector'.

JUNE

More successful AGMs were held – Tayforth in Dundee and Northern Lights in Aberdeen. Tayforth also held a seminar for tenants in Perth to gather views on what they wanted included in the Charter, and the networks also hosted an exhibition stand at the Tenants Information Service conference in Clydebank.

JULY

The summer holidays saw a quieter month for the networks, except for those lucky enough to attend Holyrood for the Queens Garden Party.

AUGUST

August saw the start of an ambitious consultation programme across the length and breadth of Scotland – organised by the Tenant Priorities team. This brought Regional network committee members, tenants and tenant groups, landlords and the Scottish Government and the Scottish Housing Regulator together to start thinking about the Scottish Social Housing Charter and the modernised Scottish Housing Regulator, with Inverness setting the pace closely followed by Falkirk and Dumfries & Galloway.

SEPTEMBER

Charter Events now moving on to Aberdeen, Ayr, and Glasgow.

More work on the development of Housing Revenue Account (HRA) guidance with network representatives meeting with Scottish Government officials and Audit Scotland.

Tenants from various committees represented the networks on the newly established Charter Sounding Board.

A further meeting with the Housing & Communities Minister takes place. The regional networks submitted a paper compiled on behalf of the networks by Eric Allan from the Northern Lights Network on the "Perceived Decline of Estates."

OCTOBER

More Charter Events take place in Paisley, Dundee, Wishaw and Haddington, and the networks host an exhibition stand and workshop

at the Tenant Participation Advisory Service conference in Dundee.

Danny Mullen was delighted to receive the "Tenant/Resident representative of the year award" as part of the Tenant Participation Good Practice Awards for his work both locally in West Lothian and nationally.

NOVEMBER

Final Charter consultation events held in Edinburgh, Lochgilphead and Central Region hold a members event in Alloa on the Charter. BEEM held similar event in Edinburgh.

DECEMBER

Hugh Wilson Fraser, chairperson of the South West Scotland Regional Network, had a trip to Buckingham Palace to receive his MBE from the Queen in recognition of his commitment to voluntary work in his community.

Many activities put on hold due to bad weather!

JANUARY 2011

Networks representatives meet with the Minister for Housing & Communities, planning for AGMs begins with networks looking forward to further consultation on the Charter, the SHR and housing policy in Scotland. Another busy year begins!

For more information on the regional networks check out; www.regionalnetworks.org.uk

out with the old, in with a new Housing Act

Along with the welcome green shoots of spring, April will see the first provisions of the new Housing (Scotland) Act come into force.

While last year began with the introduction of the Housing Bill to the Scottish Parliament, the Bill gained Royal Assent and became an Act just as 2010 was drawing to a close in December. It was, said Alex Neil, the Minister for Housing and Communities, 'a major milestone for social housing in Scotland'.

The Act establishes a new, independent Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) to safeguard and promote the interests of tenants, homeless people and other service users. It also reforms the Right to Buy, so more social housing will be kept to rent to future generations of tenants and introduces the Scottish Social Housing Charter which will set out what a good landlord should be achieving for its' tenants. (See the articles on pages 11, 14, & 15 for more information)

Tenants and the national Registered Tenant Organisation (RTO) Regional Networks were active in shaping

the Act and influencing the Local Government and Communities Committee (The Committee responsible for looking at every detail of the Bill and deciding whether or not to support it in the Parliament)

Tenants were also represented on a Housing Bill sounding board chaired by the Minister. They didn't hold back in making their views known, and the Act is all the better for that.

After listening to tenants' views the Committee agreed some changes as the Bill went through Parliament. Here are some of those that give tenants a stronger role in regulation.

- The SHR must explain how it will involve tenants and other service users in its work.
- The SHR must give tenants a way to bring serious performance failures to its attention. It will publish a statement explaining what it means by 'significant performance failures' and how it will deal with them.

- Landlords will be expected to actively involve tenants in their self-assessment, and the SHR will:
 - o publish guidance for landlords on how to involve tenants in preparing and checking information it has asked for;
 - o consult tenants and others before publishing the guidance; and
 - o ask landlords to show how they involved tenants in preparing and checking the information.

Another welcome amendment removed the power for the SHR to charge landlords for its services – something strongly opposed by the tenant organisations and the RTO network who feared tenants would pay through their rents for this.

Scottish Ministers will appoint the SHR's first board at the beginning of April. Look out for news about this on the RTO website in a few weeks' time. Find out more about the SHR in the article on page 12.

You can find out more about the **Housing (Scotland) Act 2010** from the Scottish Government's website.

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/Housing/16342/safeguarding>

all change for the right to buy

The first provisions of the 2010 Act came into force this spring – but how will it affect you?

From a tenants point of view, the most important changes relate to the right to buy.

New tenants

After 1 March 2011, new tenants of social housing will not have the right to buy their home. This also applies to those who have previously been tenants of a social landlord, have left the sector, and are now returning.

Existing tenants

The Act does not change any existing rights or entitlements. Anyone who has the right to buy on 1 March 2011 keeps that right as long as they remain in the same tenancy.

Breaks in tenancy

Social landlords have the discretion to be able to ignore breaks in social tenancies that are outside tenants' control.

New supply homes

From 1 March 2011, the right to buy for 'new supply' social housing ends. This mainly refers to new build houses although some other properties can also be affected. This will stop new houses being sold and will encourage social landlords, particularly councils, to build new houses.

Pressured areas

From later in 2011, pressured area designations will be extended and made more flexible. This only affects tenants with the modernised right to buy (where tenancies began on or after 30 September 2002). In pressured areas, these tenants have their right to buy suspended. This is because Scottish Ministers have agreed that there is a shortage of social housing in a particular area and that shortage is likely to be made worse by tenants buying their homes. Councils, rather than Scottish Ministers, will now be able to make the decisions about pressured areas, and they will be able to designate particular housing types as well as areas as being pressured. Designations can last for up to 10 years rather than five at present.

The right to buy rules are complex and tenants' right to buy will depend on their individual circumstances. The changes are explained more fully in the booklet 'Your right to buy your home – a guide for Scottish secure tenants', which is now available on the Scottish Government website.

These reforms are aimed at ensuring that more social rented properties are available to tenants for rent over the lifetime of the properties and will help reduce waiting times for people who need affordable social rented housing. The Scottish Government estimates that they will stop between 10,000 and 18,000 houses being lost through right to buy from 2012 to 2022.

Contact:

Joanne McDowell (Policy Manager) and Ross Wilson (Policy Adviser) are happy to answer any enquiries. Please contact Ross in the first instance on 0141 305 4086.

You can find more information about the 2010 Act on the Scottish Government website (<http://bit.ly/housingact>)



Anne Cook, Isabell McLaughlan and Maureen Carney



Delegates discuss the Charter at the event in Renfrewshire.

an update from the Scottish Housing Regulator

Last December the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 received Royal Assent. This Act establishes the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) as a body independent of Ministers. The new SHR will have a statutory objective to safeguard and promote the interests of current and future tenants, homeless people and other service users.

The Act gives the new SHR a broad range of flexible powers. It builds on our existing risk-based approach to regulation. Rather than carrying out routine inspections of all housing associations and local authorities, we collect and review a wide range of information about each landlord. This allows us to tailor the type and level of involvement we need to have with each one.

The Act also brings in the Scottish Social Housing Charter. This will set a number of high level outcomes that social landlords across Scotland should be achieving, or working to achieve, in a given period. The SHR's role here will be in assessing and reporting on landlords' performance against the Charter. The Scottish Government is currently developing the Charter and talking to stakeholders about outcomes.

The new SHR will be formally established in April 2011 when its Board is appointed. Its first action will be to consult on how it will use its new powers. The switch-on of the powers will happen only after the consultation. This is likely to be in April 2012.

The Role of Tenants

Tenants will have an important role to play in the new regulatory framework. Last year we attended twelve consultation events across the country to hear stakeholders' views. Many tenants attended these and their views are influencing the development of our new regulatory approach. The Scottish Government will soon establish the Board of the new regulator and there was a category for tenants in the application process. The Act also places duties on the new regulator to consult tenants and other stakeholders on many issues. Tenants will also have a greater role to play in providing SHR with information on significant performance failures by social landlords and SHR will be exploring

“The new SHR will be formally established in April 2011 when its Board is appointed. Its first action will be to consult on how it will use its new powers.”

how tenants can be involved in contributing to the assessment of landlords against the Charter.

What Happens Next?

Once the new SHR is established it will consult on its new regulatory powers and approach to regulation. The consultation will explain how SHR proposes to carry out its role, and will ask for views. This will take place in the summer. There will be an opportunity for everyone involved in housing in Scotland to be involved, and SHR will pay particular attention to ensuring that the consultation is accessible to tenants.

Following the consultation and based on feedback from stakeholders, SHR will publish finalised guidance ahead of the switch on of the new powers.

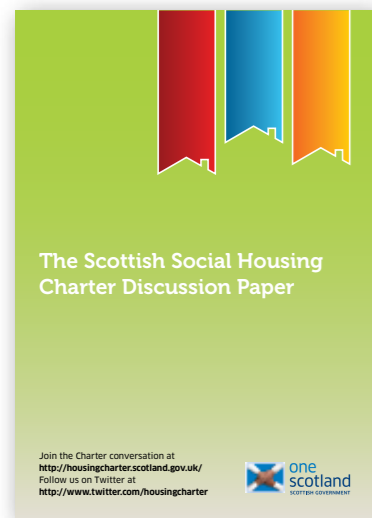
More Information and Getting Involved

If you would like any more information about anything above please contact the SHR Policy Team at shr@scottishhousingregulator.gsi.gov.uk. We will be circulating more information to RTO's and the tenant networks about the new SHR and its consultation this summer. Look out for it.

**By Andy Robinson
Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR)**

Scottish Social Housing Charter

Part of the Act requires Scottish Ministers to consult on and then set the outcomes that social landlords should achieve for their tenants. The Scottish Social Housing Charter will be the document which contains these outcomes, or results.



The charter will apply to all social landlords, but not to private landlords. When we say 'social landlords' we mean housing associations and local authorities. Not all local authorities have council houses, but they still provide homelessness services, and so are covered by the charter.

The charter won't replace any legal obligations that landlords have just now under previous legislation. The charter will be used by the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) to assess landlord performance and SHR will publish its findings each year. This should help landlords and tenants to identify and share areas of good practice, so that services keep on improving.

Housing and Communities Minister Alex Neil was keen that the charter should begin with a blank sheet of paper. The Scottish Government genuinely wanted to hear your views before putting anything in writing. It was an opportunity for tenants, tenant representatives, housing professionals, councillors and board members alike to be involved in developing policy from the very beginning of the process.

During 2010, we've been asking stakeholders what they think makes a good landlord and what should be included in the charter. We held 12 charter "roadshow" events across Scotland, from Dumfries & Galloway to Inverness, and we thank the

“Over the past few months, we've been asking stakeholders what they think makes a good landlord and what should be included in the charter.”

landlords who provided the venues, the staff and tenant representatives who helped with the arrangements and everyone who took part in the workshops. We wanted to tell people about the charter and to encourage landlords, tenants and others to talk to each other about what should be in it. Tenants and tenant representatives in particular welcomed the chance to influence the charter from the start.

Colleagues also made guest appearances at events run by other organisations, spreading the word about the charter and taking part in workshops. These included a number of housing association events, Aberdeenshire Council Tenant's Conference and the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) Conference. Added to the roadshow events, we've spoken directly to almost 1,000 people.

We've reached even more people with our website, <http://housingcharter.scotland.gov.uk>. Nearly 3,000 people from all parts of the globe have visited the site, although not everyone has left ideas or comments. If you are someone who has looked but not spoken, please take a moment to register and join the conversation.

The site has featured guest articles by tenants and housing professionals, and reports from a number of organisations that have held charter events, including Tenants Information Service (TIS), TPAS, Margaret Blackwood HA, and Inclusion Scotland.

We've tried to reflect all the information and good ideas that we've gathered in the past few months in a short discussion paper, which we published last month. We're keen to hear your thoughts on what's in the paper to help us get the charter right.

We've sent a copy of the discussion paper to all local authorities, housing associations and registered tenant organisations. You can also read it or download it from our website.

We'd like to have your comments by 16 May 2011. You can write to us at:

The Tenant Priorities Team
Social Housing Division
The Scottish Government
Edinburgh EH6 6QQ

Telephone 0131 244 5568

email us: housingcharter@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

If you'd like a copy of the discussion paper, please write to us or email us.

Or you can leave comments on the website.

We're particularly keen to read responses that have been developed jointly by tenants and landlords, but the most important thing is to let us know what you think.

We'll read all your comments before we go on to publish a draft charter in the summer, and hold a formal consultation. This will give you another chance to have your say. The final version will be submitted to Parliament for approval towards the end of 2011. All being well, the Charter will come into effect from April 2012.

homes fit for the 21st century

At a new housing development in Carntyne, Glasgow, on 4 February, we launched *Homes Fit for the 21st Century*, our strategy and action plan for housing over the next decade. The paper sets out our vision for housing, and identifies the wide range of actions that we need to realise it.

From Discussion to Policy

Following the launch in May of our housing discussion document, *Housing: Fresh Thinking, New Ideas*, many of you took the time to get involved in the national housing discussion which took place over the following months. Many thanks for this – through commenting on our website, submitting formal written responses, or even coming along to the numerous meetings which took place, your contributions have helped to shape our new policy paper, and the actions we set out. Indeed, contributions from the East Ayrshire Tenants Federation,

Edinburgh Tenants Federation and the West Dunbartonshire Tenants and Residents Organisation are included in the paper itself.

What's in it?

The actions in the paper are based around our two objectives for housing:

- to increase housing supply, building new, high quality affordable homes; and
- to maximise the choice and options available to everyone in the housing system.

Amongst other things, we restate our commitment to social housing, recognising the vital role that it plays in providing people with an affordable home and a platform for getting on in life. We will give

“Your contributions have helped to shape our new policy paper, and the actions we set out.”

housing associations and councils more flexibility to deliver housing services in ways which best suit their communities, and we will also launch a consultation this summer on changing legislation to make it much easier for social landlords to diversify their activities.

Want to know more?

A hard copy of *Homes Fit for the 21st Century* has been sent to landlords and registered tenant organisation. It's also available online at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/Housing/reform>, where a summary copy can be accessed too.

If you'd like any more information on any of the above, then please contact Luke Macauley at luke.macauley@scotland.gsi.gov.uk, or on 0141 305 4127.

Regional Networks press for greater clarification on the operation of Housing Revenue Accounts

Registered Tenant Organisation Regional Networks have raised their concerns with the Housing & Communities Minister, Mr Alex Neil, MSP, in relation to how some local authority landlords might be operating their Housing Revenue Accounts (HRA). This is the first major policy issue that the Regional Networks have brought to the attention of Scottish Government. Hugh McClung, chairperson of the Central Regional Network, drafted and coordinated a comprehensive paper on behalf of the network committees that covered a range of issues on uses of the HRA. This formed the basis of Scottish Government's deliberations on how to address this potential problem identified by tenants.

It is recognised there is increasing demand on housing services, with Councils often being asked to provide services to meet the needs of communities which are in addition to the traditional role of a local authority landlord. The networks were

particularly concerned that services that benefit the community as a whole are being paid exclusively, or disproportionately, from Housing Revenue Account resources. They believe this highlights the need for the charging system to be fair to both tenants and council tax payers and that Scottish Government guidance on what activities should, and should not, be paid for from the HRA is required. The central purpose of this Guidance would be to remind councils of their obligations to tenants who pay almost £1 billion into Scotland's Housing Revenue Accounts every year.

Following ongoing discussions with the Minister and Scottish Government, Audit Scotland and Scottish Housing Regulator officials it has been agreed that new guidance on the operation of the Housing Revenue Account will be developed. The Minister has committed to ensuring transparency over the use of Housing Revenue Account resources and that information on expenditure should be easily available in a clear and understandable format.

From the discussions, three issues are being addressed:

- The Government's Housing Revenue Account guidance will be revised to provide a clearer framework within which Audit Scotland will undertake audits of Housing Revenue Accounts.
- Councils should assist tenants' understanding of housing finance by taking a proactive approach to presenting and publishing clear and unambiguous information about their Housing Revenue Accounts.
- Tenants should make use of the ability to contact Audit Scotland directly with any concerns of any potential Housing Revenue Account misuse/mismanagement.

It is anticipated that draft guidance on the operation of Housing Revenue Accounts will be available in the summer of 2011. The Guidance will be produced in consultation with COSLA and in collaboration with the Regional Networks.

When the UK Coalition Government took office in May 2010 they announced a series of measures to reduce public expenditure.

housing benefit changes

Throughout the UK, expenditure on Housing Benefit (HB) has risen by almost 80% (in cash terms) from £11,176 million in 1997-98 to £19,978 million in 2009-10. This is almost a 35% increase in real terms. Plans were included in the UK Government June 2010 Budget to cut this benefit. Further expenditure cuts to Housing Benefit were announced in the October 2010.

The Scottish Government agree with the broad principles of the Welfare Reform: one that improves incentives to work and simplify the benefits system and agrees that paid employment is the best route out of poverty. But it is essential that any changes do not impact unfairly on our most vulnerable people.

The proposed cuts to Housing Benefit forms part of a much larger programme of comprehensive

welfare reform which the UK Government claim will make the benefits system simpler, more affordable but above all, make work pay. These proposals are all set out in the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) White Paper, Universal Credit: welfare that works. Check out the website below for more information:

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/policy/welfare-reform/legislation-and-key-documents/universal-credit/>

Legislation on State benefits is reserved to the UK Government so the Scottish Parliament is limited in what they can do to mitigate the impacts of these changes. However Scottish Ministers have drawn attention to the potential effect these changes on both tenants and landlords. Other devolved administrations share many of these concerns.

A Joint Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA)/Scottish Government (SG) Stakeholder Advisory Group has been set up to assess the impact in Scotland, seek to influence UK Government policy on the planned reforms, and consider what mitigating action can be taken by the Scottish Government and partner organisations. The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (SFHA) is running a campaign against the measures. The SFHA believes that the measures will “impact most on the poorest people of society, lead to an increased demand for social housing and impact on the revenue income of housing associations and co-operatives”.

The changes to Housing Benefit are being taken forward in two broad stages, determined by whether or not they need a new Act of Parliament before they can be put into effect. The first stage will

affect private sector tenants and take effect from April 2011. These changes have been brought in through changes to the existing DWP regulations.

Changes to housing benefit for claimants who rent local authority or Registered Social Landlords (RSL) housing will not take effect until 2013. The main change will affect working age claimants (those under age 65)

The details are still being worked out by DWP but we have looked at the Housing Benefit proposed changes to see how they might impact on Scotland’s housing (both the private and the social rented housing) and with the help of stakeholders have produced an Impact Assessment paper, which has been sent to DWP to make them aware of our concerns.

“The interaction of housing benefit reform with other changes to the benefit system is something that should not be overlooked.”

At this preliminary stage it is quite clear that the changes to Housing Benefit will have a significant negative impact in Scotland. Almost 55,000 households in Scotland are likely to be impacted (around 97% of the total).

There is a particular concern over the impact on progress to the 2012 Homelessness commitment and the implications for the well being of those that this will impact upon in terms of both the extension of the Single Room rate to the 25 to 34 age bracket and the up rating of non-dependant reductions. Of more importance is the fact that the moves to restrict housing benefit for those “under-occupying” could potentially impact on up to 110,000 households in Scotland and although the actual figure is likely to be lower, the size composition of the stock means that there is no alternative.

The interaction of housing benefit reform with other changes to the benefit system is something that should not be overlooked. Of particular interest, clearly, are the Universal Credit proposals but changes to Educational Maintenance Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance are also likely to have an impact.

The full impact paper can be downloaded from the Scottish Government website:

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/Housing/supply-demand/chma/marketcontextmaterials/hbchangesscottishimpact/>

By Ged Millar

**Policy Officer,
Telephone 0131 244 0700**



congratulations to Hugh Wilson Fraser MBE

Hugh was thrilled to receive his MBE from the Queen at Buckingham Palace in December.

He received his MBE for his voluntary work in his community of Locharbriggs and Dumfries and Galloway over the last 20 years. His commitment to helping others has even increased since he retired from full-time employment

at the age of 65 – he is now in his mid-eighties, though you would never believe it.

Hugh says, “I now have more time to devote to helping my community and I wouldn’t have received this honour if it were not for the help and support of so many people over the years. This is a testament to the invaluable contributions older people bring from communities across Scotland.”

Hugh has been a great supporter of the regional networks and has been Chair of the South West Scotland regional network since its inception. He believes that jointly working with the Scottish Government on national policy issues is the way forward for tenants to have their voices heard at the highest level.

Our congratulations to Hugh, MBE.

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