



GRAMPIAN
HOUSING ASSOCIATION LTD

Customer Participation Strategy 2008 - 2011

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HAPPY TO TRANSLATE

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1. Introduction

Foreword by Chairman

Grampian Housing Association places a high priority on working with our customers to ensure their views are heard and acted on. In recent years we have developed ways of involving and consulting our customers in a range of different ways. This strategy explains how we will work with customers. It outlines the opportunities to get involved and explains how we will provide feedback.

We have developed a customer participation strategy that reflects customers' interests. We know the best way of improving our services is through meaningful and effective customer involvement.

I hope you find this strategy helpful. On behalf of Grampian Housing Association we look forward to working with our customers and communities in the future.

David Young
Chairman

2. Equal Opportunities

The Association recognises its responsibilities in relation to equality of opportunity for all its customers and that this is particularly crucial in the area of participation. The Association has an action plan in regard to equality issues, many of which relate to participation. Some measures are already in place and these include:-

- Recognition as a “Happy to Translate” Logo organisation, a national initiative funded by the Scottish Government to promote equal opportunities by providing access to quality translation and interpreting services;
- Subscription to Language Line providing access to over 100 community languages;
- Translation of a Summary of Rights for Tenants into community languages;
- Use of venues that are accessible for those with physical disabilities;
- Provision of creche facilities where required when arranging meetings;
- Promotion of home visits where customers are unable to attend the offices or events;
- Seeking customers’ views on equality issues when becoming a customer for the first time.

3. Customer Participation Charter

Customer Participation Charter

Grampian Housing Association will:

1. Strive to ensure that all forms of participation do not discriminate against anyone on the grounds of their race, age, sex, religion or sexual orientation.
2. Provide training where possible to customer participants to enable them to participate as fully as possible.
3. Respond to recommendations and requests from tenant and resident associations in a manner which reflects dialogue and partnership.
4. Provide a written strategy regarding customer involvement and ensure that it is kept up to date and relevant.
5. Ensure that participation is an ongoing process and built into all aspects of the Association's activities.
6. Aim to ensure that decisions of the Association reflect customer views where these accord with the agreed aims and objectives of the Association.
7. Treat tenants and residents as the main focus of its service.
8. Provide practical support to encourage and facilitate participation.
9. Make available information about the Association's performance, services and activities.
10. Ensure that communication is clear, effective and understood by those who it is designed for including provision of translation services and facilities for those who may have a visual or hearing impairment.
11. Ensure that communication and participation is consistent with the Customer Care Plan.

4. Key issues covered in this strategy

Grampian Housing Association is committed to listening to and consulting with all our customers in a meaningful and effective way. In consultation with customers, we have identified several key issues for customer participation. These are the issues on which this strategy is based:

- Removing barriers to participation
- Providing a range of different options for customers to get involved
- Involving customers at all levels of decision making
- Involving all customers equally
- Involving under-represented groups
- Providing good information and feedback to customers

5. Background

Grampian Housing Association was established in 1975. It is a fast growing housing association based in the North East of Scotland. The Association provides services to over 3,000 households. It is a non-profit making organisation, controlled by a voluntary Board of Management whose members are Association customers and other local people.

The Association has a long and successful history of involving customers and sees customer participation as its way of doing things, not just something we do. This document meets the Housing Association's duty to produce a participation strategy, as required by the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001.

The strategy:

- Explains how customers will be kept informed
- Indicates which issues customers will be consulted on
- Shows how the Association will take account of customers' views
- Demonstrates the Association's commitment to customer training
- Provides details of the resources required to make the strategy work

6. How the strategy was developed

Grampian Housing Association has had a Customer Participation Strategy in place since 2002 and reviews the strategy every three years. In June 2007, the Association employed the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) to carry out an audit of customer participation and review the Strategy to ensure it reflects best practice and legal requirements.

As part of the strategy review, TPAS facilitated a series of focus group sessions. The aim of these discussion sessions was to find out whether customers and staff think the current strategy is effective, what its strengths and weaknesses are and how it could be developed in the future.

Two focus group sessions took place with customers in Aberdeen, whilst there were also sessions held in Elgin, Peterhead and Huntly. Separate focus groups were held for Association staff and for the Board of Management at the main office in Huntly Street, Aberdeen. The customer panel, *Count me in* was asked the same questions as those taking part in focus groups, although this was done in the form of a postal questionnaire.

TPAS also contacted South Aberdeenshire Tenants and Residents Association (SATRA) by telephone.

Wider customer consultation

In order to get the views of customers that were unable to attend focus groups, all customers had an opportunity to complete a postal questionnaire. The questionnaire asked customers for their views on how the Association provides information and consults with them. Questionnaires were returned directly to the TPAS freepost address. In total, 66 customer questionnaires and 25 customer panel questionnaires were completed.

This strategy is based on the feedback and comments that were received from customers during discussion sessions and through the postal questionnaire. It meets the requirements of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and reflects recognised methods of good practice for involving customers.

7. The purpose of the Customer Participation Strategy

The Customer Participation Strategy is the document that sets out the main ways in which customers will be provided with information and consulted over service standards and changes to services. It explains what information we will provide and some of the ways we will consult with you and take account of your comments.

The strategy is intended to be a 'working' document that customers and staff can refer to. It has been written as a useful guide, setting out a 'menu of options' for customers to get involved. The strategy is continually changing as customer aspirations and preferences develop and we are always looking to improve how we work with customers.

The strategy sets out what information customers can expect to receive from the Association. It explains customers' rights to become involved and the Association's duties to consult with customers. These can be summarised as:

Customers' Rights:

Customers with Scottish Secure Tenancies, Short Scottish Secure Tenancies and Registered Tenant Organisations have a right to be consulted on:

- The Participation Strategy
- Changes to rent and service charges
- Changes to housing policies that are likely to affect them

The Association's Duties:

The Association has a duty to:

- Develop a Participation Strategy that:
 - shows how we will keep customers informed;
 - explains which issues we will consult with customers on
 - explains how we will take account of customers' views
 - provides details of the resources required to make the strategy work
- Create a register of customer organisations (this is a list of customer groups that are registered with Grampian Housing Association)
- Respond to comments from customers with Scottish Secure Tenancies or Short Scottish Secure Tenancies or customer organisations about the services we provide

8. Aims of the strategy

The principle aim of the customer participation strategy is to involve customers in decision making processes about housing and related services.

In order to achieve this, the Association has developed a range of specific aims. These were developed with input from customers that took part in focus group discussion sessions and from customer feedback in completed postal questionnaires.

- Provide clear key messages explaining how customers can participate in Grampian Housing Association
- Provide a range of options for customers to get involved and influence decisions about services
- Increase the involvement of underrepresented groups such as younger customers, customers with disabilities and minority ethnic groups
- Provide methods of participation that are suitable for customers spread over a wide geographical area.
- Demonstrate the benefits of customer participation in terms of improving service delivery and ensuring accountability and feedback.

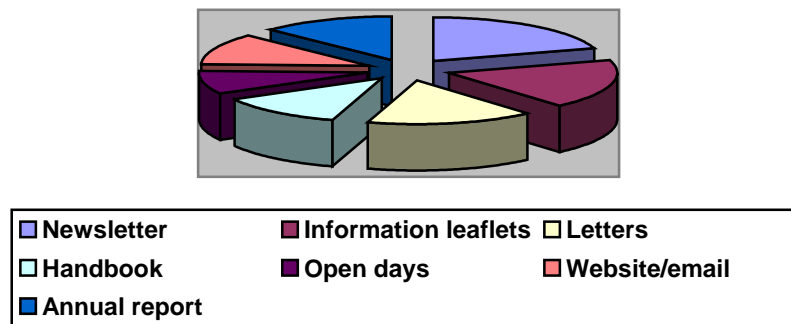
9. Keeping customers informed

Grampian Housing Association aims to provide customers with good quality information that is easy to understand. The Association keeps customers informed through a variety of different methods such as “Keynote”, the tenant handbook and the website. The information we provide explains important aspects of the housing service, your tenancy agreement and how you can get involved as a customer.

The information we produce also helps us provide feedback on how customers’ comments and views have helped us make changes to policies and services. For example, when we carry out a Customer Satisfaction Survey we will let you know the results and explain how these will be used to improve services.

The methods we use to provide information have been selected based on customers’ responses to the customer participation questionnaire delivered to all the Association’s customers in January 2008 (see below).

Chart 1. Preferred methods of receiving information



“Keynote” newsletter

The “Keynote” newsletter is produced twice a year and sent to all customers. Articles in the newsletter are submitted by Customers and Association staff about topical issues that affect customers. “Keynote” can be translated on request into different languages or formats such as large print, audio tape or Braille.

Tenants’ and shared ownership handbooks

Grampian Housing Association provides a handbook to every tenant and sharing owner. The handbook provides useful information on the tenancy / occupancy agreement and services provided by the Association. The handbooks are written in plain English and information is clearly presented.

Website

Grampian Housing Association's website provides a range of useful housing information. There is a section entitled "customer participation" that allows browsers to access a range of useful documents such as:

- customer participation strategy;
- groups start-up pack for setting up a tenants'/residents' association; and
- information and application pack for *Count me in*, the customer panel.
- fact sheets on a range of issues

The website is clearly set out and written in plain English. It can be translated into various languages through the "Babel Fish" translation service and can also be read out to web users through the "Browsaloud" service.

10. Registered tenant organisations

Registered tenant organisations were introduced as part of the provisions of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. These organisations have a statutory right to be provided with information and consulted over important decisions relating to the housing service.

At Grampian Housing Association we are keen to consult with all of our customers equally. As a result of this we will consult with all customer groups whether they decide to register with us or not.

Customers can participate in and influence housing services by joining or setting up a customer group. They have the right to register with the Association and may receive an annual grant to cover administration costs such as posting letters to their members. The advantage of registering is that the Association has a legal duty to consult with registered tenant organisations over proposed changes to housing services.

Registered tenant organisations are independent. They have written constitutions, their own committees and records of their accounts that are publicly available.

The legal context for registered tenant organisations

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 states that:

- All tenants and residents associations have a right to become registered tenant organisations with the Association
- Groups can appeal to the Scottish Government if they are refused registration
- The Association must consult with registered tenant organisations before making or changing any policies that will have a significant impact on members of the group
- Following consultation the Association must demonstrate that it has taken account of any comments made by registered tenant organisations
- The Association must keep a register of all tenant organisations, which is open for inspection by the public at any time

Although the legal position relates to tenant bodies the Association will consider applications from other customer groups on the same basis as set out above.

Registered tenant organisations in Grampian Housing Association

As at April 2008, there is one group registered with Grampian Housing Association. South Aberdeenshire Tenant Resident Association (SATRA) covers an area from Portlethen in the north to Marykirk in the south. To find out more about SATRA you can contact them as below:

SATRA

Tel: 01569 766604

Contact: David Wood (Chairperson)

Process for becoming a registered tenant organisation

The Association is required to hold a register of all customer organisations in the area. To become registered with the Association a customer group must have:

- A name
- A written constitution
- A clear description of the area your group covers

Your group must hold a publicly advertised inaugural general meeting (first meeting), to appoint office holders (chairperson, secretary and treasurer) and to agree the constitution or rules of conduct. After its first year it must hold a publicly advertised annual general meeting.

A copy of the group's constitution should be submitted to the Association and will be held by the Association for public inspection. It should contain the following information:

- The name of the group
- The group's area of operation
- Rules of membership
- A statement on how the committee will conduct its business
- An explanation of procedures at meetings and how decisions will be taken
- A statement of how funds will be managed and audited
- The procedure for making changes to the constitution
- A statement supporting equal opportunities
- A statement setting out arrangements for the dissolution of the group

11. Consultation and involvement

It is important that customers are consulted over changes to housing and related services that will have a significant impact on them. To make sure that we are delivering good quality services we are keen for customers to get involved and to let us know their views.

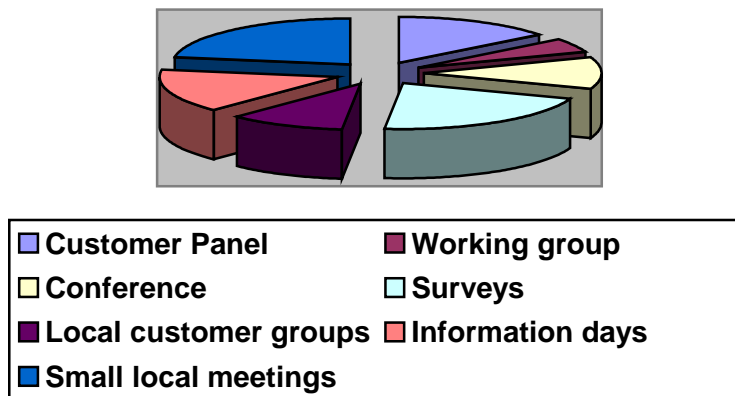
Grampian Housing Association will consult on the following issues:

- When we introduce or make changes to any policies that will have a significant effect on our customers
- Setting rent and service charge levels
- Service standards (for example repair response times, complaint handling)
- The Customer Participation Strategy

Naturally, different people prefer to get involved in different ways. The Association understands that joining a customer group is not always the most suitable method for customers to participate in housing issues. Because of this we have developed a 'menu of options' for customers to get involved.

The methods we have developed to consult with customers have been selected based on responses to the postal questionnaire delivered to all customers in January 2008 (outlined below).

Chart 2. Preferred consultation methods



***Count me in* customer panel**

Grampian Housing Association's properties are spread over a wide geographic area. As a result of this, it is not always easy for customers to travel to a central location for meetings. To provide customers with a more suitable option of getting involved we have developed *Count me in*. This is a group of interested customers that have indicated that they would like to be consulted by post. If you would like to join *Count me in* please contact Housing Plus on FREEPHONE: 0808 100 1354 or apply on line at www.housingplus.net or write to Housing Plus, FREEPOST SCO3082, Carrbridge PH23 3BR (no stamp needed).

Customer event

The Association holds a regular customer event. This is an opportunity for all customers to come along and find out more about the Association activities and plans for the future. In the future, the Association may also hold an event in partnership with other local housing associations.

Consideration is being given to holding the event in a different location to encourage customers from all areas to attend. The Association makes every effort to provide a varied programme including the following activities:

- A choice of workshops
- Guest speakers and workshop leaders
- A question and answer session
- A free prize draw

Customer groups

The Association will consult with all customer groups on important housing and related issues and support groups to become registered customer organisations if desired. If you and your neighbours are interested in setting up a customer group, we will provide advice and assistance. We will also provide additional support to you by making suitable venues available and providing you with training on customer participation and other skills.

'Village voices'

As of 2008 the Association intends to pilot a new opportunity for customers to get involved. It's called 'village voices' and will allow the Association to assess the popularity of a new method of consulting with local customers in smaller communities where there is not sufficient demand for setting up a customer group.

If successful, 'Village voices' will be consulted over the same issues as customer groups and will receive the same level of funding and support. They will be expected to represent the local community on housing matters and will receive training and have a signed code of conduct. All customers can become 'village voices', although there is a nomination and election system that will take place at the Association's annual general meeting. If you would more information on becoming a 'village voice', please contact the Association.

Consultation events

From time to time the Association will hold consultation events in local communities when it is consulting on changes to housing and related services, for example setting rents for the next financial year. Customers' comments at these events will help shape our final policies and we encourage all customers to take part if they are invited.

Questionnaires and satisfaction surveys

Every three to five years the Association conducts a customer satisfaction survey to find out what customers think of our services. We use this information to improve our services and decide how we will invest in services over the coming years.

We will publish the results of satisfaction surveys and explain these to you in "Keynote". When we let you know the results of satisfaction surveys we will do so in a way that is easy to understand by using clear simple language and straightforward charts and tables.

From time to time we will send out informal questionnaires to find out what you think of certain parts of the housing service. For example we might use "Keynote" to find out what you think of the ways we consult with customers.

Customer Board Members

The Association welcomes customer involvement in its Board of Management and sees this as a key element of the its customer participation strategy, ensuring that the services provided and the new developments and initiatives undertaken by the Association are meeting customers needs and aspirations. We consider that ideally about one third of the Board should be made up of customers. Customers can join the Board either by invitation, when casual vacancies arise, or through election at the Annual General Meeting. The Board of Management is the ultimate decision-making body, but much of its work is delegated to Committees. The Association has three main Committees dealing with the operational areas of the business: Housing and Property Services; Development; Finance and General Purposes. There is also an Audit Committee which specifically deals with the annual audit and internal audit processes.

12. Feedback

Grampian Housing Association will regularly ask for feedback on the services we provide. The following methods are used by the Association:

- Customer satisfaction surveys
- Questionnaires
- Consultation events
- “Count me in” consultation panel
- Letters to individual customers

“How your views shape the services we provide:”

When we consult with customers we think it is important to let you know how we have taken account of your comments.

We know from the findings of a recent postal questionnaire that “Keynote” is a popular way of providing feedback to customers. We will use the newsletter to keep you up to date on any changes to services that we have made as a result of customers’ comments. In addition, customers responding to questionnaires will be provided with feedback through special mailings to respondents.

13. Resources

A key requirement of this strategy is to carry out an assessment of the resources needed to implement effective customer participation. The resources the Association has made available to implement the strategy are outlined below:

- Staff time
- Independent advice from TPAS to conduct an audit and review of the Association's existing customer participation strategy
- Cost of producing and distributing three customer newsletters each year
- Cost of other printed information such as information leaflets and flyers
- Customer events
- Staff / customer training
- Staff / customer attendance at conferences
- Administration
- Customer travel expenses and out of pocket expenses

14. Monitoring and reviewing this strategy

The Association will monitor the effectiveness of customer participation by measuring performance in the following activities:

- Number of customers attending customer events
- Number of customers on *Count me in*, the customer panel
- Number of customers responding to consultation documents
- Number of customer surveys carried out and response rates
- Number of “Keynote” newsletters produced
- Yearly budget for customer participation
- Cost per tenancy of customer participation
- Amount of staff time spent on customer participation

To ensure the Customer Participation Strategy is working as intended, the following monitoring arrangements will be put in place:

- an annual update will be provided to the Board of Management on key customer participation outcomes and achievements and progress of the customer participation strategy action plan
- regular progress updates will be provided to the Association’s Customer Participation Working Group
- Publishing annual customer participation outcomes and achievements in “Keynote”
- Benchmarking and peer reviews

The customer participation strategy and action plan will be reviewed by the Association every three years in consultation with customers and staff. When reviewing the strategy, the Association will give due consideration to whether the methods of communication and participation are still the most effective for Grampian Housing Association customers.

15. Action Plan

The action plan will be monitored and reviewed annually. The following activities have been identified as customer participation priorities and will be addressed over the duration of this three year strategy:

Ref:	Activity
1.1	Produce two customer newsletters & one key performance report
1.2	Organise an annual customer event, possibly in conjunction with other local RSLs
1.3	Provide feedback following customer event
1.4	Pilot 'village voices' scheme
1.5	Circulate information about village voices in "Keynote"
1.6	Produce a timetable of key consultation events to be published in "Keynote"
1.7	Promote and increase membership of the "Count me in" customer consultation panel
1.8	Develop approach to increase customer involvement of underrepresented groups such as disabled customers, minority ethnic groups and younger customers.
1.9	Carry out customer participation training needs analysis for staff
1.10	Produce a "Guide to customer participation in Grampian Housing Association" in the form of a leaflet that sets out the range of opportunities for customer participation
1.11	Revise and expand customer participation section in website
1.12	Promote rent setting exercise
1.13	Carry out rent setting consultation
1.14	Provide feedback from rent setting consultation
1.15	Complete training needs analysis of village voices & committee members of any new customer groups
1.16	Carry out a baseline customer satisfaction survey
1.17	Review customer participation strategy
1.18	Consult customers over the future organisational structure of Grampian Housing Association

Comments and suggestions

We would like to know your views on customer participation in Grampian Housing Association. Please use the form below to let us know how we can improve the way we involve customers and return to:

Grampian Housing Association
74 Huntly Street
Aberdeen
AB10 1TD

Name.....

.....

Address.....

.....

.....

Telephone (daytime)

(evening).....

Email

My comments

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I would like to have my name and contact details added to the Association's

"Count me in" customer panel