

Scottish Women's Convention

Review of the Scottish Social Housing Charter – A Consultation

August 2016

The Consultation

This consultation seeks views on the Scottish Social Housing Charter, which remains in force until 31 March 2017. Following this consultation, the Scottish Government will develop an updated version of the Charter and ask the Scottish Parliament to consider the changes and approve a new Charter from 1st April 2017.

The Charter was introduced by the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010, which requires Ministers to set standards and outcomes that social landlords should be achieving for tenants and other customers through their housing activities. It also requires Ministers to review the Charter standards and outcomes from time to time.

The Charter sets the outcomes and standards that all social landlords should be achieving for their tenants and other customers through their housing activities.

Its purpose is to:

- Give tenants, homeless people and other customers a clear understanding of what they should expect from a social landlord.
- Give landlords a clear understanding of what they should be delivering through their housing activities.
- Provide the basis for the Scottish Housing Regulator to monitor, assess and report on the performance of social landlords, and if necessary to require compliance with the Charter, and through the Regulator's reports:
 - Give landlords the information they need to achieve continuous improvements in their performance and in the value for money they provide.
 - Give tenants and other customer's information on how their landlord is performing in relation to other landlords, so that they can hold the landlord to account.

The Charter applies to Scottish social landlords. It does not cover private sector landlords. The standards and outcomes do not add any new duties to social landlords; rather they describe what a good social landlord should be achieving for its tenants and other customers.

Anything to add to the Charter

Is there anything else you think the Charter should cover? If so please tell us what and why you think it should be included?

It is vital that a strong gender focus is included in the Social Housing Charter. Equalities are covered under Charter outcome 1. This broad recognition of all protected characteristics may not, however, take into account the unique and specific needs of women in social housing.

For example, the removal of council tax and housing benefit brought about by the introduction of Universal Credit (UC) is having a particularly adverse impact. Women who are used to having their rent paid directly to their landlord will, under the new system, be given that money directly and expected to make the payment themselves. This could cause issues with rent arrears. More often than not, women manage very tight household budgets, which run to the dates upon which small pockets of money will be received.

“If we have a bad winter I won’t be paying my rent. The money will go towards my gas and electricity instead. I can’t cope with my kids being cold again.”

While the Scottish Government will be given the power to change this and have rent paid directly to the landlord, this has no guaranteed timescale. It is, therefore, important to recognise that women’s financial situations may be compromised. Social landlords should take this into account under Charter obligations.

It is widely recognised that there is a critical need for more affordable, appropriate housing overall in Scotland, particularly in the social housing sector. Families often live in unsuitable accommodation. Many are overcrowded, or are forced to move away from support networks due to lack of availability. This can make it difficult for women to access informal childcare through friends and family, which can seriously curtail their ability to enter into employment or education.

“I don’t want to live in a two bedroom flat with my two kids in a part of town which doesn’t have a great reputation, but I know there are no bigger properties available where I would want to live. I rely on my family and friends, who live nearby, for childcare so that I can go out to work. If I had to move outwith the area, I would have to get a bus to drop my kids off, get another bus to work, and then do a similar journey at night. It would make me going out to work completely pointless and I don’t want that.”

These barriers faced by women, which begin with poor quality housing often in unsuitable areas, should be tackled through the Charter. A gender focus on the obligations under Charter outcome 4, ‘Quality of Housing’, as well as Charter outcome 6, ‘Estate Management, Anti-Social Behaviour, Neighbour Nuisance and Tenancy Disputes’ could go some way to achieving this.

As well as a strong gender focus in the Charter, regard must be made to the geographical nature of Scotland. Many families live in rural areas, where social housing can be extremely difficult to access. Certain Charter outcomes may be more difficult to achieve in these parts of the country. More work may be necessary in order to ensure that tenants in rural areas are not disadvantaged or discriminated against.