



EDINBURGH TENANTS FEDERATION

Edinburgh's Federation of Tenants' and Residents' Associations

Progress Report

October 2007 to December 2007

Introduction

This is the second quarterly progress report on the work plan agreed by our members at the Federation's AGM in June 2007, and reports on the Federation's work between October and December 2007.

Our priorities for the coming year were spelt out in our Work Plan and are laid out here. This report follows the priorities outlined in the Work Plan.

- 1) to continue ongoing work
- 2) (a) to adapt to the new political administrations
(b) to expand the Federation's Executive Committee
(c) to work with Registered Social Landlords and their tenants
- 3) to promote the Federation and its activities more widely
- 4) (a) to continue to explore new methods of tenant participation, beginning with Tenant Led Inspections
(b) to develop Housing Area Boards and help them to engage with Neighbourhood Partnerships
(c) to work on improving tenant representation in terms of both equalities and areas of the city
- 5) (a) to secure more resources for the Federation to help us carry out our work
(b) to increase the contact that the Executive Committee has with our members
(c) to develop a rolling programme of activities for the Federation.

Report

1. Continuing ongoing work

As the Council's re-organisation is finally complete there has been a flurry of activity as officers are keen to get working on their new responsibilities. As a result, we are finding our joint working increasing. Over the past three months, in addition to work on the Scottish Housing Quality Standard and the Tenant Participation Strategy, we have also seen the reinstatement of the Tenant Participation Working Group and the Multi Storey Working Group. These will again give us the opportunity to work with elected politicians as well as officers.

We were asked to be involved in new pieces of work over the past three months. We have been asked to participate in a rent-setting project, selection of preferred partners within the Housing Association sector, the multi-storey concierge service review, and a project looking at improving recycling facilities in the multi-storeys. Additionally, we have contributed to two Chartermark assessments – for Housing Management and for the Caretaking and Concierge service.

We have also continued to work with our housing association colleagues at Dunedin Canmore, with the Housing Association Tenants Sub Committee reviewing their proposed Tenant Participation Strategy.

Repairs

The Repairs Strategy Group met again in October and discussed the repairs action plan, EBS complaints handling and the repairs budget. Tenant reps continued to build on good working relationships with the group's officers.

Tenant reps had a meeting with Jim Davidson, head of Housing Property Services and his team on 14th November. This was essentially a preliminary meeting which laid the groundwork for regular future meetings and agreed priorities for discussion. Reps were able to meet the key people within Housing Property Services and begin to establish working relationships with them.

ETF and Edinburgh Building Services (EBS) organised a study visit to Repairs Direct and EBS on 15th November. Nine tenant reps attended, and for some it was their first time visiting Repairs Direct and EBS' headquarters at Murrayburn. They met key people in both Repairs Direct and EBS, and had a chance to listen into some of the calls Repairs Direct operatives were taking. Then they went on to EBS, where they listened to a number of presentations from key managers before touring the Central Admin Team and learning more about the back office processes that aim to ensure the right repairs staff go out to do the right job at the right time.

The plan now is to organise another study day – this time to visit an empty home and maybe go out on the rounds with some of the repairs operatives, though the logistics of this need to be looked at more carefully. Some of the staff from the Central Admin Team are interested in attending meetings of the Repairs Group in order to get to know us better and get a better idea of tenants' concerns.

There has been a further meeting of the Federation's Repairs Group to co-ordinate these activities.

High Flats

The Federation's High Flats Group continues to meet regularly to discuss issues of interest or concern to residents in the multi-storeys. Work was done to publicise the Block Walkabout Training Day that took place in October. We were pleased to welcome some new participants on the day.

There have been meetings of both the Caretaking Service Improvement Forum and the Multi-Storey Working Group during the last three months. Reps have been asked to participate in a review of the Multi-Storey Caretaking service, and also to be part of a project team looking at how to improve recycling facilities and reduce the levels of rubbish within the multi-storeys.

Tenant reps were involved in reporting on the caretaking service to the Chartermark assessor. Edinburgh's caretaking and concierge service is now one of only two organisations in Scotland to have achieved full compliance with each of the Chartermark criteria, and we congratulate them on this.

Our Convenor has continued to try to promote joined up thinking and services for tenants with mental health problems, including meeting with Neighbourhood Managers and the head of the mental health service at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital.

Stair Cleaning

There was a regular meeting with the contractors in October, which reps attended. Reps are now keen to set up a meeting of the wider steering group that comprises officers, reps and elected politicians, in order to take a more strategic view of the service.

The Federation continues to monitor and pass on complaints received. These are generally dealt with within 1-2 days. We keep hearing that other people are dissatisfied with the service and we would urge these people to make formal complaints in order that they can be resolved and any lessons can be learned.

Investment and Regeneration

We have had one of our bi-monthly meetings with representatives of the Strategy and Investment Section to discuss and co-ordinate approaches to the housing investment crisis in Edinburgh and to the housing regeneration areas. This meeting followed the announcement by the Scottish Government of the outcome of the Spending Review and the launch of its discussion paper, "Firm Foundations", on the future of housing in Scotland. All parties were keen at this early point to identify options for tackling the crisis we face in Edinburgh. Sadly there seemed little on offer to address our concerns over the supply of affordable rented housing or how we achieve the Scottish Housing Quality Standard given our high rents and large outstanding debt, and this has to inform our response to the consultation.

We received an update on the selection of the housing association preferred partners for the development of new affordable housing for rent. Two Executive Committee members had participated in this process and their contribution was much appreciated. Finally, we had an update on developments in the housing regeneration areas and a short discussion on the need for consistency in the approach to setting up Steering Groups, the mechanism for local involvement in the regeneration process. ETF presented a paper on this topic which we hope will form the basis for future discussion to establish a shared understanding and agreement on the role and nature of Steering Groups in the regeneration process.

Regeneration Areas

We have continued to support the North Sighthill Residents Association to represent the interests of the residents in the joint Steering Group responsible for co-ordinating and managing the demolition process in the area. This process is in need of review given the development of neighbourhood management and Neighbourhood Partnerships and the key role given to Community Councils, but must not compromise the basic principle of directly involving the representatives of those affected by the regeneration process.

During this period we also supported the North Sighthill Residents Association to hold a general meeting of its members so that the committee could be accountable for its work, take guidance on its future work and recruit new members to the committee. Alongside this, we have held discussions with the Gracemount Court and Cottages Residents Association about providing support, particularly in setting up a local Steering Group, as they are simultaneously going through the same regeneration process as North Sighthill. This has largely been possible because of the appointment of our Outreach Worker, Justine Bradd, who started work at the end of October. Plans have also been made to bring the two groups together early in the New Year to learn from each others' experiences.

Scottish Housing Quality Standard

After the consultation on 22nd September, at which tenants made their priorities known (all houses up to scratch by 2015, reduction in spend on kitchens and bathrooms from £9000 to £6000 per house without reducing choice or quality, and rent rises of inflation plus 1%), the council went off to model the proposals.

The bad news is that they don't add up. The department has decided that management costs should be protected and only reduced in line with stock loss. Consequently, the Council on 12th December agreed a delivery plan to meet the targets by 2015 but requiring a rent increase of inflation plus 2.7%, which is a miniscule reduction from the council's original proposal of inflation plus 3%. Sadly, ETF had no further input into the delivery plan beyond the consultation in September and hence was not party to the variety of options that would have been explored and no influence over the final outcome of a rent rise way beyond what tenants were recommending.

Rent Setting

We have held two meetings with the Council on proposals for a new rent setting scheme and one briefing session for Executive Committee members on this topic. This will be the third occasion we have worked with the Council on establishing a new rent setting scheme. We are hopeful that on this occasion we will not only agree a preferred scheme but see it implemented in 2009.

With more than 2,000 different rent levels at present, we have always been keen to see this replaced with something that is simple, fair and easy to explain: everything that the current system is not. We are close to agreeing a set of proposals that would result in only 9 different rent levels with differences based simply on property size and whether it is a flat or a house. The difficult issues remaining to be resolved are: a transition scheme to introduce the system to cushion the impact on the minority who will face a rent increase; being assured that the housing benefits section will cope with such a radical change smoothly and with the minimum of upset for benefit recipients; and a thorough process for informing and consulting tenants on the proposal.

Premises

There has been no progress on securing new premises for the Federation. The Council has been looking at its own vacant premises with a view to making something available to us, but nothing has so far materialised.

2(a) Adapting to the new political administrations

The Federation has begun working with the new administration in the City Chambers, though it has still proved impossible to secure a meeting with Housing Minister Stewart Maxwell MSP after he declined to meet with Federation representatives.

The Tenant Participation Working Group has now been set up, with an inaugural meeting set for January 2008. It has been agreed that the Federation should provide some form of briefing session on tenant participation for councillors, but the details are still being worked on.

The Scottish Government published a green paper on housing at the end of October. The Federation has provided a briefing to its members on what proposals could mean for Edinburgh, and will be making a formal response to the green paper before its January deadline. The timing for the consultation period is difficult for many as it coincides with when groups traditionally shut down over the Christmas period. The Federation has therefore written to the Minister and

the civil servants responsible for the consultation and asked them to consider extending the consultation period in order that more tenants' groups can give these proposals their considered opinion. We have also prepared postcards for our members to send to the Scottish Government asking for more time to respond: we hope that many of you found time to post these in the run-up to Christmas.

2(b) Expanding the Executive Committee

Before the AGM there were nine remaining members on the Executive Committee. Four new members were elected at the AGM in June, thus expanding our membership to thirteen. The new committee received induction training in September.

Four of the Executive Committee are Housing Association tenants, and we now have representation from all across the city, apart from East Edinburgh.

2(c) Working with Registered Social Landlords and their tenants

The Housing Association Tenants Sub Committee has been very active over this period progressing a working relationship with Dunedin Canmore Housing Association. Further discussions have taken place with a Dunedin Canmore representative exploring common interests. Work was undertaken providing support to a Registered Tenant Organisation of Dunedin Canmore. Finally, a major piece of work was providing an extensive commentary on Dunedin Canmore's draft Tenant Participation Strategy.

On a broader front, the Housing Association Tenants Sub Committee has produced an article for *Tenants Voice* on its work and promoting tenant involvement with housing association landlords. The article will now form the basis of further promotional work to encourage housing association tenants to organise and get involved.

3. Promoting the Federation

We continue to develop the website as a means of promoting the Federation to the wider world, and as a means of generating dialogue with our members. Over the past three months we put a survey asking visitors to the site to tell us what they thought of it and what else they wanted to see. The most popular response to this was discussion boards, so we will be looking to see how we can introduce these.

We have continued to send out *Federation Matters* every month, and one issue of *Tenants Voice* has been published, with some pages in full colour as an experiment. We hope you liked them! As well as being sent out to our members and supporters, both publications are now available for anyone to view or download from the Federation's website. Members of Dunedin Canmore Housing Association's Tenants Forum now receive *Tenants Voice* and we continue to look for ways of expanding our circulation amongst tenants in Housing Associations. If your landlord has a tenants' forum that we could add to our *Tenants Voice* mailing list, please let us know.

Our members should all have received an updated members' pack in November, containing information about the Federation and lists of useful contacts. This is something we update annually: if there are contacts that aren't there but that you would like to see included, please let us know for future issues.

4(a) Developing new methods of tenant participation

Our primary focus in the past few months has continued to be the idea of introducing Tenant Led Inspections to Edinburgh. Having done the initial ground work in the summer, we had to wait for sign-up from our prospective inspection subjects. Both the Council and Dunedin Canmore Housing Association have now agreed to participate in a pilot inspection and a meeting has been set up between the tenants' inspection team and representatives from both organisations in order to plan an inspection.

We were willing to help promote the Council's mystery shopper initiative within *Tenants Voice* but the Council's internal decision-making took too long for us to be able to feature it. Nevertheless we understand that some of our members have been involved in this project and we are keen to learn more from them about how it worked.

4(b) Developing Housing Area Boards and Neighbourhood Partnerships

After a lengthy period of uncertainty over Housing Area Boards and uneven development across the city in establishing a relationship with Neighbourhood Partnerships, there has been a lot of activity that may result in greater clarity and certainty. We helped tenant representatives in the South West area to organise and prepare their agenda and views in anticipation of a forthcoming meeting. We also helped tenant representatives in the North area meet to discuss what they would like to see developed in their area. This resulted in assisting them carry out a survey of Registered Tenant Organisations in the area to determine support for working together on housing and related issues.

Early in November we held another city wide meeting of tenant representatives to Housing Area Boards. Representatives provided an update on developments locally, reaffirmed what they saw as the purpose of the Housing Area Boards and the future they sought for them, and made commitments on how to secure these in the next round of local discussions. Following on from this meeting, and having confirmed to senior managers in the Council the continuing concerns over Housing Area Boards, we met with the Council to discuss the difficulties that all were facing and to agree a way forward. The outcome of this discussion is a framework or set of principles that should better guide discussions and negotiations across the city on the form that Housing Area Boards will take and the nature of their relationship to their respective Neighbourhood Partnerships.

4(c) Working on improving representation

The Executive Committee now attracts membership from throughout the city, though East Edinburgh remains unrepresented. Four tenants from three of the city's Registered Social Landlords are now members of the committee.

We continue to support new and ongoing tenants' groups whenever we are asked to. We have made no progress in terms of working to encourage the involvement of young tenants or tenants from equalities groups but recognise work of this nature will require long term planning and resourcing.

5(a) Securing more resources

There has been no progress on items this low in the Federation's list of priorities for the coming year. They remain on the list of things on which we would like to make some progress, but they are generally of a longer term nature.

Our first priority in terms of resources is to secure new premises that are fully accessible and are more suitable for the Federation's needs. As other items of work take off it may be possible to start to make the case to funders for additional staffing resources to help share the workload, but that is not for immediate action.

5(b) Increasing Executive Committee contact with members

Executive Committee members are generally happy to attend meetings and events held by Federation members, and are simply waiting for an invitation. Their contact details are contained within the members' packs that were sent to all member groups in November, or alternatively they can be contacted via the Federation office.

5(c) Develop a programme of activities

This is a piece of work that by its very nature continues to be developed. Certain events in the Federation's calendar have become fixed by tradition.

The annual quiz night in November was very well attended and enjoyed by all who took part. We are currently preparing for the Burns supper in January which will follow our quarterly meeting. Live music will be provided by North Sea Gas. The finance training is scheduled for Saturday 12th April in Southside Community Centre. An events list is included in every issue of *Federation Matters*, and is also available on the Federation's website.

Evaluation and Monitoring

This is the second quarterly report of our activities since the Federation's Annual General Meeting in June 2007. It will be discussed at our quarterly Federation meeting in January and then circulated to our members and funders, the CEC/ETF Liaison Group and the Tenant Participation Working Group.

The first quarterly report on our activities was discussed and endorsed by our members at a Federation Meeting held in October. Also at that meeting the members agreed an Executive Committee recommendation that the Federation remain as an unincorporated organisation without charitable status. This followed many months of work by the Executive Committee, assisted by professional assistance from Edinburgh Voluntary Organisation Council, exploring the pros and cons of becoming incorporated and / or acquiring charitable status. A paper outlining the various considerations and the reasons for the Executive Committee's recommendation is available on request.

Future Projects

We will continue to work to the priorities set out in the Work Plan.

Tenants Voice will be going out again in February. Any articles and photos for inclusion should be sent to the Federation office by 31st January.

January 2008