

North Ayrshire Council
Housing Services

**Annual Assurance Statement
2020/21**

Supporting Evidence
September 2021



North Ayrshire Council
Comhairle Siorrachd Àir a Tuath

Introduction

In February 2019, the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) issued a revised framework for the regulation of social housing in Scotland. The new framework includes the requirement for landlords to submit an Annual Assurance Statement which has been agreed by a Board or Committee within the organisation. We must provide assurance that the organisation complies with the relevant requirements of Chapter 3 of the Regulatory Framework.

This document provides evidence to support our Statement that North Ayrshire Council is assured that we:

- ✓ Adhere to relevant guidance and the requirements of other regulators;
- ✓ Meet our statutory duties to prevent and alleviate homelessness;
- ✓ Adhere to statutory guidance from the Scottish Housing Regulator;
- ✓ Take account of regulatory advice from the Scottish Housing Regulator and from other regulators; and
- ✓ Comply with all regulatory requirements, encompassing:
 - Assurance and notification
 - Tenant and service user redress
 - Whistleblowing
 - Equalities and human rights
 - Scottish Social Housing Charter Performance.

As a landlord, we are also required to meet all legal duties and responsibilities. During 2020/21 we were unable to do this, as some properties did not have an annual gas safety check within the legal timescales due to the impact of COVID-19 on gaining access to tenants' homes. We have provided information on this non-compliance in our Annual Assurance Statement and further detail in this supporting evidence.

In August 2020, the Scottish Housing Regulator published advisory guidance to assist landlords to adapt their approach to the submission of the AAS to reflect the impact of the pandemic. They requested that landlords include their position in relation to equalities and human rights in the 2021 Annual Assurance Statement. At that time, it was anticipated that the guidance on equalities data collection would have been available to landlords, however, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed the production of that guidance, and it is not yet available. The Regulator is also producing guidance on equalities data collection, and jointly developing a briefing on the right to housing.

In recognition of this position, the SHR has requested that landlords provide assurance in their Statement that they have appropriate plans to implement an effective approach to the collection of equalities information and that they have started to consider how they can adopt a human rights approach in their work.

Regulatory Requirements

Assurance and notification

We prepare an Annual Assurance Statement in accordance with guidance and submit it to the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) annually. The statement is available to tenants and other service users. We will notify the SHR during the year of any material changes to our assurance as set out in the Statement.

We can evidence that we meet all legal obligations associated with housing and homelessness services, and equality and human rights.

We have not met our legal obligations around tenant and resident safety as we did not comply with gas safety legislation for 1,228 properties during 2020/21. Our contractor initially ceased works due to concerns around the safety of their employees and their interpretation of the Scottish Government guidance. Following negotiation, safe working practices were put in place to minimise risk to tenants and employees. Notwithstanding this, there was an ongoing reluctance by some tenants to grant access to their property due to their concerns about risk of COVID-19 transmission. As this was fully attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic and all efforts were made to ensure compliance at the earliest opportunity and appropriate records were kept, we have not considered this a material non-compliance. We did, however, notify the Scottish Housing Regulator of the difficulties we were experiencing in carrying out these checks in April 2020.

We notify the SHR of any tenant and resident safety matters involving the Health and Safety Executive or reports from other regulatory bodies relating to safety concerns. There were no issues to report during 2020/21.

'Customer Connections', our Tenant Participation Strategy, is available to tenants and service users on the Council website.

[Customer Connections Strategy \(north-ayrshire.gov.uk\)](https://www.north-ayrshire.gov.uk/customer-connections-strategy)

Tenant and service user redress

Information on how to report any concerns around significant performance failures is available to tenants. Further information is contained in the Scottish Housing Regulator [leaflet](#).

North Ayrshire Council's Complaints Handling Procedure is readily available to tenants and other service users. It sets out the information they need to exercise their right to complain and seek redress. Responses are provided within timescales set out in the Procedure, in accordance with guidance

from the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO). We have mechanisms in place to learn from complaints and other tenant and service user feedback, in accordance with SPSO guidance.

Whistleblowing

North Ayrshire Council has a policy and procedure in line with the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 for whistleblowing by staff and elected members. This is readily available on the Council website and promoted through staff bulletins.

Equalities and human rights

Equality is one of the North Ayrshire Council's core values. The principles of equality and fairness are central to all council activities. Our Equality and Children's Rights Impact Assessment process for all policies, procedures and proposals ensures we meet legislative requirements. All decisions made by the Council's committees include an assessment of equalities implications.

As a landlord, we collect data relating to each of the protected characteristics for existing tenants, new tenants, people on waiting lists, governing body members, staff, people who apply to us as homeless and service users on our Gypsy/Traveller site. We are currently undergoing a system review and have incorporated equalities data into the brief to further develop our approach.

We have also begun to consider how we can adopt a human rights approach in our work. We await guidance from the Scottish Housing Regulator to further inform this strategy.

Scottish Social Housing Charter Performance

We submit an Annual Return on the Charter to the Scottish Housing Regulator annually in accordance with published guidance. We have agreed our approach to this through the North Ayrshire Network (NAN), a group of representatives from the various Registered Tenant Organisations in North Ayrshire. You can read about our approach in Customer Connections, our Tenant Participation Strategy 2017-22.

Each year, we report on performance in our autumn edition of Tenancy Matters. The NAN work with us to agree the content of the report, which includes comparisons with previous years, other landlords and national performance. Within this report we identify how we will address areas for improvement and ask for feedback on our approach.

Standard 1 – The customer / landlord relationship

Outcomes:

Equalities

We promote equality and embrace diversity in all parts of Housing Services. All the information we produce is in line with the Council's Communications Strategy. All leaflets, and a number of documents, are published in Plain English and can be made available in large print, braille, tape or CD, and can be translated on request.

Communication

Housing Services provide a comprehensive range of information available in some leaflets, on the Council website and on social media. The Tenant Editorial Panel approves all leaflets prior to issue to ensure they are fit for purpose and easy to understand. Our 'tenant approved' logo shows tenants have endorsed our publications. In recent years we have developed a social media profile through Facebook and Twitter to encourage digital engagement with a wider and more diverse customer base.

We commission an independent organisation to undertake a tenant satisfaction survey at least every three years. The results of this help us to focus our efforts in improving communication and participation and understand what is important to our customers. Our next survey is being undertaken during summer 2021.

Participation

The North Ayrshire Network (NAN) customer group has responsibility for ensuring that we continually improve the way we deliver services to tenants and customers. Part of their role is to challenge our performance against the indicators, outcomes and standards in the Charter. To do this, Housing Services report to the Network through presenting on performance both mid-year and prior to submitting the Charter annually, working together on developing our annual report to tenants and communicating any changes from the Scottish Housing Regulator directly to the group.

Our Tenant Inspection Panel scrutinise one area of service per year. They can decide this independently through review of our performance information, or with support from Officers. Scrutiny provides an opportunity for tenants to drive improvement in the services most important to them. This process continued virtually during the pandemic.

Customer Connections, our Tenant Participation Strategy for 2017 – 2022 encompasses and reflects the requirements of the Scottish Social Housing Charter and the Council's priorities. These support communities' tenants and residents to grow and develop opportunities for active engagement and participation for all citizens by listening to local needs and aspirations.

Our last tenant satisfaction survey told us that 95% of tenants are satisfied with the opportunities given to them to participate in our decision-making processes.

Standard 2 – Housing quality and maintenance

Outcomes:

Quality of housing

Our housing stock is in very good condition and is well maintained. We take a proactive approach to housing asset management and target improvements to ensure that our properties are SHQS and EESSH compliant. Properties are refurbished to ensure they remain attractive, meet modern requirements and tenant expectations. We have a range of planned maintenance programmes which are designed to achieve economies by replacing major element components just before they would otherwise require responsive repairs; anticipate changes in minimum acceptable standards; and reduce future requirements for cyclical maintenance.

We have not met our legal obligations around tenant and resident safety as we did not comply with gas safety legislation for 1,228 properties during 2020/21. Our contractor initially ceased works due to concerns around the safety of their employees and their interpretation of the Scottish Government guidance. Following negotiation, safe working practices were put in place to minimise risk to tenants and employees. Notwithstanding this, there was an ongoing reluctance by some tenants to grant access to their property due to their concerns about risk of COVID-19 transmission. As this was fully attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic and all efforts were made to ensure compliance at the earliest opportunity and appropriate records were kept, we have not considered this a material non-compliance. We did, however, notify the Scottish Housing Regulator of the difficulties we were experiencing in carrying out these checks in April 2020.

Our ambitious Estate Based Regeneration Programme was approved in 2019 and makes financial provision for investment in our housing estates over a ten-year period.

Repairs, maintenance and improvements

North Ayrshire Council is committed to delivering a high quality, efficient and effective reactive and planned maintenance service to all our tenants and factored owners in a manner which maintains high customer satisfaction. Our Repairs Policy sets out the service provided by the Council for repairs and maintenance and aims to ensure the needs of our current and future tenants are met in relation to the provision of high-quality housing. The policy was developed in consultation with tenant representatives.

The average length of time taken to complete emergency repairs increased from 2.96 in 2019/20 to 3.45 hours, and from 6.30 to 9.75 days for non-emergency repairs. This is directly attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, with repairs taking longer due to safe systems of work and sanitising processes being put in place to ensure the safety of tenants and staff. Only emergency repairs were undertaken for the majority of 2020/21 due to the COVID-19 restrictions in place. When non-emergency repairs were reinstated, there was a substantial backlog which impacted response times, and satisfaction levels. Supply of materials also impacted some repairs. The 9.75 days for completion includes repair requests kept open during periods of restriction, despite Building Services being unable to attend for health and safety reasons.

Satisfaction levels of tenants who had repairs or maintenance carried out in the last 12 months has decreased from 95.50% to 86.73% during the same period. This is based on responses from 98 tenants in 2020/21, compared to 1,534 the previous year due to the survey process being impacted during the pandemic. The wait times for non-emergency repairs during restriction periods is likely to have reduced satisfaction levels.

An efficient and effective void repairs service provides a quick turnaround on empty properties, which helps to speed the repairs process and reduce void rent loss. Void performance has been affected by the additional time taken to rehouse tenants from our regeneration projects. The Council agreed to demolish a number of blocks of flats and rehouse all tenants, with an enhanced package of works carried out in tenants' new homes. A general increase in the number of properties requiring major works such as central heating, rewiring and full decoration has also impacted on performance. The average time taken to re-let properties has increased from 26.26 days in 2019/20 to 27.13 days in 2020/21. This is in part due to the additional time required during the initial lockdown before operatives could safely enter a property prior to the introduction of electrostatic cleaning. A review of the void process is ongoing to identify improvements.

Standard 3 – Neighbourhood and community

Outcome:

Estate management, antisocial behaviour, neighbour nuisance and tenancy disputes

Estate Management covers a broad range of situations and activities such as new tenant visits, permissions for garages and runways in garden ground, abandoned tenancies, untidy gardens, neighbour disputes, problems with pets, abandoned vehicles, tackling graffiti and illegal dumping/fly-tipping. We have a comprehensive procedure manual to ensure we meet our responsibilities as landlord, and to support tenants to meet their responsibilities detailed in their Tenancy Agreement. Every effort will be made to support tenants to address breaches of tenancy, however if a tenant is unwilling to do so, the Council will pursue appropriate legal action.

The Safer North Ayrshire Partnership (SNAP) comprising of a range of community planning partners, works together to deliver the multi-agency SNAP strategy which includes how we work together to tackle antisocial behaviour (ASB) and low-level crime. The partnership continued to meet throughout 2020/21. In addition, we set up a series of meetings in which Police Scotland and Housing attended to discuss emerging issues because of the pandemic and how we would deploy interagency resources. We experienced an 3% increase in reports of ASB, in the main because of neighbour complaints in relation to breaches in Social Distancing Guidelines. Recognising that community concerns in relation to COVID-19 were heightened,

Housing Services and Police Scotland worked together to educate the public and where necessary issue warning where ASB was persistent. In 2020/21, there is a 0.5% negative variation in ARC performance compared to last year, because of working from home processes. The Council have locally agreed targets for the closure of cases which are based on the complexity and level of investigation required to resolve. Our performance against locally agreed targets is 98.3% against a target of 94%.

Our last tenant satisfaction survey saw an increase of 6% in tenants satisfied with the management of the neighbourhood they live in compared to the previous survey.

Standard 4 – Access to housing and support

Outcomes:

Housing options and access to social housing

The decision to demolish our high-rise accommodation in Irvine and our process for rehousing tenants into accommodation of a high standard, with upgrade works being completed at void stage, is increasing the average time taken to re-let properties. This is a key area of focus, and an end-to-end review of processes is underway involving Housing and Building Services.

We have introduced periodic meetings with North Ayrshire Health and Social Care Partnership, who manage the process for aids and adaptations, and our Building Services team who carry out the majority of works in Council dwellings. This allows us to monitor performance and spend. To ensure ongoing improvement and quality of service provision, Occupational Therapy (OT) assessments are reviewed by Senior Occupational Therapists. NAHSCP has a formal Adaptations Criteria and Policy for all staff to adhere to whilst assessing adaptations. Joint complex case reviews are held monthly, with Partnership and Housing representation, before any complex adaptation is agreed. OT staff have been trained to explore housing options with all service who have long term conditions, to ensure that accessible housing needs are met where adaptations are not appropriate. These tiers of governance provide a formal procedure for all decision making, ensuring resources are targeted to those most in need of adaptations. Processes have, at times, been adapted in line with government and national policy updates arising from COVID-19.

There has been some improvement in adaptations performance, with the number of households waiting for an adaptation to their home reducing from 84 in 2019/20 to 12 in 2020/21. The average number of days to complete an approved adaptation has also reduced from 62.96 to 54.79. A joint improvement group involving Housing, Building and Property Management and Investment Services alongside the Health and Social Care Partnership continues to review this process to consider ways to achieve the best outcome for tenants.

Homeless people

Our Homelessness and Housing Advice Service remained operational throughout the pandemic. In addition, a re-prioritisation of workloads by other services helped focus on the needs of this group. This included: a refocussing of the works undertaken by Building Services to ensure a sufficient supply of lettable temporary and permanent accommodation for homeless people; a prioritisation of lets to homeless households; a focus of equipment

supply and rerouting IT channels to ensure homeless and potentially homeless households could access services utilising existing processes; and an upscaling of the services offered by our Facilities Management and Health and Safety Teams to ensure the safety of our employees and clients. As a result, we were able to ensure that suitable temporary accommodation was available for anyone who needed it. In addition, we were able to facilitate the Scottish Government early prison discharge programme. We put in place a monitoring framework which reported changes in trends in homelessness and service provision because of the pandemic, and any mitigation being undertaken in response. This was reported to the Chief Officers Group weekly throughout the pandemic. Given the rapidly changing COVID-19 position, we initially held daily Senior Leadership Team meetings with the Head of Service (Physical Environment) to develop and respond to the changing needs of our services users.

Our inter-agency Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan (RRTP) details our ambitious targets for allocations to homeless households over five years, based on robust independent modelling. To inform our approach to allocations, we developed a pilot to allocate 100% lets to homeless households during the third quarter of 2020/2021.

We agreed to prioritise: households with children, recognising the impact of homelessness on adverse childhood trauma; households in employment, given the cost of temporary accommodation and the impact it can have on employment and affordability; and women experiencing domestic violence, to reduce the risk of further trauma.

Whilst we experienced a reduction in level of households who had been homeless for more than six months, our duration of homelessness increased from 178 days in 2019/20 to 221 days on 20/21. In the main this was a result of the increased void period required to bring houses up to lettable standard due to reduced access to materials.

During 2020/2021 we:

- Appointed support staff to assist with the implementation of our Housing First Plan, with 22 tenancies created for our most complex households;
- Worked with national partners, including health colleagues, to identify further opportunities to prevent homelessness across North Ayrshire;
- Set up a pilot to support new tenants under the age of 25 to maximise tenancy sustainment;
- Closed a 24 bedded hostel and set up additional dispersed flats within the community;
- Prioritised lets to homeless households and reduced the duration of homelessness.

Standard 5 – Getting good value from rents and service charges

Outcomes:

Value for money

Our robust Housing Revenue Account Business Plan provides clear strategic direction, ensuring that effective short, medium and long-term financial planning is undertaken. This clearly details how we will plan for, and deliver, key priorities such as compliance with the Scottish Housing Quality Standard and EESSH, investment in our current stock, our Council house building programme and rent setting.

The Business Plan was developed by a cross stakeholder working group which included representation from elected members, tenant representatives and officers from within Housing, Property Management and Investment and Financial Services. This approach ensured balanced decision-making that can stand up to both internal and external scrutiny.

The Plan provides a platform to develop an effective performance management and reporting framework that makes certain that we continue to provide value for money services to our tenants and, at the same time, keep rents at affordable levels. This is achieved while recognising that we are currently operating within an everchanging and evolving economic environment that requires the flexibility to change and adapt.

The plan is easily accessible to stakeholders. It provides information to demonstrate that the Council has a clear picture of its strategic direction and the associated financial position of the service to deliver this, over the 30-year planning period. This plan is reviewed annually, and we are focused on providing value for money through a number of measures, such as operating robust financial management processes, implementing value for money principles, exploring efficiency opportunities, and managing competitive contractual arrangements.

92% of tenants felt that the rent for their property represents good value for money during our last tenant satisfaction survey.

Rents and service charges

Our rent levels remain lower than the national average, however we continue to invest significantly in our existing stock and new house building programme. We face challenges in for example, changes to welfare reform, demographics and the housing stock profile. We are committed to delivering services in new, improved and more cost-effective ways.

Standard 6 – Other customers

Outcomes:

Gypsy/travellers

North Ayrshire Council provide services, advice and assistance to Gypsy/Travellers who live permanently in North Ayrshire and to those who visit on a temporary basis. North Ayrshire manages one permanent site at Redburn Grove, Irvine. The site has 16 pitches, and each pitch has its own amenity block with separate kitchen, shower, toilet facilities and utility room. A community room is available on site for partner services to meet tenants and their children within a safe and comfortable environment. The room is used by several Services, including: Education, Welfare Reform team, Tenancy Support, Community Link team and a weekly GP surgery. Our Tenant Participation Team also support Redburn Grove tenants to hold regular tenant's meetings. The meetings allow tenants the opportunity to work in partnership with Council staff as we consider the options for current and future service provision. However, this was interrupted during the pandemic. Six of the families who were digitally excluded were issued with Chromebooks and Wi-Fi access for two years as part of the Connecting Scotland initiative. This will help these low-income households with employment support, attendance at virtual tenant meetings, and with engagement more generally.

In 2016 the Scottish Government introduced minimum standards for Gypsy Traveller Sites across Scotland. North Ayrshire Council achieved the minimum standards at Redburn Grove, however we recognise that significant capital investment is required to ensure that it continues to meet expected standards. Work to replace kitchens within each amenity unit was completed in June 2021. This is the first phase of the spend of the Council's £0.074m share of £2m capital investment fund from the Scottish Government. The second phase of the project includes the installation of gates to every pitch, door replacement in the amenity units and the resurfacing of pitches. This work is due for completion by the end of summer 2021. These projects were highlighted by the tenants as their priority for improvements on the site.

The Scottish Government has developed a draft design guide for Gypsy/Traveller sites that will be used for new sites or major refurbishments of existing sites. A first draft of the design guide has been published, giving advice on what good quality, culturally appropriate accommodation should look like. The Scottish Government have also been working on proposals for a new capital fund to run for five years from 2021-25. In October 2020, Scottish Government/COSLA sought views on likely future investment needs over the next five years. NAC responded that approximately £2.5m funding would be required in year three for Redburn Grove. Future improvements will follow engagement with current tenants, to confirm their preferences for future housing. The Scottish Government is working on criteria for the fund, including how residents and travelling community members will be involved, together with a process for project selection.

Our response to unauthorised encampments is consistent and in line with the policy issued by the Scottish Government. Our Gypsy/Traveller Encampment Officer works to build relationships with visiting families to assess their needs. Where necessary they will make referrals to partner organisations and will provide advice on housing options, if required. The Officer also works closely with other landowners and members of the settled community and provides advice and assistance regarding the rights and responsibilities of Gypsy/Travellers who visit North Ayrshire.

Refugees

In 2015, North Ayrshire Council pledged a commitment to participate in the UK Government's Syrian Resettlement Programme. The Council agreed to resettle 160 vulnerable Syrian refugees over a four-year period and to coordinate the programme, a Refugee Support Team was introduced to deliver the required objectives. This service, along with input from Community Planning Partners such as the Health and Social Care Partnership, Education, Department of Work and Pensions, Police Scotland and voluntary organisations, delivers robust resettlement packages to assist families to integrate into the local area and access vital services to meet their individual needs. The Council has fully participated in the Syrian Resettlement Programme and, due to meeting its initial target numbers earlier than expected, increased its pledge on two further occasions, taking the overall total to 201 refugees (41 families).

The Council agreed to continue its humanitarian commitment and to participate in a new global resettlement programme, with the aim of resettling a further 30 refugees throughout 2020/21. This was paused due to COVID-19 restrictions on movement both overseas and in the UK. The programme has now recommenced, and plans are in place to resettle the 30 refugees by March 2022.

38 Syrian families and four Afghan families have been issued with Chromebooks and Wi-Fi access for two years from the Connecting Scotland initiative to assist with contact and ESOL learning and employment support. A number of individuals from within the Syrian community with better IT skills have volunteered to assist others to attend virtual calls and meetings.