

West Lothian Council Tenants Annual Report 2019/20



Housing, Customer and Building Services



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1.0 Introduction

Welcome to the 2019/20 Tenant Participation Annual Report. Over the course of the financial year, Housing, Customer and Building Services have tried to engage with many tenants and service users in various innovative ways.

The Tenant Participation (TP) Team has seen a significant increase in the number of people engaging with us about the services we deliver. Our Facebook Group has over 335 members and the team endeavour to keep them up to date with information about the service and the Council.

The team regularly supports monthly meetings, including, scrutiny panels, housing networks and focus groups. All these meetings are important to us as they help us carry out consultation and gather feedback when developing processes and procedures which affect our customers.

A significant addition to this process was the continuation of the evening network meeting which was introduced in 2018, providing those who couldn't attend day time meetings with an alternative to come along at a convenient time and learn about housing issues and services.

The team were also instrumental in organising events, such as local 'Meet and Greet on the Street' events over the summer period, providing an opportunity for staff and tenants to meet and answer



any housing related questions about their tenancies.

We also held focus groups with customers who had completed the Tenant Satisfaction Survey to further explore their views and opinions on certain questions within the survey.

Throughout the year, we have celebrated milestones and achievements, which included, recognising our Good Neighbours at the Annual Award Ceremony in October and celebrating the success of our Editorial Panel who were awarded the Tenant Information Services (TIS) Award for Most Inspiring Scrutiny Group in June 2019. This award was in recognition for the hard work and dedication shown in editing, proof reading and approving publications intended for West Lothian Council tenants. Two of our other groups were finalists at these awards too. They were:

- West Lothian Tenants Housing Network for their continual scrutiny of housing services and
- Al Nour Group for Tenant Group of the Year

2.0 Networks and Tenants Groups

2.1 Networks



West Lothian Tenants Housing Network (WLTHN)

This daytime network, covering the whole of West Lothian, offers tenants, service users and staff an opportunity to come together to discuss and share their views on matters that are important to them.

This constituted group meets monthly and has a formal structure, devolved budget and follows a schedule of consultation and information sharing briefings throughout the year. Members have been very active in debating issues and sharing their views on some key topics which included:

Information Sharing

- Budget Setting
- The Council's Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan (RRTP)
- Private Landlord Registration
- The Annual Return on the Charter
- Quarterly Performance Information, and
- Online Digitisation

Consultation

- Scottish Government's Consultation on the Sale of Fireworks
- Tenant Satisfaction Survey
- Council's Allocations Policy Review – in addition to consultation at the network meeting, all applicants were sent a text message, which asked them to share their views by completing an online consultation survey.

Membership to this network remains consistent with around 14 – 16 members attending each month.

Evening Tenants Housing Network

The introduction of the first evening housing network in November 2018 saw 13 tenants attending and since then, member numbers have been relatively steady. Those attending have had information presented to them from various areas of the service, including the Safer Neighbourhood Team and the Council's New Build programme.

These meetings brought real debate and genuine interest in how services are delivered and follow up sessions were held to answer their queries around the allocation of houses and issues around flatted communal buildings. The TP Team have added this as a regular evening event to the TP schedule, four times a year.

All tenants or service user of Housing, Customer & Building Services are welcome to attend the day or evening network which is publicised on our Tenants Facebook Group.

Scottish Regional Networks

One of our Housing Network members, volunteered to represent his fellow tenants at the Scottish Government's Region Network Committee of which there are four in the country. The Regional Networks are made up of council and housing association tenant and resident groups and they work to influence the development of national housing policy, ensuring tenants and resident views are reflected in policy discussions. They work in partnership with the Scottish Government and some of the achievements, so far, include:



Engaging with Tenants Nationally

This map of Scotland illustrates the number of Registered Tenants' Organisations within each Local Authority Area at April 2017.



- Developing effective engagement with the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) and meeting with SHR on a regular basis to discuss social housing regulation.
- Challenging the Scottish Government to produce more robust guidance on the operation of Local Authority Housing Revenue Accounts (HRA) to ensure Council tenants rent money is used correctly.
- Participating alongside professional organisations in Scottish Government working groups ensuring that tenants and interests are at the heart of the policy process.
- Sharing ideas and best practice to improve services and participation locally

Homeless Housing Network Group (HHNG) and Homeless Sub Group

The HHNG has seen significant change over the last year following the successful introduction of 'The Big Lunch'. This exciting new initiative has seen the Housing Need Service and the HHNG team up with The Larder (a social enterprise organisation tackling food poverty), to bring cooked meals to people experiencing homelessness. This gives all those coming along an opportunity to chat to staff and other people in similar situations to themselves, in an informal and relaxed setting.

The change to the HHNG was a result of falling numbers attending the original network group, and the remaining members and staff felt that the time was right to move forward with something new.

The HHNG and the HHNG Sub Group have been hugely successful over the past few years and it's thanks to the joint working that has taken place which has allowed the group to evolve into its current format of the Big Lunch.

Special Mention for a Special Christmas Lunch

For the second year in a row, some volunteers from Housing Services and other council services teamed up with 'The Larder', and organised a Christmas Day lunch for homeless and vulnerable people in West Lothian. This year the lunch was held on Christmas Day in Blackburn Partnership Centre and the event was supported by the Management Committee of the Blackburn Partnership Centre, The Larder, Tesco, David Stein Butchers, the Councils Corporate Management Team and the TP Team.

A special thank you to all who gave up their time to ensure that over thirty homeless and vulnerable people had a great Christmas Day.



2.2 Tenants Groups

Throughout the course of the year our Registered Tenants Organisations (RTOs) have suffered with dwindling attendance figures and the dissolution of some groups.



Boghall Tenants and Residents Association

This group had been thinking about stopping their meetings, due to dwindling numbers, however they have found a new lease of life and have decided to continue, but meet every second month as members felt there was not the same demand to resolve issues. The TP Team continue to support this group and local housing staff encourage new tenants to participate.

Tenants Groups in Homeless Units

Housing Need staff continue to encourage tenants residing in the Council's three Emergency Accommodation Units to participate in monthly meetings. These meetings allow tenants to come together to discuss issues pertinent to the unit and surrounding area. The meetings continue to be well attended and offer a social aspect with members enjoying 'a bite to eat' and an opportunity to catch up with one another.

Outwith the formal meetings, residents in some units meet to take part in 'Games Nights' and cooking classes; looking at meal preparation, hygiene and shopping on a budget. One unit also has a bike lending scheme, where residents can borrow one of the two mountain bikes. This not only helps with general health and well-being, but also helps to get the young people to and from college, visiting family and other important appointments.

Al Nour Community Group

The Al Nour Community Group has been running since August 2018 at the request of the Syrian refugees who have settled in West Lothian under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. The group held their first AGM in October and two of the older teenagers were appointed as Secretaries, bringing some new skills, including support in typing the minutes in English and Arabic.

The group is working hard to ensure everyone has the opportunity to attend their meetings, by now meeting on a Saturday. Members have also been instrumental in applying for funding to allow them to arrange and attend various local events, the last one being a Mother's Day event where group members and their children participated in an arts and crafts afternoon.

The group also liaise with partner agencies such as the Church of Scotland and The Conservation Volunteers (TCV). They recently had a meeting with the Refugee Council who have helped with funding to organise an event in West Lothian for World Refugee Day (due to the outbreak of Covid 19 this event will be held later in the year). The intention is to invite those voluntary organisations and others who have supported the families since arriving in West Lothian in 2018, including ESOL, Education, Women into Work and the TP Team.



New Build Groups

The TP Team continue to work with the local housing offices to promote tenant groups in areas where there have been new build communities created. Several meetings have been held to iron out any 'year-end defects' or other issues related to these new homes

3.0 Other Groups

Tenants Panel

A schedule of meetings is developed annually so that tenant members and senior managers can discuss and analyse information relating to Housing, Customer and Building Services. They continue to meet monthly to fulfil their role of scrutinising service delivery, by looking at financial elements of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget, performance information, setting performance targets for the coming year and all other areas relating to the delivery of services for tenants.

The members of the Tenants Panel had asked for some training on different aspects of the new build council housing programme from start to finish, so they are able to understand terminology and the processes involved. So far, sessions have been held in February and March 2020 and our Housing, Strategy and Development colleagues will continue with these throughout 2020. They have also made a commitment to involve the Tenants Panel with new build projects from the planning and development stage right through to site completion.

Panel members were also invited along to the Mitsubishi Factory Site in Livingston to see the new renewable heat source chosen to be installed in council properties in areas that are not connected to the main gas network. Panel members found the visit very informative and have been updated on progress and tenant's satisfaction levels with the new Ecodan Heating System. To date, there has been no adverse comments or complaints with tenants very satisfied with this new form of heating.

Tenant Participation Development Working Group (TPDWG)

This group meets monthly with the TP Team and drives the development of tenant participation in West Lothian by monitoring the TP Team's Action Plan and ensuring the aims set out in the TP Strategy are met. The work plan is monitored and reviewed regularly by the working group, setting out their own actions to ensure they remain focussed and drive service development forward.

The group has developed a schedule for the review of the TP Strategy which will revamp the original strategy and see the introduction of new initiatives in the new strategy document scheduled for release in Spring 2021.

Capital Programme and Repairs Working Group.

Members of this group meet alternate months with the Housing Capital Programme managers and the Repairs Manager to review Capital Programme projects and associated budgets and also monitor the Council's Repairs Service provided by Building Services.



Group members monitor the progress of the Assisted Decoration Scheme and manage an allocated budget for the Street Environmental Improvement Projects (SEIP). They review SEIP applications and make site visits to determine which projects meet the set criteria before approving the work. The group receive a monthly update on all projects and can visit again upon completion.

Budget scrutiny is important for this team to ensure that tenants continue to receive value for money for both Capital Programme projects and the Repairs Service

The Repairs Manager held a meeting in the Kirkton Service Centre which is Building Services headquarters and invited members to tour the building. They have received updates and information regarding Dampness & Condensation, the Pre-Inspection process for various repairs and visited several void properties to see first-hand the work that is required to be carried out before these properties can be put back into stock.

The group constantly look for ways to develop and improve and are expanding their remit by introducing the scrutiny of the repairs service and reviewing the criteria for Street Environmental Improvements Projects too.

Services for the Community Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel (PDSP)

The Services for the Community PDSP meet regularly throughout the year, with members from our Tenants Panel attending on behalf of the network and feeding back to them the outcome of issues raised and discussed.

Tenant representatives can participate fully in the meetings and are encouraged to take the views and opinions of fellow Housing Networks members on issues such as rent increase, Housing Revenue and Capital Budgets, including new build projects to the meetings

Focus Groups

Following on from the 2019 Tenant Satisfaction Survey, a series of focus groups were held throughout the year, with council tenants being selected at random to attend one of a series of meetings arranged in the East and West of the county. This offered a wider group of tenants the opportunity to share their views on satisfaction levels and for the council to discuss any issues they may have had. In total, eight people took part in four sessions, with their opinions and experiences being used to influence decisions to improve services.

The added advantage to this is that several of those tenants who attended have continued to participate in the monthly Housing Networks and training events.

4.0 Tenant Led Inspections (TLI's)

Within this financial year, one inspection was carried out, three were signed off as completed successfully and one was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.



- **Safer Neighbourhood Team**

This TLI was signed off in 2019. Unfortunately the sign-off had been delayed due to a reorganisation of the service following changes brought about by the Council's Transforming Your Council process.

- **New Build Properties.**

Staff from the Housing, Strategy and Development team presented the final action plan to inspectors in December 2019 and asked for this inspection to be signed off as complete. The Action Plan set out how the service met the 40 recommendations made by inspectors in their report.

- **Condensation & Dampness**

Inspectors were asked to undertake this inspection to see if improvements could be made and highlight the growing issue of condensation by informing tenants of the causes and prevention measures. The inspection team made 14 recommendations which included gathering information on the effectiveness of 'Anti-Mould Kits' and developing an information leaflet to be distributed in every new tenancy pack. The Repairs Manager is working on all recommendations with a completion date of 31st March 2020. (For the purpose of this report, this date will be reviewed due to Covid-19).

- **Housing Needs Service.**

Also in December 2019, tenant inspectors signed off the Housing Needs Service TLI which was carried out in August/September 2018. Their report made 20 recommendations which senior managers addressed over the agreed 12month period.

- **Out of Hours Repairs Service**

This inspection was scheduled to commence on March 16th 2020, with three new inspectors volunteering to take part. Unfortunately, it was postponed due to the government imposed restrictions on non-essential meetings due to the Covid 19 pandemic. This will commence once restrictions have been lifted, and it is safe to do so.

- **Tenant Led Inspection Training**

Training for those who have expressed an interest in becoming an inspector is carried out as required, usually twice a year. This year we were fortunate to gain an additional three tenants who have been trained and are ready to start their first inspection into the repairs Out of Hour Repairs Service, as mentioned above.

TLI's carried out in 2019/20



5.0 Publications

The Editorial Panel meet regularly to review and monitor all publications produced by HCBS. The aim is to ensure all written material is easily understood, free from jargon and is tenant friendly before being made available on the website or in print format. All publications reviewed by the Editorial Panel carry the Tenant Approved stamp.



Tenants News



This newsletter is produced by the TP Team and is issued to every council home in West Lothian three times a year. It is one of the council's main ways of keeping tenants informed of service activity and developments. The content of each edition of Tenants News is drafted and agreed with the Tenants Editorial Panel.

The autumn edition includes our Annual Landlord Report, which the Service has a statutory requirement to publish yearly to keep tenants informed on how the service is performing.

Leaflets and Letters

This year, panel members were kept very busy reviewing a variety of new and updated publications and letters, including:

- Letters relating to Assignment, Joint Tenancy
- Scheme of Assistance
- Capital Programme letters and procedures
- The Council's Allocation Policy Review Letters
- Enhanced Estate Management Letters
- Tenant Satisfaction Survey
- Tenants Handbook
- Homeless Newsletter
- Tenants News



Our thanks go to the members of the Editorial Panel for their hard work and dedication in ensuring all our publications are written in plain language and are tenant friendly.

Tenants Handbook

Work has been ongoing over the course of the year to review and update the Tenants Handbook in partnership with the TP Development Working Group. The content of each section of the Handbook will be reviewed by the Editorial Panel as an ongoing initiative. The Tenants Handbook is available online at www.westlothian.gov.uk/tenantshandbook and tenants can also request individual pages from their local CIS Office/Library.

6.0 Tenants Learning & Development

Throughout the year, tenants have been given the opportunity to learn about various aspects of services we deliver. This area of participation has been very popular with tenants who have received information and training sessions on topics such as:-

- Housing Options
- Changes to the Housing Scotland Act 2014
- Review of the Tenant Led Inspection process
- The Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan
- New Build Plans
- Allocations review



Tenants were also invited to come along to training sessions to test the new online application form for Applying for a House and also to view and comment on the new Mutual Exchange site, before it goes live. This is replacing the current Home Sapper website.

As previously mentioned, Tenant Led Inspection training is carried out to offer interested tenants and service users the opportunity to try out the inspection process and the methods they can use to review a particular service. The training includes our 'Chocolate Challenge' which is a method of carrying out an inspection in a fun and practical way; providing participants with an insight into the inspection process before considering volunteering for this important role.

Consultation

The TP Team work with staff across the whole service to ensure our tenants are kept up to date with changes to policies and procedures that may affect them. This year we have supported staff from Housing Needs to promote the issues around the Rapid Rehousing programme and our Allocations Team to ensure they consult with tenants and applicants about the major changes proposed to our Allocations Policy as well as sharing our new online site for Mutual Exchanges.

Several methods of involvement were deployed during these consultation exercises to ensure we collected as many views as possible:-

- We text and lettered all applicants and tenants to inform them of an online survey they could complete
- We held several focus groups with tenants
- Publicised the consultation in our Tenants News magazine
- Reminded tenants about the consultations on our Facebook Group
- Held two information sessions with tenants
- Briefed members of the Housing Network and
- Discussed in detail with Tenants Panel members
- Demonstrated the new online sites being developed and sought tenants' views, and took on board comments made in the final development of these.

7.0 Digital Inclusion & Social Media

Tenants Facebook Group

The TP Facebook group maintains a steady membership of around 340 members at the end of the financial year. It offers an easily accessible method of engagement for tenants and service users, as well as providing tenants with the flexibility of engaging with the Service online. It is hoped that by being involved in this way, interest will be generated to take part in other tenant participation activities.



Our Facebook group allows the service access to a broader range of tenants who wish to engage on a variety of housing issues. It was agreed that members of the Housing Network would use this medium for future consultation and they will assist in developing a programme of topics/issues that can be used throughout the coming year.

Text Messaging



Text messaging has been used by HCBS to great effect over the last couple of years; most effectively as a reminder for tenants in relation to the Repairs Service, Tenants Satisfaction Survey, Rent Consultation Survey and Paying Rent. The functionality allows us to engage with individuals or groups, (such as a geographical area) allowing us to promote specific topics, such as tenants' events, completion of surveys or paying your rent campaigns.

Text messaging is effective because the message given is short and to the point, whilst also providing the tenant with the opportunity to respond immediately by clicking on the link provided. This either takes the user to an email facility or to an online survey, which involves very little effort. It is quick and provides tenants with a really simple way to respond and share their views.

Tenant Self Service Portal

The Tenants Self Service Portal continues to be developed offering customers more options to access services such as paying rent, requesting a repair and accessing their rent account.

An online housing application form and new mutual exchange website are being developed at present which will be accessible through the portal. Some tenants were involved in carrying out testing and made suggestions for improvement before these new initiatives are available to all tenants later in 2020.

8.0 Local Community Engagement

Over the course of the year, the TP Team have worked with local housing offices to promote events and initiatives which included local Meet and Greets and Street Environmental Improvement Projects



Meet & Greet in the Street

Over the summer months, the Tenant Participation Team took advantage of the warmer weather and took to the streets to talk to tenants in West Lothian. Our 'Meet & Greet on the Street' events were supported by local housing staff, with the idea being to promote tenant participation and offer tenants the opportunity to talk to us about any issues they may have in their home or community. Tenants were able to find out about:

- Allocation of Council Houses
- Garden maintenance
- Environmental issues
- Tenants' responsibilities
- Home Contents Insurance
- Care and Repair Service
- Danny Mullen Good Neighbour Award
- Assisted Decoration Scheme

With 10 events taking place, the team pitched their gazebo in various streets across West Lothian including, Whitburn, Blackburn, Armadale, Livingston and Bathgate and spoke to over 100 people. It was deemed a general success as tenants found it very informative, and went away having had a chance to talk to their local housing officer and discuss any issues with their tenancy.



In August 2019, the Local Housing Officer attended the Bridgend Fun Day BBQ which was funded and organised by the Bridgend Local Regeneration Programme Group (BLRPG). All residents from Bridgend were invited along to this free event which has now run for three years, increasing in popularity and attendance each year.

The Housing Officer felt it was a great opportunity to network with tenants in a social and fun setting. General housing advice was given on the day to several tenants and the housing officer took some enquiries back to the office to investigate further and contact those with outcomes. Housing staff continue to attend the BLRPG meetings and will support any future community events in the same capacity.

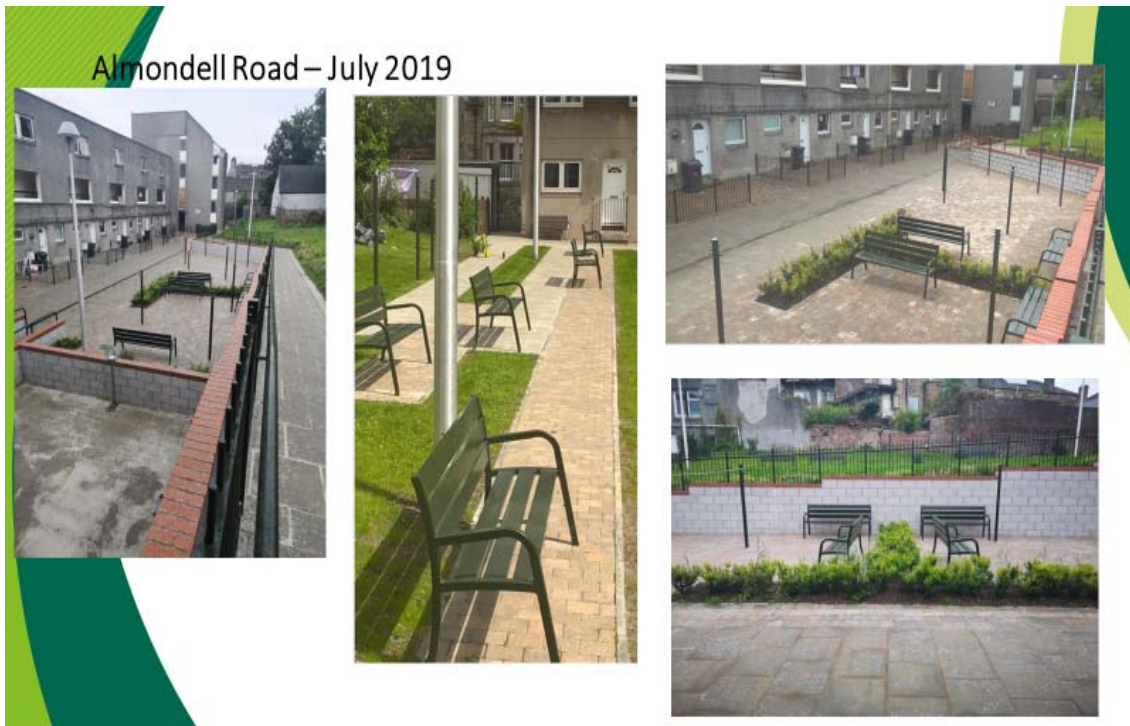
Street Environmental Improvement Projects (SEIP)

These projects allow tenants and staff an opportunity to identify an area within their local community that they feel would benefit from an upgrade. These projects are one of the roles members of the Capital and Repairs Working Group oversee. This year, the group members visited proposed sites to ensure they meet the specific criteria and also to review existing projects.

West Lothian has benefitted from many projects over the years and it was heartening to see how these have enhanced many communities, although some projects suffered from lack a maintenance. Going forward the group have agreed to review the 'Design Guide' to include the use of low maintenance materials, shrubs and plants and routine maintenance work to be carried out over a number of years.

Local Housing Staff, carried out consultation with tenants and residents in areas where SEIP applications had been received to seek their views and ideas on improvements.

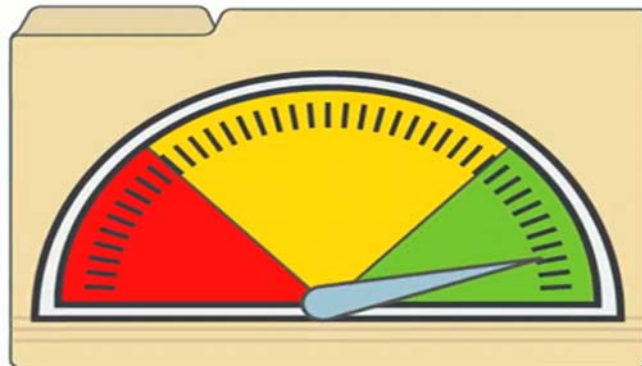




9.0 Sharing Good Practice and Benchmarking

Tenants and staff are keen to develop new ideas and initiatives and seek out good practice whenever possible. They do this by attending national events such as TIS, TPAS and CIH Annual Conferences and staff attend the Scottish Housing Network (SHN) twice yearly.

Tenants are able to attend certain conferences too, which helps them learn about new initiatives which they can then bring back to their groups and see how we can develop similar initiatives.



10.0 Awards and Recognition

Danny Mullen Good Neighbour Awards

Each year we ask tenants to nominate a neighbour they feel deserved recognition for their thoughtfulness and consideration towards others. All nominations received were from neighbours who wanted to say 'thank you' for the help, support and friendship they receive from their good neighbours.



All our Good Neighbours were invited to attend a special ceremony at the Civic Centre in Livingston to be presented with a framed Good Neighbour Certificate and a bouquet of flowers from Executive Councillor for Services to the Community, George Paul.

For the first time, we received three nominations for one Good Neighbour, this was Mr Martin from Stoneyburn. (Pictured seated middle, front row)

In recognition of all the work he carries out throughout his community, the members of the West Lothian Tenants Housing Network presented him with a gift token for £100.



Tenant Information Services (TIS) Award

This year, was another successful year for HCBS, with congratulations going to our Editorial Panel and the Tenant Participation Team for their successful achievement in being awarded the Tenant Information Service, Best Inspiring Scrutiny Group Award. This award recognises the exceptional standard of tenant led scrutiny activities that make a real difference to the lives of tenants, the delivery of housing services, and improvement of satisfaction levels.

Recognition should also be given to our other entries who were finalists at these awards:

- West Lothian Tenants Housing Network for their continual scrutiny of housing services
- Al Nour Group for Tenant Group of the Year

If you are interested in finding out more about Tenant Participation in West Lothian, please contact the TP Team, who will be able to provide any information you need. You can contact them by:



TP@westlothian.gov.uk



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