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Craig Spence, Chief Executive

As we start 2023, we are very much aware of the pressing concerns many of you will have about the cost of living crisis and rising energy costs. I want to take this opportunity to assure you that we will continue to offer you as much support and assistance as we can. Our Housing & Customer Service staff are here to help so please do get in touch.

To aid with this, you will receive a call from a member of staff in the coming months to ask how you are managing. If you feel you would benefit from some advice, your Housing Officer can work with you to access existing routes to funding and income maximisation.

We were recently successful in securing additional funding from the Scottish Government to help all of our tenants with their energy bills. All tenancies qualify for a £125 payment from the Social Housing Fuel Support Fund and more details are included in this edition.

You may also have heard that in September 2022 the Scottish

Government announced a rent freeze - for social housing and private tenants. This has since been lifted and they have not imposed a cap on the level of rent increase a social landlord can apply. Registered Social Landlords across Scotland have voluntarily agreed to try and restrict rent increases to 6.1% where they can.

You may recall that we had previously consulted with you in January 2022 for an inflation linked three year increase. This resulted in our first ever below inflation increase of 3.9% in April 2022.

This three year inflation-linked increase would have meant your rent automatically increased by 12.6% in April 2023. In January 2022 we could not have predicted how inflation would increase 12 months later.

With that in mind, we have decided to carry out a fresh one year consultation. You may already be aware that this opened on 30 January and closes on 13 February.

The services we provide are paid for by tenants rent money and the cost of delivering those services is also affected by the cost of living increases. This will inevitably mean that we, together with you, will face some difficult choices and decisions as a result. Further details are contained within the newsletter and I would strongly urge you to get involved if you haven't already.

Annual Rent Review

In September 2022 the Scottish Government announced a rent freeze for the social and private housing sector. This was in response to the Cost of Living crisis.

We normally apply a rent increase on 1 April each year. We are required to consult customers about any change and last consulted in January 2022 for years 2023, 2024 and 2025.

We know that any rent increase is unpopular. However, the costs of providing our services and keeping our neighborhoods safe and tidy have gone up massively in the last year. They are expected to continue to rise in line with inflation, which is currently about 13%. The cost of some things, such as repairs, will increase at an even higher rate.

In Autumn of 2022 we carried out our Customer Satisfaction Survey and asked how you were feeling about the cost of living crisis and what you saw as being your top priorities. Your top two priorities both focused on affordability, with one being assisting with energy costs and the other being keeping your rents affordable.

Having listened to your views, we are not recommending to increase rents in line with inflation and our costs. We will, therefore, have much less money to spend on your home and the services we provide.

Our Management Committee have a recommended option of 7.5% that balances the need to maintain core services for current tenants whilst recognising the increased pressures tenants have found themselves in. Core services include reactive repairs to keep your property safe and watertight.

Proposed rent increase	Avg Weekly rent based on increase	What this means for you
6%	£100.37	The following planned maintenance works will be postponed for 4 years: Kitchen Replacements - 195 Kitchens Heating System Replacements -104 systems Property Improvements - For example, new, ventilation systems, insulation, water tank jackets, external decoration, and internal close decoration.
7.5% (Management Committee Recommended option)	£101.79	The following planned maintenance works will be postponed for 3 years: Kitchen Replacements - 143 Kitchens Property Improvements - For example, new ventilation systems, insulation, water tank jackets, external decoration, and internal close decoration.
12.6%	£106.62	With this option no planned maintenance work would be postponed and we would invest £3.5 million in homes across Orkney.

What happens next?

You may have already received an email, letter or seen the consultation on our Facebook page or website. We would like your views so please complete the questionnaire on the last page of this newsletter. Alternatively, if you have received this by email, complete the following link <https://forms.office.com/e/PPZjb36pSx> and take part in the online survey.

All responses will be collated and a report presented to the Association's Management Committee on 22 February for their consideration prior to them making a decision on the 2023/24 rent increase. You will be provided with the outcome of the consultation and decisions made by no later than 4 weeks prior to 01 April 2023 when the changes will take place.

The closing date for the responses to the survey is 12 noon on Monday 13 February 2023. If you want to be entered into the Prize Draw for a chance to win a cash prize of either £50 or £25, you will need to complete the survey and provide us with your contact details.

Social Housing Fuel Support Fund

The Association has secured additional funding from the Scottish Government to provide every tenant with some additional support with energy bills this winter.

Social Housing Fuel Support Fund

Each tenancy has been awarded £125 to assist with heating their home and paying for the cost of energy in general. You can access this support in the following ways:

- **Bank Transfer to your preferred account.**
- **Direct credit to your OHAL account.**

Association staff will be making contact with all of our tenants over the coming months, however don't wait until you hear from us if you require the support earlier. A condition of the funding is that the support is distributed by March 2023. Therefore, if we can't make contact with you by Monday 6 March we will automatically credit your OHAL account.

Your Housing Officer can provide you with full details of this payment and any additional support available, in addition to the £125.

If you are struggling to heat your home please call us on 01856 875253 or email enquiries@ohal.org.uk as we may be able to provide you with further support and advice.

Garden & Grounds Maintenance Service

The Association has historically provided a service for gardens and communal grounds maintenance.

However, in spring 2022 Orkney Islands Council removed financial support for tenants in receipt of certain benefits. This resulted in the Association incurring this cost for 2022-23. We are also very aware that the quality of work carried out in some areas was below the standard that you expect and for that we are sorry. As part of our review of the service in 2022, we mutually agreed to end our arrangements with one of our contractors.

Furthermore, we asked you for your views in our Customer Satisfaction Survey back in Autumn 2022. A large majority of you (50%) told us that you wanted an opt-in service. As a result, we are able to provide a trial for 2023 for some parts of Kirkwall and the East Mainland.

Listed below are the streets whereby we can offer this service. If your street is not listed you will be responsible for maintaining your own garden ground in 2023.

Should you need support or advice with making these arrangements, your Housing Officer may be able to sign post you to appropriate support.

For those tenants living in the selected streets, we would be obliged if you could answer question 2 on the last page of this leaflet. ****Please note these changes do not refer to communal grass cutting****

KIRKWALL	EAST MAINLAND
McLeod Drive	Storehouse Place, Breckan Brae & Graeme Park
Liberator Drive, Court & Close	Marengo Road & Taftingus Place
Walliwall Road & Place	Greenfield
	Upper Waston Road

Government support this Winter

Households receiving Universal Credit, JSA, ESA or Tax Credits will receive Cost of Living Payments totaling £900, payable in three installments starting in spring 2023.

Every household in the country will also receive a £400 grant towards their energy bills over the course of six months from October 2022. How you receive this - as a discount on your bill, a refund or, if you have a pre-payment meter, a voucher or credit put straight onto your meter - will depend on your energy provider.

The Cost of Living Payment and Energy Bill Grant are applied automatically - you do not have to do anything. Be aware of scam calls, and texts asking you to follow a link to apply. These may sound or look legitimate, but they are designed to steal a customer's private information such as their banking details.



Have you checked whether you are eligible for the Warm Home Discount Scheme? This is an £150 payment to help with heating costs over the Winter. Contact your energy supplier to find out more.

The Scottish Government has launched a new website, pulling together information on support available to people struggling with the cost of living. See <https://costofliving.campaign.gov.scot>



New Build and Planned Investment Programme

As everyone is well aware, rising prices have caused investment pressures on household budgets. This is no different for OHAL. Over the past year there has been an unprecedented increase in prices across the construction and trades sector, which has led to increased pressures on the New Build and Planned Improvement programmes.

Proceeding with all planned works in this environment is not sustainable, which means difficult choices will have to be made regarding what works we take forward and those that are delayed. Further details are available on the Annual Rent Consultation pages of this newsletter. We understand it can be frustrating waiting for improvement works you understood were on the way, which is why we really appreciate your patience while we navigate this challenging period.

The increase in building costs also impacts on our programme to deliver new homes. While we have received valuable support from the Scottish Government's More Homes Division, progressing new sites is proving more challenging. However, if we were to stop building it would not help to keep rents affordable for existing customers. So, we are planning to keep building properties for Orkneys communities.



Other sources of Help and Information

OIC - Cost of Living Funding Scheme

Orkney Island Council's cost of living crisis funding scheme is open for eligible households who could benefit from the award of £200 per home. For further information on the scheme and how to apply, click the link below.



[Visit Website](#)

Energy Domestic Consumer Advice for Autumn/Winter 2022

A specific guide for domestic customers has been published, although please check the main web page to ensure the latest version is being accessed.

[Visit Website](#)

Energy Advice Scotland



Free, practical advice and information on energy-related matters for the citizens of Scotland can be found on their website.

[Visit Website](#)

Energy Saving Trust



The Energy Saving Trust has produced some quick tips on how to save money on your energy bills.

[Visit Website](#)

Scottish Welfare Fund



The Scottish Welfare Fund is aimed at providing assistance for people on benefits, or considered to be on a low income. The Council administers the fund on behalf of the Scottish Government and provides two types of grant:

Crisis Grants - Providing a safety net in the event of a disaster or emergency.

Community Care Grants - Providing help to leave care and live on your own, or to continue living in your own home.

[Visit Website](#)

Scottish Social Security



Responsible for managing Scottish benefits - click link below.

[Visit Website](#)

Helping You Sustain Your Tenancy

As the impact of the cost-of-living crisis increases, our Housing Staff are continuing to work hard behind the scenes to assist those tenants experiencing difficulties with living costs.

This could be by making sure you are aware of and able to claim financial help, or by talking to you about other forms of support that might help you.

It is important to contact the housing team on 01856 875253 or via enquiries@ohal.org.uk, if the current cost of living pressures are impacting you. We can help you with funding for fuel bills, housing costs and food, and can visit you to talk about what other help you may be able to receive.

Please don't feel alone and worried this winter. We are here to help.

Meet the Team



Donna Wilson
Housing Services Officer

Phone direct :
875253 ext 504

Email:
donna.wilson@ohal.org.uk



Samantha Thacker
Housing Services Officer

Phone direct :
875253 ext 508

Email:
samantha.thacker@ohal.org.uk



Mark Stillwell
Trainee Housing Services
Officer

Phone direct :
875253 ext 503

Email:
mark.stillwell@ohal.org.uk

If you're struggling with paying your rent or other bills, we would always encourage you to get in touch with us as soon as possible, as there are lots of ways in which we may be able to help.

To contact your Housing Officer direct, see contact details above.



Robert Leslie
Energy Officer

Robert has been assisting tenants since 2010 with all aspects of energy efficiency and usage. This service has always been in demand and due to the current costs of energy and heating it has never been more essential. Robert can discuss your circumstances and make sure that you are accessing any additional funding to help with the cost of heating your home.

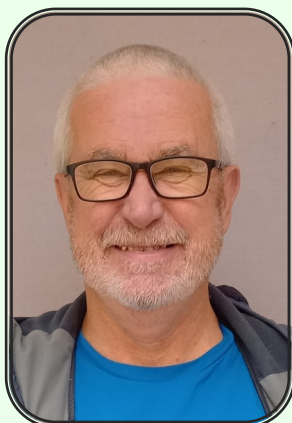
If you would like to speak to Robert and make an appointment, please contact 875253 ext 404 during office hours or email robert.leslie@ohal.org.uk.

New Committee Members

In September we were delighted to welcome three new members to our Committee. Brian Kynoch, Bruce Pilkington and Mervyn Sandison bring a range of knowledge and experience on board and are proving to be valuable members of the Committee.



Brian



Bruce



Mervyn



Our Management Committee

Clockwise bottom left: Mervyn Sandison, John Rodwell, Brian Kynoch, Fiona Lettice, Bill Wallace, Roella Wilson, John White, Bruce Pilkington and Philip Cook



It was with great sadness we learned in December 2022 that former committee member, Linda Forbes, had passed away. She will always be remembered as a highly valued member of the OHAL team, making a huge contribution to the success of the Association during her time with us.

She joined in 2014, after initially becoming involved through the Stromness Community Garden. She remained a member after moving away from Orkney, always providing strong leadership and views. During her later tenure she took on the role of Chair of the Audit and Risk Management Sub Committee, until stepping down in September 2022.

Linda took great satisfaction in hearing about the positive impact the Association has for tenants and the wider community, something she was immensely proud of.

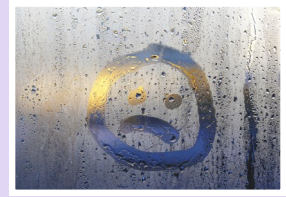
Linda will be greatly missed by everyone who knew her.



Condensation Advice

This is the most common cause of dampness.

Condensation is caused by water moisture from inside the home coming into contact with a colder surface, such as a window or wall. The water drops (or condensation) may then soak into the wallpaper or paintwork or even plasterwork and attract black mould to grow on its surface. You can wipe the black mould away using a special fungicidal solution or a solution of water and bleach. Please remember to be careful when using bleach and take appropriate safety precautions as guided by the manufacturer.



Condensation mainly occurs during the colder months and is usually found in corners and north facing walls, on or near windows, areas with little air circulation such as behind wardrobes and beds - especially when they are pushed up against external walls. Black mould is frequently seen on this type of dampness.

It is very important to strike a balance between warmth and ventilation. It may appear that by opening windows you are losing heat, but what this allows is warm moisture-laden air to escape and permits cool dry air to enter your home. Dry cool air is actually cheaper to heat than warm moist air! So this actually saves you money as well as resulting in a healthier living environment.

Taking preventative action - if you feel the dampness and/or mould growth is caused by condensation.

1. Produce less moisture

Cover pans when cooking.

Dry clothes outdoors in warm weather.

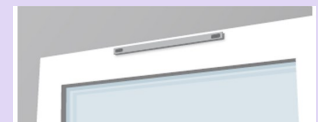
Ventilate tumble driers to the outside.

Do not use paraffin or liquid petroleum (bottled) gas heaters they produce masses of water vapour and are very expensive to run.



2. Ventilate to remove moisture

Always ventilate, or open a window when the kitchen/ bathroom are in use and close other internal doors so as to prevent moisture-laden air from spreading to other parts of your home.



3. Wipe away excess moisture

Always wipe the windows (and window sills if required) of your home every morning to remove condensation. This is especially important in the bedroom, just opening the window is not good enough.

4. Keep your home adequately heated

If possible, keep low background heat on all day, even in the bedrooms, kitchen and bathroom.



5. Above all remember, dealing with condensation is not easy and automatically assuming it has come inside from outside; it hasn't!

Only carrying out one or two of the above steps will not help your problem. You must do as many as possible every day so that it becomes part of your routine.

If you still feel, having read this article, that your dampness is due to rising damp, penetrating damp or from defective plumbing then you should contact us.

ENERGY SAVING TIPS

Help to keep costs down

Electricity prices have increased markedly recently as a result of wholesale gas price rises, which in turn affect what we pay for the energy we use in our homes. While support exists to help with these rising costs, there are also things you can do to reduce the impact on your energy bills. While we recognise that many tenants may already be doing all this and more to cut costs, hopefully some tenants may find these tips useful:

Optimise use of your heating system

Your home's heating system has various controls that can be used to reduce your energy usage. Turn down your room thermostat to 19°C, turn down the thermostatic radiator valves in individual rooms to further cut back on heat usage and adjust your timer clock to reduce heating and cooling times as well.

Do full laundry loads

Half-load settings save very little energy, so a full load is much more energy efficient. Do fewer (but fuller) wash loads instead. Try and avoid using a tumble dryer as well.

Use the 'eco' setting

On your dishwasher or boiler, the 'eco' setting heats water more slowly, using less energy. You get the same results; it just takes a little longer.

Don't use standby mode

Unless switched off at the wall, appliances like your TV continue to use energy, costing the average UK home £35 per year. Switch off at the wall to put a stop to this wasted spend.

Careful with that kettle

When making tea or coffee, most of us fill the kettle right up. This means as a country we're wasting around £68 million worth of energy a year. By filling your kettle just to the level you need, it could save you up to a third of the energy you have been using.

Switch to LED bulbs

Traditional bulbs are extremely inefficient. Modern LEDs are the opposite, and also last longer so are less wasteful too.

Use your microwave more

You'll save energy because it's quicker than using the main oven or hob. It's worth considering a slow cooker too, as they're one of the most energy-efficient kitchen appliances.

Unplug all your chargers

Across the country, people are unnecessarily over-charging their mobile phones, tablets and laptops. Instead, as soon as your device is fully charged, try to get into the habit of unplugging it. Not only will this save energy, it also prolongs battery life and removes a potential fire safety hazard. It could also save you about £60 a year on your electricity bills.

Close your curtains at night

During the day it's important to try to use as much natural - and free - heat (in the form of sunlight) as possible. But when night comes, closing your curtains will help your home retain that heat. This helps keep warmth in the room - but try not to let them cover radiators or heaters.

Turn down the temperature of your washing machine

With today's effective washing machine detergents, there's often no need to run your washing machine any higher than 30°C - clean clothes and energy saved.

Not using it? Turn it off!

Get into the habit of turning energy using devices off when not using them - TVs, lights, games consoles, etc are easily left on when not in use.

Heating guides

You should have been given a guide to operating your heating system when you moved into your property. If you require a replacement then your Housing Officer will be able to help with this.

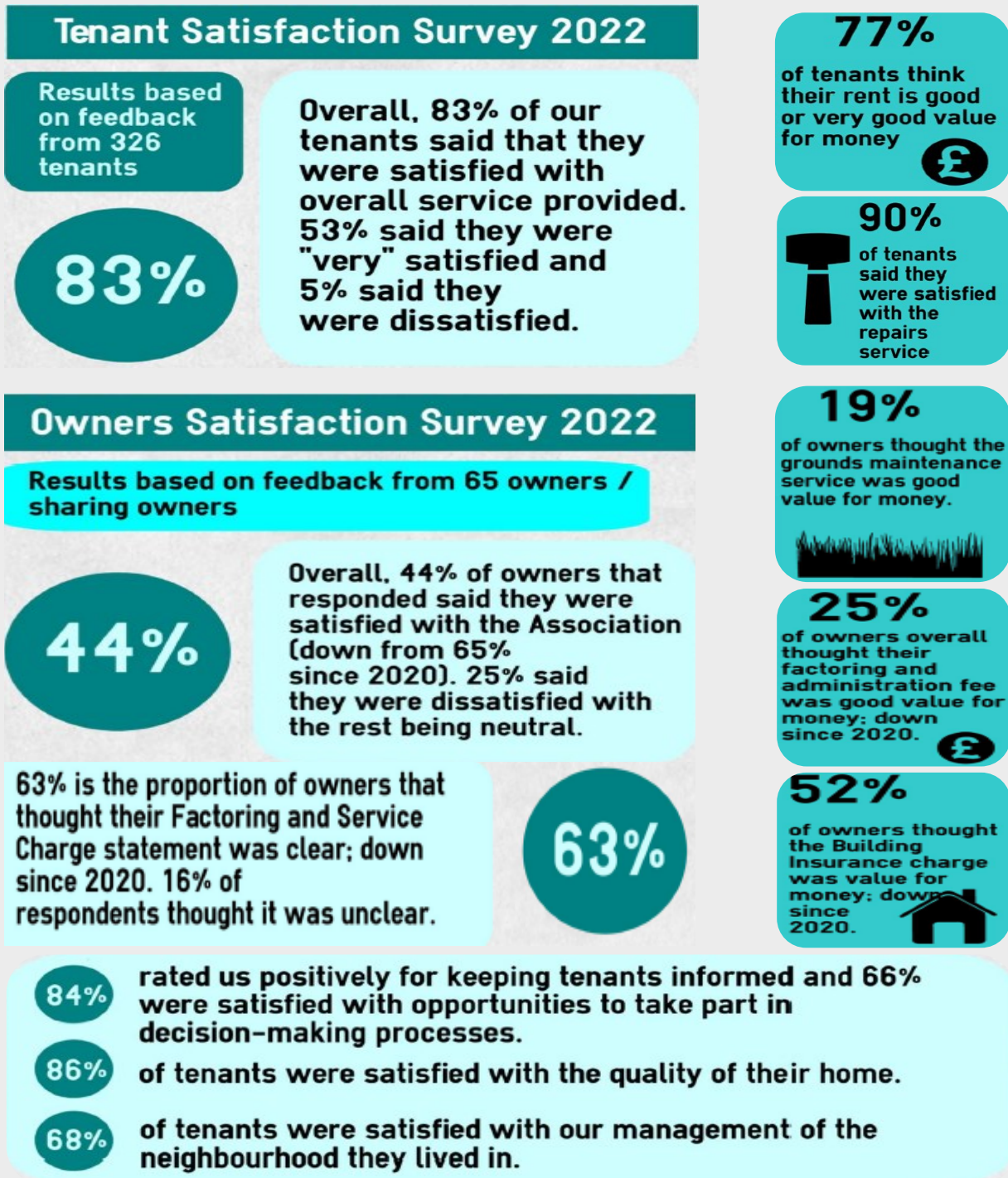
For further energy advice and support contact Robert Leslie, Energy Officer, on 01856 875253 ext 404 or email robert.leslie@ohal.org.uk

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SURVEY 2022

What did we do?

We commissioned IBP Strategy and Research to carry out our Customer Satisfaction Survey in 2022. Through them we communicated with 326 tenants and 65 owners to whom we provide services. This allows us to find out how satisfied they were with the services the Association provides. The results of the survey are provided to the Scottish Housing Regulator but more importantly allow the Association to improve and tailor services to meet the needs of tenants and owners.

What did you tell us?



You told us your top 5 service priority areas were:

- Keeping the costs of heating your home as affordable as possible
- Keeping rents affordable for tenants
- Repairs being done quickly
- Making more houses available for affordable rent
- Repairs being done to a good quality standard

COST OF LIVING INFORMATION SESSION

In November we organised our first ever hybrid event for tenants, along with Orkney Islands Council, offering advice and information on how to navigate the current cost of living. With everyone feeling the effects of increasing costs we felt it was important to reach out to tenants to assure them that help is available for those finding themselves in difficulty.

Speakers from Orkney CAB and Social Security Scotland provided extensive information on the services they offer. The CAB presentation focused on maximising income with useful online tools: <https://benefits-calculator.turn2us.org.uk/>, budgeting and reducing expenditure, and finally managing debt. Social Security Scotland went through the list of benefits they offered, details of which can be found here: <https://www.socialsecurity.gov.scot/benefits>

It was the first face to face session since the pandemic and we are keen to hold similar events in future and would encourage more engagement with tenants on different issues. If there are any subjects that you feel would benefit tenants and residents please do contact Suzy Boardman, Communications & Engagement Officer, 875253 ext 205 or suzy.boardman@ohal.org.uk.

Have your views heard?

Have you ever wanted to make a difference in your community? We would love to welcome new members to our Resident Panel giving you a real opportunity to affect changes to the services we deliver to you.



In the New Year we will be closely examining the gardens and grounds maintenance service and need your input on the way forward for this service.

If you are interested in joining a single issue focus group, or if you are curious about joining our Resident Panel, please contact Suzy Boardman.

Community Projects

Do you have an idea that you think could have a positive impact on your community? We'd love to hear about it, and we may be able to help you with setting it up, please contact Suzy Boardman.



Engaging with communities

Our Housing Officers have been out and about taking part in estate walkabouts over the recent months. It has been great to meet tenants and residents at these events, hearing your experience and feedback to help improve what we do. Keep an eye on our website and Facebook page.

Emma McConnachie, Senior Housing Officer, said *"We find these visits to be very beneficial in familiarising ourselves with the estates and for meeting those who live within them. We look forward to undertaking more walkabouts during the year."*

Consultation Questions

The below questions have been provided to seek your views on the proposed rent increase.

Question 1

Based on the information contained in the rent review leaflet and this newsletter what is your preference from the following options for the rent increase in 2023/24?

6%

☐

7.5%

☐

12.6%

☐

Question 2

For tenants living in the areas listed in the Kirkwall and East Mainland selected streets please confirm if you would like to opt-in or opt-out of our grass cutting contract for 2023/24 & 2024/25:

Opt-in

☐

Opt-out

☐

Question 3

The Association intends to contact tenants as part of our winter contacts programme. However if you are struggling with anything in particular at this moment and require advice/ assistance from your housing officer please provide details in brief below:

ARE YOU A TENANT?

☐

OR A SHARING OWNER?

☐

Tenant's name

Address

The consultation will run until the 13th February 2023. The results will be presented to the Management Committee who will consider the responses with tenants being notified at the start of March of the outcome.

If you require any support completing the survey please contact the Association at:

01856 875253



www.ohal.org.uk



enquiries@ohal.org.uk



Orkney Housing Association

