GUIDANCE NOTE

Agency publication of online policies

Registered agencies are to make key policies relating to the provision of tenancy management and rent setting readily available to tenants, prospective tenants and others in a variety of formats, including online through a website.

Introduction

Registered agencies are facing increased scrutiny on their operations from tenants, people seeking housing, advocates, neighbours and the community in general.

The Housing Registrar has received feedback indicating that online information from some social housing providers is difficult to access and not easily visible for tenants, residents and other relevant stakeholders.

Tenants and applicants have the right to know how their tenancy will be managed.

These guidelines have been developed to assist agencies comply with Performance Standards and government funding requirements (including the Victorian Housing Register).

The Housing Registrar promotes transparency to encourage market confidence within the community housing sector and to reduce regulatory red tape.

Compliance with performance standards

Performance Standard 1 requires registered agencies to be fair, transparent and responsive in delivering housing assistance to tenants, residents and other clients.

This includes the requirement that registered agencies make information about their tenancy management and rent calculation policies available in a variety of formats.

For compliance assessments registered agencies may be asked to demonstrate how visible and accessible information is to tenants, prospective tenants and others.

Consideration must be given to making information accessible to tenants with disabilities and those whose first language is not English.

The most straight forward way of achieving compliance is for agencies to publish policies related to tenancy management and rent setting on their website. This obligation is also consistent with requirements on participating agencies under the Victorian Housing Register.

Applicable policies

Applicable policies include but are not limited to:

- housing allocation;
- rent setting;
- alterations and disability modifications;
- maintenance and repairs;
- inspections;
- privacy and information security (which complies with the *Privacy & Data Protection Act 2014*);
- complaints and appeals;
- Code of Conduct and conflicts of interest;
- arrears management and hardship;
- tenant transfer and succession;
- transitional housing;
- neighbours;
- evictions; and
- tenant recharge.

Developing policies

Consideration should be given to the following factors when developing policies, making them accessible and ensuring best practice:

Language

- Is the information provided clear, concise, plain and simple?
- Have technical terms, acronyms and abbreviations been defined and used clearly and consistently?
- Is the language appropriate for all relevant parties/users?
- Does the information provided allow informed decision making for clients and other relevant stakeholders?
- Do policies give specialised staff enough discretion and room to exercise their own judgment in certain circumstances?

Structure

- Is there a standardised format for all policies in your agency?
- Is the font used clear and easy to read?
- Is the date of last update included in the footer or other visible location?
- Have headings been used and is the structure logical and easy to follow?
- If a hyperlink is included, does the heading properly describe where it leads to and the expected content?

Accessibility

- Is there a clear menu option on your website for online policies?
- Are there no more than two clicks from the menu option to access policy information?
- Are all online policies printable?

Policy updates

- Is there a regular policy review schedule?
- Is your agency proactive in ensuring online policies are kept up to date and reflect recent policy or organisational changes?
- Are all references and hyperlinks still valid?

Staffing

- Is there a responsible member of staff for policy review and online policy management?
- Have staff received appropriate policy training and can they provide effective and timely responses to enquiries?
- Are staff familiar with the policy review schedule and proactive in identifying policy issues?
- Are specialised staff capable of exercising professional judgment when applying policies?

Where should policies be published online?

The Registrar expects policies related to tenancy management and rent setting to be available to the general public through your agency's website.

The Tenant Portal is insufficient due to the limitation this places on accessibility.

Public access ensures transparency for the numerous stakeholders within the community housing sector and promotes public confidence.

Assistance with policy development

If you need assistance with policy or website development, please contact CHIA Vic.

The Institute of Community Directors Australia has an extensive free policy bank also available for reference: www.communitydirectors.com.au/icda/policybank

Please discuss implementation times and any policy issues with your lead regulators.