

Melville Housing Association



Policy: Freedom of Information and Environmental Information

Subject:	Freedom of Information and Environmental Information Policy
Section:	Directorate
Objective:	The purpose of this document is to detail a general understanding of FOISA and EIR and outline where responsibility lies for complying with the legal duties of Melville Housing Association under FOISA and EIR
Scottish Social Housing Charter	Outcome 2 – Communication – Social Landlords manage their business so that: “tenants and other users find it easy to communicate with their landlord and get the information they need about their landlord, how and why it makes decisions and the services it provides”.
Corporate Strategy	Strengthen Core Services
Issue Date:	November 2022
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Policy Ref No:	FOI 001

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 ("FOISA") and the Environmental Information (Scotland) Regulations 2004 ("EIR") place a general obligation on Scottish public authorities to allow the public access to information that they hold. Both FOISA and EIR are overseen by the Scottish Information Commissioner ("SIC").
- 1.2 From 11 November 2019 Melville Housing Association will be designated as Scottish public authority and will need to make information available in accordance with FOISA and EIR.
- 1.3 This is the Freedom of Information and Environmental Information Policy of Melville Housing Association. The policy will:
 - provide a general understanding of FOISA and EIR; and
 - outline where responsibility lies for complying with the legal duties of Melville Housing Association under FOISA and EIR

2.0 Policy Statement

- 2.1 Melville Housing Association is committed to the underlying principles of openness and transparency underpinning FOISA and EIR and complying fully with the requirements of this legislation. To this end Melville will:
 - follow the relevant Scottish Ministers' Codes of Practice relating to FOISA and EIR, as well as any relevant guidance issued by SIC;
 - take into account the needs of individuals when presenting information under FOISA and EIR;
 - make all employees aware of their responsibilities under FOISA and EIR and support them in fulfilling those responsibilities;
 - publish a wide range of information through our Publication Scheme;
 - monitor compliance with FOISA and EIR with a view to continuous improvement;
 - respect data protection in accordance with the GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018 when complying with FOISA and EIR;
 - only withhold information where entitled to do so under FOISA and EIR and explain why information is withheld; and
 - provide advice and assistance to individuals seeking to access information

3.0 Responsibilities

3.1 The Chief Executive has lead management responsibility for FOISA and EIR within Melville Housing. This includes effective implementation and regular review of this Policy.

The Communications Manager will be responsible for:

- responding to requests under FOISA and EIR and who information requests should be forwarded to;
- collating information for sending out to requesters;
- making information available in accordance with our publication scheme;
- dealing with requests for review.

3.2 All staff are responsible for:

- familiarising themselves with this policy;
- forwarding information requests received to the Communications Manager as quickly as possible. Staff members who are unsure how to recognise an information request should seek guidance from the Communications Manager;
- seeking guidance from the Communications Manager if they are unsure about any of the duties placed on Melville Housing by FOISA or EIR;
- providing information requested by the Communications Manager to allow a request for information to be processed.

3.3 Employees should be aware that, once an information request is received, they are committing a criminal offence if they delete or alter any information held by Melville Housing in order to prevent its disclosure. Where employees are unsure if deletion or alteration of information may result in an offence they should seek guidance from the Communications Manager.

3.4 Compliance with this policy is compulsory for all Melville Housing Association staff. Any employee who fails to comply with this policy may be subject to disciplinary action.

4.0 Scope of the Policy

4.1 This policy applies to any information held by Melville Housing Association which relates to one or more of the functions set out below, regardless of format. This will include information created internally and information received from third parties. It will also relate to information which is held on behalf of Melville Housing Association.

This policy applies to all Melville Housing Association employees.

5.0 Background

5.1 Why is Melville Housing Association subject to FOISA and EIR?

Melville Housing Association is subject to both FOISA and EIR by virtue of the: Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 (Designation of Persons as Scottish public authorities) Order 2019 (the "Order").

The Order came into effect on 11 November 2019 and brought all Registered Social Landlords ("RSLs") and certain RSL subsidiaries under the scope of FOISA and the EIR.

5.2 What is subject to FOISA and EIR?

In accordance with the terms of the Order, not everything that Melville Housing Association Ltd does is subject to FOISA and EIR. Instead, Melville Housing Association is only subject to these regimes in respect of certain functions, namely 'housing services' (as defined in s.165 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010) which Melville Housing Association carries out – subject to some restrictions. Looking at the definition of 'housing services' and the restrictions which are set out in the Order the following functions carried out by Melville Housing Association are covered by FOISA and EIR:

- the prevention and alleviation of homelessness
- the management of social housing accommodation
- the supply of information to the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) by an RSL or a connected body (i.e. a subsidiary) in relation to its financial wellbeing and standards of governance.

5.3 What is the difference between FOISA and EIR?

EIR provides a right of access to 'Environmental Information' held by Melville Housing Association. Environmental Information has a very wide definition which is set out in Regulations. Where a request under FOISA is received for Environmental Information it should be processed in accordance with EIR.

Whilst the obligations under FOISA and EIR are similar – there are some key differences that employees must be aware of when dealing with requests for information. Further guidance on the differences are available on SIC's website.

6.0 Legal Duties

Melville Housing Association has a number of legal duties which it must comply with under FOISA and EIR. These are set out below:

6.1 Responding to Information Requests

People have the right to request information from the Association. Where the information requested is within the scope of the Order and the Association holds that information, the Association must release the information unless an exemption (under FOISA) or an exception (under EIR) applies. The Association shall, when responding to requests for information from individuals, follow the Section 60 Code of Practice and any relevant guidance produced by the SIC.

6.2 The Association aims to respond to information requests promptly, and in any event within 20 working days of receiving the request (except in some circumstances under EIR where the Association is entitled to extend the timescale for responding by an additional 20 working days).

6.3 Where the Association provides an individual with the information they have requested, it will in so far as is reasonable to do so, provide information in the format that the individual has requested and will adhere to any duties in accordance with the Equality Act 2010.

6.4 Where the Association refuses to provide information to individuals it will clearly explain reasons why and detail the provision in FOISA or EIR that allows the Association to withhold that information and why the Association believes that provision applies (including, where required, an explanation of how the Association has carried out the Public Interest Test).

6.5 Where the Association is asked to provide information which it does not hold but is aware that another Scottish public authority does hold the requested information, the Association shall provide contact details of said Authority to the individual requesting the information and explain that the individual may wish to request the information from that Scottish public authority. Where a request is being handled under EIR and these circumstances apply the Association shall offer to transfer the individual's request to the other Scottish public authority.

6.6 The Association may choose to charge for fulfilling information requests received from individuals. Any charges made by the Association shall be made in accordance with:

- for requests being handled under FOISA: the Freedom of Information (Fees for Required Disclosure) (Scotland) Regulations 2004
- for requests being handled under EIR: the Schedule of Charges published within the Association's Guide to Information.

6.7 Any fee charged by the Association will be reasonable and will not exceed the costs to the Association of providing requested information.

7.0 Responding to Requests for Review

7.1 Where someone has requested information from the Association and:

- the Association has failed to respond to the request within the 20 working day deadline (or extended deadline in respect of certain requests made under EIR); or
- the person requesting the information is unhappy with the response to the request (e.g. where information has been withheld under one of the exemptions or exceptions available under FOISA / EIR)
- they have the right to request that the Association reviews the response to their request to determine whether or not the provisions of FOISA or EIR have been followed.

7.2 Where the Association performs a review and determines that a response to a request is not in accordance with FOISA or EIR, the Association will take immediate steps to rectify this matter. This could, for example, include releasing information which was previously withheld.

7.3 Where the Association performs a review and determines that a response to a request is in accordance with FOISA or EIR then the Association will notify the individual who asked for a review of this as quickly as possible.

7.4 The Association will handle all requests for review in accordance with the timescales set out in FOISA and EIR.

7.5 Where an individual is unhappy with the response to their review request they may appeal to the SIC. If an appeal is made by SIC and a decision handed down by them, both the Association and the individual in question have a right to appeal to the courts on a point of law.

8.0 Provision of Advice and Assistance to Individuals

8.1 The Association must provide individuals seeking to access information with advice and assistance. This advice and assistance will be provided with a view to ensuring that all barriers which may potentially prevent an individual from accessing information are removed. The Association will comply with this duty by following the guidance contained in the Section 60 Code of Practice issued by Scottish Ministers.

9.0 Publication of Information

9.1 The Association shall publish information in accordance with its Publication Scheme. The Guide to Information of Melville Housing Association Publication Scheme will be available on our website and a paper format will also be available on request.

10.0 Data Protection

- 10.1 The Association is committed to upholding its data protection obligations set out in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018.
- 10.2 Under data protection laws, individuals have the right to request access to all of the information that the Association holds about them. This and other rights that individuals have under data protection are not covered by this policy. Employees should refer to the Association's Privacy Policy when dealing with these rights.

11.0 Equal Opportunities

- 11.1 We are committed to Equality and Diversity and will not discriminate in the operation of this policy on the basis of age, gender, race, colour, ethnic or national origin, religion or belief, marital status, pregnancy and maternity, political, sexual orientation or gender reassignment, medical condition or disability. We aim to promote equalities and comply with all current legislation.

12.0 Review of Policy

- 12.1 The Chief Executive will ensure that this policy is reviewed every three years. Any amendments required or recommended will be submitted to the Board for consideration and approval.