

Communities Scotland
Inspection report

Garrion People's Housing Co-operative

January 2006

Contents

	Pages
1. Introduction	1
2. Context	2
3. How good are the services?	3
4. Is the service managed for improvement?	8
5. Governance and financial management	10
6. Areas for improvement action	12
7. Next steps	13
Appendix 1 Sources of Evidence	14
Appendix 2 Examples of Positive Practice	15
Glossary	16

1. Introduction

About this inspection

- 1.1 This inspection was carried out by Communities Scotland under section 69 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 on behalf of Scottish Ministers. Our purpose in inspection is to provide an independent external assessment of the effectiveness of housing service delivery and make recommendations to help improvement. Inspections are conducted within a published framework of Performance Standards*.

How we assessed performance

- 1.2 Our inspectors asked two key questions:
- How good are the services we have inspected?
 - How well are these services being managed for improvement?
- 1.3 In order to answer these questions the inspectors:
- spoke to staff, tenants and members of the governing body;
 - asked other partner organisations for their views;
 - saw and tested first hand how well services were being delivered;
 - examined key policies, publications, information and the organisation's self-assessment submitted for this inspection; and
 - analysed published performance and financial information.

The inspection team

- 1.4 The Garrion People's Housing Co-operative inspection was carried out by Jonathan Grant (Inspector) who was supported by Josephine McAloon (Inspection Officer) and Luise Seikman (Financial Analyst). We were on site on 7 October 2005. We would like to thank everyone involved in the inspection, particularly the Management Committee, staff and tenants for their time and co-operation.

Responding to this inspection

- 1.5 We expect all inspected bodies to make this report available to anyone that wants it, report our findings to tenants and other stakeholders and respond to the issues raised in this report. We require that the summary of this report is issued to all tenants.

* see glossary

2. Context

About the organisation

- 2.1 Garrion People's Housing Co-operative was registered with Scottish Homes as a non-fully mutual housing co-operative* in 1990. The Co-operative owns 219 properties in Gowkthrapple, North Lanarkshire. This includes 140 tenement flats refurbished in 1995 and acquired from the local council, 51 houses built in 1998 and a sheltered housing complex, purchased in 2000 from Scottish Homes. The Gowkthrapple area has seen a general reduction in demand for some of the existing social housing for a number of years. The Co-operative operates in a context where it classifies 68% of its houses as low demand. Garrion is working in partnership with North Lanarkshire Council to examine options for the regeneration of Gowkthrapple. The Co-operative plans to begin to build new houses in 2006 as part of this process. Garrion has 10 Committee members, 9 of whom are tenants of the Co-operative.
- 2.2 Garrion operates a formal staff sharing arrangement with a neighbouring social landlord, Forgewood Housing Co-operative. Six staff members split their time between the two organisations. Garrion also have a joint share with Forgewood in Bridges Housing Association, an unregistered subsidiary organisation that provides management services to other housing organisations. Bridges is an Industrial and Provident Society* and its management committee is made up of four members from each of the two Co-operatives. The table below shows some key facts about Garrion.

Key facts	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005
Houses owned	219	219	219
Employees	6	6	6
Annual turnover (£000's)	518	523	529
Total possible rental income (£000's)	499	518	499
Total Arrears (£'s)	22,478	39,727	53,894
Average weekly rent	44.09	47.89	49.16
Houses re-let	56	50	46
Average days to re-let	12	16	28

Source: Annual performance and statistical return (APSR)* / Inspection submission*

* see glossary

3. How Good are the services?

Accessible services

Social landlords should provide open, fair and equal access to their services.

- 3.1 We found that the Co-operative operates an open housing list and people aged 16 or over can apply at any time. Garrion assesses applications in three days on average but has not set a target time for putting applicants onto its housing list*. Garrion does not exclude applicants and reviews its housing list annually.
- 3.2 Garrion recognises that demand for some of its housing is reducing. It is working well to increase awareness of its housing list and increased the number of people on its housing list from 63 to 105 over the last 2 years. It advertises its properties in local newspapers, service directories and local colleges. It is also developing links with the Lanarkshire Ethnic Minority Action Group and working with North Lanarkshire Council and other local Registered Social Landlords* (RSLs) to develop a Common Housing Register* (CHR).
- 3.3 The Co-operative prioritises allocations based on a range of housing needs which clearly reflect the statutory reasonable preference categories*. The cases we reviewed were all to people with one or more of these needs. Garrion also promotes applicant choice well and does not place limits on the number of offers that can be made to an applicant. The Co-operative's contribution to meeting housing need in its area of operation is a key strength.
- 3.4 Garrion let 82% of its houses to applicants from its own housing list in 2004/05. The Co-operative has a nominations agreement with North Lanarkshire Council but receives few referrals. The Co-operative and the Council have agreed to suspend the agreement in response to both organisations having difficulties in finding applicants for flatted properties in the area. Garrion agreed a protocol with the Council to manage referrals under Section 5* of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and has housed all referrals it received. It also receives and houses a number of referrals from other local RSLs. Garrion collects equalities information from its applicants and reports this to the management committee.

* see glossary

- 3.5 The Co-operative works well to minimise the number of people it suspends from receiving an offer of housing: one person was suspended at the time of our inspection. It also regularly reviews suspensions and gives clear advice to applicants on how to have the suspension removed.
- 3.6 Two members of staff check each application and allocation and the Co-operative verifies each applicant's circumstances before making an offer. However, cases we reviewed showed weaknesses that had not been discovered by the Co-operative's quality control systems. Garrion does not always follow its policy when assessing housing need; one application had not been awarded its full entitlement of points.
- 3.7 Garrion provides an accessible repairs service. Tenants can report repairs during office hours by telephone, in person or by writing and Garrion provides an out of hours service for emergency repairs. All repairs are arranged through individual appointments, although the Co-operative does not record whether these appointments have been kept.
- 3.8 Garrion provides good information to tenants on its services. It issues a regularly updated tenants handbook, a quarterly newsletter and information leaflets. Information is available in other formats on request and a translation service is available. In the Co-operative's most recent tenant survey 93% of respondents were satisfied with the amount of information provided. The Co-operative is also developing an interactive website which it plans to have in place in early 2006.
- 3.9 The Co-operative's office is within walking distance of all of its houses. It has also improved access to its office by installing an external ramp although the office does not have private interview space. The accessibility of Garrion's services are a key strength.

Service quality

Social landlords should deliver high quality services and maintain high quality houses.

Housing management

- 3.10 The provision of good information and access to appropriate support are important ways in which landlords can help their tenants sustain their tenancies. The Co-operative does good work to help tenants remain in their homes. It provides all of its

tenants with a Scottish Secure Tenancy* (SST), gives good information at the start of new tenancies, conducts early new tenant visits, directs tenants to debt advice agencies and co-ordinates support packages for the homeless people it houses. Despite this good work, Garrion has a high turnover rate of 21% and four times as many tenants abandon their houses compared to its peer average*. The Co-operative does not actively identify other vulnerable tenants, for example young people, and target support services where they are most needed.

- 3.11 Garrion evicted three tenants for rent arrears in 2004/05. It seeks to recover vacant possession only as a last resort and does some good work to support tenants with rent arrears. The Co-operative refers individual cases to advice agencies and North Lanarkshire Council's Social Work and Tenancy Support Services. However, we saw that Garrion makes repayment agreements with some tenants in arrears without satisfying itself that the agreements are realistic. The Co-operative does not routinely assess its tenants financial situation as part of its arrears management work and this is another weakness in sustaining tenancies.
- 3.12 Garrion manages its neighbourhoods very well. An estate caretaker co-ordinates cleaning and minor repairs and at the last tenants survey 90% of respondents were satisfied with the maintenance of common areas. The Co-operative also provides a close cleaning service and a regular skip delivery. Tenants that we spoke to at the sheltered housing complex were also very satisfied with the condition of their neighbourhood.
- 3.13 The Co-operative recorded 33 incidents of antisocial behaviour in 2004/05, although it does not yet have a clear definition of what it considers to be antisocial behaviour. The Co-operative has taken good action on antisocial behaviour, including installing Closed Circuit Television (CCTV), training a staff member as a mediator and working with North Lanarkshire Council's specialist neighbour disputes team. The Co-operative could improve its management of antisocial behaviour, as it does not gather tenant satisfaction information, performance reports contain limited information and performance against its targets is not monitored.

* see glossary

Property maintenance

- 3.14 Garrion sets itself challenging targets to complete responsive repairs. Its target for Urgent repairs of 2 working days is more challenging than the national average* of 3 working days and its Routine target of 5 working days is more challenging than the national average of 10 working days. The target for completing repairs it categorises as Emergency is in line with the national average of 6 hours.
- 3.15 The Co-operative reported completing 99% of its repairs on target, against a national average of 95% in 2003/04. Its most recent survey showed that 80% of respondents were satisfied with the speed of the repairs service. However, we found that Garrion's measurement and reporting of repairs performance is weak. Reports do not include the amount of time taken to pre-inspect repairs and responsive gas repairs are not included in the calculations. Also, Garrion is not recording the time when repairs are completed so it cannot be sure that its emergency repairs are being completed in its target time of 6 hours.
- 3.16 Pre and post inspections are important tools for ensuring repairs are targeted accurately and carried out to a high standard. Garrion has agreed targets for inspections and reports outcomes against its targets to the management committee, although targets are not always achieved and performance reports include only limited detail.
- 3.17 The Co-operative provides a good Right to Repair* service: good information on the scheme is provided to tenants and performance is monitored and reported well.
- 3.18 Scottish Ministers have set a target that all landlords' houses should meet the new Scottish Housing Quality Standard* (SHQS) by 2015. Landlords were required to prepare a plan showing how they will achieve this, by April 2005. Garrion has submitted a self-assessment plan to the Scottish Executive and expects that all but eight of its houses will meet the standard by 2015. Meeting the standard for these exceptions remains a challenge to the Co-operative as they are houses where the structural design of the kitchens currently prevents the standard being achieved.
- 3.19 The Co-operative completed a 15% sample survey of the physical condition of its houses in 2003, which concluded that the stock is in generally good condition with no

* see glossary

major repair or improvement works necessary. Garrion is aware that it needs information on all of its stock and has plans in place to achieve this in 3 years. It may have to review its SHQS delivery plan as it gets new information from this survey work. The Co-operative also delivers planned maintenance programmes supported by 30 year life cycle costing information. Its last kitchen replacement programme was well received by tenants with 86% of respondents satisfied.

- 3.20 Garrion is required to carryout safety checks every 12 months on all gas appliances and flues which it provides for its tenants' use. The Co-operative reviewed and changed its gas maintenance procedures in 2004 in response to weaknesses it had identified in its performance. It now operates a 10 month inspection cycle and reports its performance to the management committee. All houses have a valid gas safety certificate in place but we found weaknesses in the Co-operatives monitoring of performance. Garrion has not addressed weaknesses in how it monitors its contractor's performance and is not aware of its performance in achieving gas safety checks within one year of the previous service: we found one case where this had not been achieved.
- 3.21 From May 2004 social landlords have had a statutory duty to manage asbestos in the common areas of their properties. Garrion has an excellent approach to the management of asbestos. It has an asbestos management plan in place, has surveyed all of the common areas of its houses and has an asbestos register. Plans are also in place to further develop the register by surveying empty houses.
- 3.22 Garrion has a good approach to home safety. All of its houses have regularly maintained hard wired smoke alarms. The Co-operative has installed door entry systems in all of its houses with common entrances and none of its houses have lead pipes.

Service user focus

Social landlords should place the people they serve at the heart of their work, treat them with respect and be responsive to their views and priorities.

- 3.23 The Co-operatives most recent tenants survey found that 88% of tenants were satisfied with Garrion as a landlord. Garrion supports one Registered Tenant Organisation* (RTO) and members that we spoke to during the inspection confirmed

* see glossary

high levels of satisfaction with the Co-operative's services and also with how well it listens to their views. Garrion also collects other satisfaction information, for example through a sample repairs satisfaction survey, although the collection rate is variable. The Co-operative has a good complaints policy and has received no formal complaints in 2004/05.

- 3.24 Garrion is excellent at responding to feedback from its RTO and tenants on the management committee. The Co-operative introduced estate caretakers, close cleaning services and CCTV systems in response to this feedback.
- 3.25 While Garrion is committed to involving tenants in improving its services, it could improve how it consults with tenants who are not members of the RTO or on the management committee. Newsletter articles are used to request views from tenants but these achieve a limited response.

4. Is the service managed for improvement?

Performance and resource management

Social landlords should have clear objectives, standards and targets, manage costs effectively and should work to continuously improve services.

- 4.1 Garrion's performance in collecting rent is poor. A recent internal audit identified that the Co-operative was slow to pick up developing arrears in some cases and arrears have significantly increased. Total arrears as a percentage of its total rental income has increased from 4.5% in 2002/03 to 10.8% in 2004/05 and current non-technical arrears have risen from 2% in 2002/03 to 5.84% in August 2005. Garrion's arrears are now higher than its peers and the national average. The Co-operative is aware that its performance is poor and is taking action to improve. For example it is dedicating staff resources to prioritise arrears recovery, has set a target for improvement, and is reviewing its policies and procedures, although it is too early to assess the outcomes of these measures.
- 4.2 The Co-operative's performance in how quickly it re-lets* its houses compares well against its peers and the national average, although its performance is declining. The time it takes the Co-operative to re-let its houses has increased from 12 days in 2002/03 to 28 days in 2004/05 against a national average of 34 days and a peer

* see glossary

average of 31 days. Garrion's rent loss has also increased from 0.4% in 2002/03 to 1.71% in 2004/05. The Co-operative has taken action to improve performance, for example permitting under-occupancy of its lower demand houses. Garrion reports its re-let performance to the management committee but the report could be improved as it does not contain sufficient detail to fully manage improvement in re-let performance.

- 4.3 Garrion's costs for delivering its housing management services is £539 for each of its houses for 2003/04 which is more than the average for its peer group and nationally. The costs for delivering the maintenance services is £397 for each of its houses for 2003/04 which is significantly higher than the peer average of £156.39 and the national average of £191.29.
- 4.4 Garrion sets objectives for its services in its Internal Management Plan (IMP) and holds an annual service planning day for staff and committee members to review objectives for the Co-operative. Its strategic plans link well with individual service plans which have objectives for both the co-operative and individual staff. Garrion is generally aware of how well it is performing, although there is room for improvement, for example in gas safety and its management of empty houses. While some service objectives are SMART*, others are not, for example tenant satisfaction. The Co-operative's use of performance targets could be developed further, for example it does not set a target for the time it takes to re-let its houses.
- 4.5 While the Co-operative's approach to performance monitoring is generally good, some areas are under-developed, for example responsive repairs and antisocial behaviour. Reports to the management committee are generally good but the reporting of re-let, gas safety and tenant satisfaction performance is under-developed. Policies and procedures are also good, with only minor improvements needed.

* Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound

5. Governance & financial management

Leadership, ethical standards and risk

Social Landlords should have a clear vision, promote values that underpin good governance and effectively manage organisational risk.

- 5.1 Garrion sets out its vision for the future of the Co-operative in its Internal Management Plan. The management committee has a clear view of its role in setting the strategic direction, monitoring performance, exercising control and it works well with staff. The management committee generally receives good levels of performance information, although there is room for improvement in some reports. Performance information is regularly reported to tenants in newsletters, through responsive mail-shots and at the Annual General Meeting (AGM).
- 5.2 Garrion has 10 management committee members and 9 are tenants of the Co-operative. While attendance at meetings is very good and above the peer and national average, Garrion could improve how it encourages its members to join its management committee. The Co-operative's management committee members are experienced and committed to the improvement of the organisation. All management committee members receive an annual training needs assessment and are well supported with training and development opportunities.
- 5.3 A strong membership and good levels of participation at AGM's are important ways for landlords to demonstrate accountability. Garrion has 79 tenant members and attendance at its AGM is poor, with only the management committee attending in 2004/05. Promotion of the benefits of membership, and the monitoring and reporting of performance in membership levels is limited. Members of the management committee that we spoke to are aware that increasing participation by the membership is an important way to ensure current and future accountability.
- 5.4 Garrion operates a joint staffing arrangement with Forgewood Housing Co-operative and has established one subsidiary organisation, Bridges Housing Association. Bridges provides management services to other housing organisations and the Co-operative received £8000 from Bridges activities in 2004/05. The constitutional arrangements and management agreements in place are intended to ensure that Garrion, Forgewood and Bridges retain separate identities and that the relationships do not put Garrion's assets at risk, although we found that Garrion has

not completed its scheduled 2004/05 review of its constitutional and management agreements.

- 5.5 Garrion has a strong awareness of the importance of both staff and management committee members maintaining the highest ethical standards. We found that the Co-operative acts in accordance with statutory requirements relating to the granting of benefits in Schedule 7 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. Garrion's management of potential conflicts of interest is under-developed. The Co-operative does not require tenant management committee members with rent arrears to withdraw from committee meetings when arrears are considered. We raised this with Garrion during the inspection visit and it immediately agreed to review its procedures.
- 5.6 Garrion's risk management policy is good and we found that the Co-operative has a good awareness of risk. Its internal audit system is good and Garrion has taken action where it has identified problems, for example in its management of rent arrears. Garrion is fully aware that its most significant risk comes from the falling demand for some of its houses and is progressing with its plans to regenerate Gowkthrapple and build new houses, due to start in 2006.

Financial viability and management

Social landlords should be financially viable in the short and medium term and sustainable in the longer term. They should have a robust financial management framework.

- 5.7 Garrion's 10 year financial projections indicate that it is viable in the medium term. The Co-operative predicts that despite major repair works expenditure needed to comply with SHQS, it will mostly generate surpluses over the next 10 years. Garrion has also secured a future development programme which will contribute towards improving its turnover.
- 5.8 Garrion's financial management framework is good with some strengths and areas where improvement is needed. The 10 year financial projections include a cash flow, balance sheet and an income and expenditure account, however, there is no narrative to help explain the figures and the assumptions underpinning the model are also not stated.
- 5.9 A one year budget is presented annually to the management committee for approval and reviewed part way through the financial year. The management committee uses

separate financial reports presented quarterly to monitor actual spend against budget. The quarterly financial reports do not include a cash flow but do provide explanations for variances and report on certain key performance indicators*.

6. Areas for improvement action

These are the key areas that need to be targeted for improvement action. They are broadly in order of priority:

In **Service quality** Garrion should:

- manage the collection of arrears effectively;
- improve how it monitors its performance in its management of gas safety;
- review how it measures and reports its performance in responsive repairs;
- ensure that it understands the financial position of tenants in arrears before it makes repayment arrangements;
- review how it measures and reports the performance of its anti-social behaviour services;
- improve its approach to sustaining tenancies with vulnerable tenants and those in arrears;
- improve its void re-let performance: and
- always follow its own policy when allocating its houses.

In **Service user focus** Garrion should:

- review how it consults with tenants who are not members of the management committee or the RTO.

In **Performance and resource management** Garrion should:

- develop its service planning and performance reporting.

In **Governance and financial management** Garrion should:

- review its arrangements for managing potential conflicts of interest in its relationships with Forgewood Co-operative and Bridges Housing Association and for management committee members with rent arrears;
- ensure that it regularly reviews the cost-effectiveness of its management agreements with Forgewood and Bridges;

* see glossary

- state the assumptions underpinning the 10 year financial projections and provide narrative to help explain the figures; and
- take steps to encourage an increase in participation by the membership of the Co-operative and attendance at AGM's.

7. Next steps

- 7.1 This report highlights our findings following this housing inspection. We expect Garrion People's Housing Co-operative to respond effectively to our recommendations using an improvement plan to be submitted to us within eight weeks of the publication of this report. The plan should show how the organisation intends to respond to our findings. The plan will be agreed with us.
- 7.2 If you would like to see Garrion People's Housing Co-operatives improvement plan you should contact the Chairperson at:

Garrion People's Housing Co-operative
3 Heathfield
Wishaw
North Lanarkshire

Telephone: 01698 360740

Sources of Evidence

Groups and third parties consulted:

- North Lanarkshire Council
- Communities Scotland Homepoint Team
- Communities Scotland Quality and Transfer Delivery Unit
- Communities Scotland Tenant Participation Development Team
- Care Commission

Interviews / meetings:

- Members of the Association's Committee
- Director
- Depute Director
- Housing Manager
- Maintenance consultant
- Financial consultant
- Members of the Registered Tenants Organisation

Reality checks:

- Review of rent arrears cases and legal actions against tenants
- Review of gas safety documents
- Review of asbestos register
- Review of responsive repairs
- Review of housing list applications, allocations and suspensions
- Review of anti-social behaviour cases
- Review of Schedule 7 register
- Review of conflict of interest register
- Review of Committee rent accounts
- Observation of committee meeting
- Tour of estate

Key documents reviewed:

- Inspection submission*
- Schedule 7 register
- Conflict of interest register
- Complaints register
- Management committee rent accounts
- Draft Annual Report
- Performance reports

* see glossary

Examples of Positive Practice

These are areas we would highlight as working particularly well, taking account of the organisation's operating context:

Service user focus

- Garrion has introduced significant service improvements as a result of feedback from tenant's groups and tenants on its management committee, for example estate caretakers and a CCTV system. Tenants that we spoke to confirmed that Garrion listens to their views and acts to improve services.

Service quality

- Garrion has an excellent approach to managing asbestos in the common areas of its houses. It clearly outlines its approach to its duties in its management plan and has inspected all of its common areas to determine if asbestos is present. A record of asbestos is held by the Co-operative and contractors are made aware of asbestos before starting repairs works. Garrion are also expanding their survey work to develop a register of all of their houses.

Glossary

Annual Statistical and Performance Return (APSR)	Annual questionnaire completed by RSLs and sent to Communities Scotland. Used to keep the Register of Social Landlords up to date and to track the performance of RSLs.
Anti Social Behaviour Order (ASBO)	ASBOs are preventative orders designed to protect individuals from further anti-social behaviour that causes or is likely to cause alarm or distress. Breach of an order is a criminal offence, punishable by a fine or imprisonment.
Average	The arithmetic mean – the sum of all the values divided by the number of values.
Common housing register	A register of all applicants for social housing used by two or more landlords within an area.
Focus group	A group of people brought together to have a structured discussion on a specific subject or set of subjects, facilitated by an independent person.
Fully mutual housing co-operative	Defined by the Housing Association Act 1985. All members must be tenants (or prospective tenants) and all tenants must be members. Activities must be exclusively for the benefit of the members.
Housing list	A list of applicants for housing which is used by the RSL to allocate its housing stock.
Industrial and Provident Society	Many RSLs are legally incorporated as industrial and provident societies. I&Ps can be charitable or non-charitable, or housing cooperatives. They must be non-profit making and supervised by the Register of Friendly Societies.
Inspection submission	Documents submitted by the landlord at the start of the inspection to provide information to on its performance, context and how it is structured.
Life cycle costing	A method of calculating the cost and timing of the repairs to, and replacement of, major building components.
Non-fully mutual housing co-operative	A housing co-operative where all tenants are not required to be members of the co-operative. (See also fully mutual housing co-operative).
Notice of proceedings	The formal notice provided to tenants informing them that their landlord is taking legal proceedings to seek a court order for recovery of possession of a property.
Peer group	A group of organisations facing similar tasks and

challenges with which comparisons can be made. RSLs choose which peer group they belong to when they submit their APSRs.

Performance indicator	A measure of how a RSL is achieving its objectives. Performance Indicators can be compared with a pre-set standard (a benchmark) or with other organisations.
Performance Standards	Housing standards for all social landlords in Scotland.
Reasonable Preference categories	Homelessness, overcrowding, large families, living in below tolerable standard housing or unsatisfactory living conditions.
Registered social landlord (RSL)	A landlord providing social rented housing that is registered and regulated by Communities Scotland.
Registered Tenant Organisation (RTO)	A tenant's group, from a defined area, that is recognised by the landlord as being properly constituted and governed in terms of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001.
Re-lets	Lets made to the second or subsequent tenant. Distinguished from new lets that are made when the property is first built or modernised.
Right to Repair	A scheme which gives tenants legal rights to have certain repairs in defined times.
Section 5 referrals	Under Section 5 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 a local authority can request a registered social landlord which has accommodation in its area to provide accommodation to homeless people. This request is known as a Section 5 referral.
Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS)	All property managed by registered social landlords must be brought up to a certain standard by 2015.
Scottish secure tenancy (SST)	The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 establishes the Scottish Secure Tenancy as the tenancy for all tenants of social landlords in Scotland.
& Short Scottish secure tenancy (SSST)	Section 34 and schedule 6 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 establish the basic conditions when a Short Scottish Secure Tenancy can apply to some tenants of social landlords in Scotland in place of a full SST

Regulation & Inspection

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