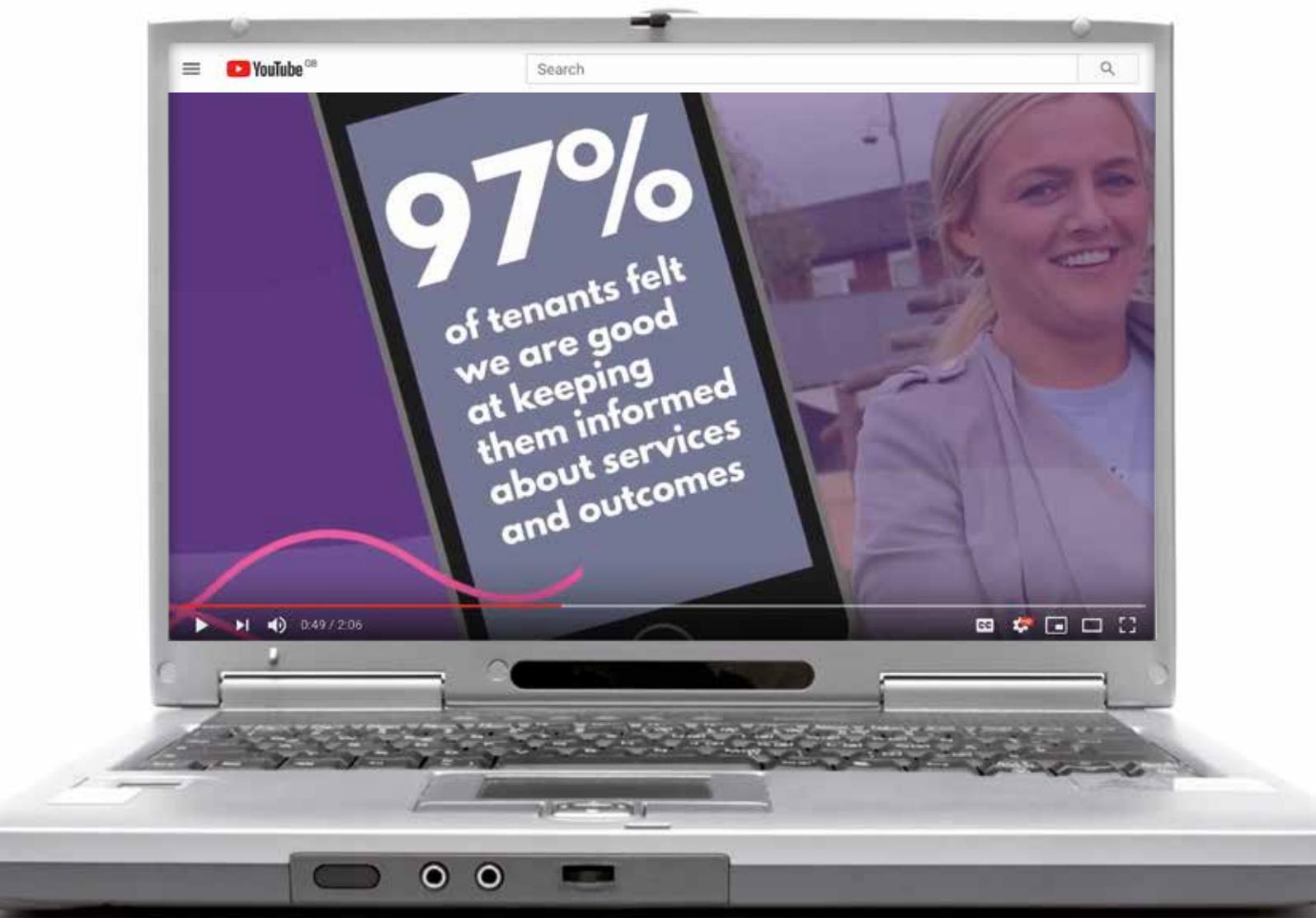


**GWSF**

Glasgow and West of Scotland  
Forum of Housing Associations



# CCHAs' use of social media and other forms of communications

February 2020

# About GWSF Glasgow and West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations (GWSF)

GWSF is the leading membership and campaigning body for local community-controlled housing associations and co-operatives (CCHAs) in the west of Scotland. The Forum represents 67 members who together own almost 88,000 homes. Along with providing this decent, affordable housing CCHAs also deliver factoring services to around 33,000 owners, mostly in mixed tenure housing blocks. For over 40 years CCHAs have been at the vanguard of strategies which have helped improve the environmental, social and economic wellbeing of their communities.

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# Introduction



In recent years, there has been more focus than ever before on how Housing Associations communicate with their tenants and with the wider world. We are all aware of the increasing demands on housing associations in relation to both GDPR and Freedom of Information requirements. Against this backdrop, and with a rapidly evolving social media landscape, it seems both appropriate and well-timed to consider how Community Controlled Housing Associations (CCHAs) use social media, and other types of innovative communications, in their organisations.

The key aim of this report is to provide an insight into CCHAs' current use of social media and other types of communications. As well as capturing the broad picture in relation to what types of social media our members utilise we also wanted to get a better understanding of: what CCHAs' use different forms of social media for, and the related benefits and challenges; attitudes to and concerns about using social media; and how CCHAs' social media strategies might evolve moving forward. We were also interested in exploring other innovative forms of communications which our members are employing.

The findings in the report are based on research conducted with GWSF members over a period of a few

months in the summer of 2019. This included: a desk-top survey of all GWSF members' websites and social media platforms; one-to-one interviews with staff members from eleven associations; and feedback from both staff and committee members at one of the Forum's regular open meetings, and at a workshop at our annual conference.

We must emphasise that the data simply presents a 'snapshot' of some GWSF members' social media use; captured at a precise 'moment in time'. Nonetheless, we believe it provides rich and nuanced insights which add value to our knowledge base and which we hope will prove helpful to all our members moving forward.

# Executive Summary

**1.** Amongst GWSF members the most widely used forms of social media are Facebook and Twitter. Other social media platforms are also used by members but to a much lesser degree, with only a few associations signed up to these.

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**2.** For all of the associations who took part in the research the benefits of being on social media outweigh the disadvantages. All of them had thought carefully before embarking on social media about what types they wanted to use, what they wanted to use it for and what audiences they wanted to reach.

Although associations resource the management and monitoring of their social media platforms in different ways they all have a dedicated resource for doing so, and agreed that this is imperative if social media is to be executed properly.

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**3.** In relation to Facebook, associations' main target audience is their tenants. Furthermore, giving tenants more choice in the way they receive information from the association and communicate with the association was the main reason for being on Facebook. 'Quality control' is seen as crucial for the management and monitoring of associations' Facebook accounts and this usually involves all content being posted by one member of staff or a dedicated communications team.

Despite initial concerns there have only been isolated incidents where a few associations have had to deal with inappropriate comments on their Facebook pages. The majority of participants indicated that they welcome negative comments about service delivery because this then gives them a chance to address issues quickly and publicly. CCHAs use Facebook for a range of things, including: informing tenants about housing management matters and social regeneration activities; encouraging tenant engagement; and to advertise posts which might appeal to local people. Interestingly, some associations mirror their real life community anchor role online and post content for other local organisations and community groups on their Facebook pages.

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**4.** In most cases, associations who use Twitter do so to reach a number of wider audiences including: other housing associations; the wider housing and third sectors; national and local politicians; and partners and funders. Twitter is regarded as a platform that allows associations to present their corporate brand and also lets a wider range of people see what they do as both landlords and in their wider role in communities.

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**5.** Some CCHAs are also using other innovative ways to connect with their tenants, and two are featured in this report. Ayrshire Housing Association's Tenant Portal allows tenants to manage all aspects of their tenancy, including paying rent and reporting repairs. The Portal is user-friendly and easy to use for tenants and has also made things easier for staff in relation to freeing up their resources.

Thenue Housing Association's phone app has also been successful in allowing them to communicate quickly and easily with tenants who use the app. It has also proven to be popular with tenants who use it.

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**6.** There was an appetite amongst all of the associations who took part for remaining open to using more types of social media in the future, and for keeping up with the evolving social media landscape. Some participants also believed that moving forward with social media could provide more opportunities for staff already in the housing sector, and also attract more staff into the sector.

A crucial point that participants made was that social media would always be about enhancing their association's other forms of communications with tenants and other audiences and would never replace these.

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**7.** The key recommendation from the research is focus on providing more opportunities for media and communications staff within CCHAs to share their knowledge and experience, and the potential for setting up a GWSF network group which would allow this to happen.

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# 1. Types of social media used by GWSF members 2019-20

The two most common social media platforms used by GWSF members are Facebook and Twitter.

At the time of our survey;



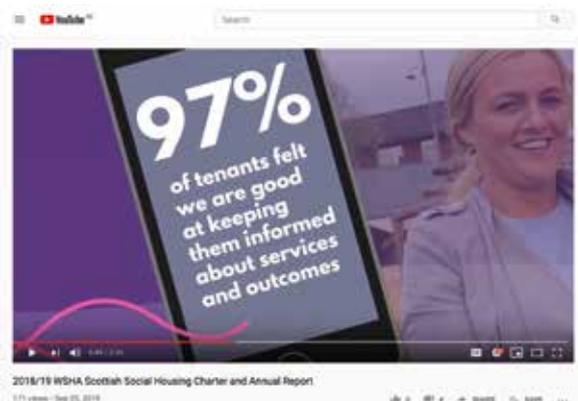
## Other types of social media

Some associations are also using other types of social media in innovative ways. These include: Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn. Furthermore, the majority of participants indicated that they would consider using other types of social media in the future.

## Examples of other types of social media



### YOUTUBE - West of Scotland HA



West of Scotland HA have used Youtube to post short videos on a number of different topics, including – their Annual Charter Return, data protection and to recruit new board members.



### INSTAGRAM - Queens Cross HA

Queens Cross Housing Association works with young people in its communities from age 5 – 18. The Association offers a diverse programme of youth work, from weekly clubs and activities, to trips away. Queens Cross youth workers use Instagram to keep young people updated on activities.

## 2. Attitudes to/strategies for using social media

### Overall attitudes

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the interviewees who participated in the research, and who all use social media in one form or another, had positive attitudes towards it overall. Most felt that the benefits outweighed the challenges. Furthermore, the general view was that it was now crucial to be on social media.

*“It’s not a case of if you use social media, it’s surely now about how well you do it. It’s vital now for so many reasons. To give tenants choice about how they communicate with us, to raise the profile of the association, to connect with our wider community, and with other organisations.”*

*“There are far more benefits than negatives. Yes, we sometimes get criticism but we welcome the opportunity to answer publicly, and we can address issues quickly.”*

*“Most of the things we worried about didn’t happen... but we’ll always be cautious because we need to be in terms of continually monitoring our social media, potential for reputational damage.”*

It is important to acknowledge that there was also some apprehension amongst those members who **don’t** currently use social media about embarking upon it.

*“We just don’t think it would be of any benefit. The risks would outweigh the advantages and there is just no point in opening ourselves up to it.”*

### Making a case for social media

All of our participants emphasised that there had to be a ‘business case’ made for using social media. This meant that it was ‘value for money’ for their associations and that they used the social media platforms that worked for them.

*“There’s no point in being on everything [all types of social media] if there’s no benefit to the Association, to tenants. So, Facebook is offering our tenants something extra. But at our size, and with our resources, anything else is just using up staff time that could be used more effectively.”*

*“Of course, it’s got to be about value for money – the resource for social media for us is an investment since it adds more for tenants, raises our profile, and allows us to communicate in different ways.”*

### Resourcing social media

In **Section 3**, we will discuss the logistics of how associations resource social media in more detail. However, it is worthwhile including a brief overview here.

Although associations manage social media in different ways, they all agreed that a dedicated resource is needed to do it effectively. Participants also cautioned that without this resource to both ‘manage and monitor’, the danger is that social media accounts can reflect badly on the association.

*“I think it’s important from the outset to agree a strategy for social media, who’s going to manage it, oversee it...using whatever resources you have available. But definitely you need to have that clear strategy.”*

*“Once you make the decision to have social media, I think you obviously need to have the resource in place to manage it. There’s nothing worse than going on to an organisation’s Facebook and you see it hasn’t been updated for months. It just looks bad. Unless you’re going to keep it up to date, get back to people quickly, then you would be better off not having it in the first place.”*

## Strategies and approaches

For all of the associations social media is embedded in overall communications strategies and policies. Although some participants acknowledged that there was still some way to go in relation to use of social media. One key message was that social media was complementary to other forms of communication, and not intended to replace these.

*“We see it all in the round – social media is one part of our overall communications strategy.”*

*“We need to get to the point of embedding social media in working practices...to make it second nature for staff.”*

*“We still send out quarterly newsletters and I can’t see us stopping that. We need to have a recognition of our tenants’ different demographic needs. Although, in saying that, we must be careful not to pigeon-hole people. Not all older people are technophobes.”*

*“We’ll keep doing our newsletters because people like them. Having that tangible keep-sake of an event that you’ve been at, or a photo of someone, is often really important to people. Sometimes people will come in to the office to ask for more copies. We like to cover it all. Digital and real interaction.”*

*“You can never just think – I’ve posted on social media - therefore I’ve engaged. So, we cover all the bases.”*

## Examples of social media policies



West of  
Scotland  
Housing  
Association

### West of Scotland Housing Association

West of Scotland Housing Association is developing a **Social Media Charter** ‘akin to our Customer Service Charter’ – which will set out the association’s response time for dealing with issues on social media. – The ultimate aim is if an issue is raised on social media, it will be dealt with on social media.



GOVANHILL  
HOUSING ASSOCIATION

### Govanhill Housing Association

Govanhill Housing Association carried out a **Privacy Impact Assessment** before starting its Facebook account which involved a risk assessment in terms of how its use of social media could potentially impact on staff.

## Reporting on social media

All of our participants have mechanisms for reporting on social media. In most cases this involves regular reports to their committee and to relevant staff teams.

*“We do a monthly report for our committee on how things are going. The numbers of tenants engaging with us on social media, any issues, any highlights.”*

*“We update staff teams, remind them that they can send things that they want to post to the social media team...it’s about keeping it at the front of their minds, that it’s a key resource for them too.”*

*“We have a monthly social media plan which lays out aims for what we want to achieve...what we want to highlight to tenants. So, for instance consultations, policy updates, our welfare rights service.”*

## 2. Attitudes to/strategies for using social media (Continued)



### Keeping it local

One issue which was raised by several interviewees was that they didn't want social media to ever replace 'real life interaction'. As community-based associations a big part of their work has always involved face-to-face contact with tenants in their offices, and this was something that they wanted to continue.

*"We like people coming into the office. Some people are used to just coming in for a chat, a catchup."*

*"In terms of community engagement, it gives me the opportunity to hover about – chat naturally to people, see if I can interest them in some of our community groups."*

*"Sometimes I do think it's a bit of a paradox...we're saying on the one hand – 'come in and see us' and on the other – 'communicate with us through social media'."*

*"Fundamentally, it's about not shutting down any avenues and giving people choices. We don't want people to be digitally excluded and we don't want them to stop dropping in. it's up to the individual."*

*"We're based in the community and people are used to coming into the office. When they are here, they often open up about other issues...ask about other things."*

*"We all know the impacts of social isolation and for some people having that human contact with our staff is really important. But for other people social media can actually be a lifeline in terms of loneliness and social isolation too."*

However, for other associations covering a larger geographical area, or with more spread out or rural communities, social media was a useful tool both for communicating with all tenants and for making them feel included.

*"We only have one office. But we are very aware that we need to reach tenants in all the areas we serve. And social media allows us to connect with tenants in all of our communities."*

*"For tenants in our more rural areas social media is potentially a lifeline. A quick way to contact... communicate with us. Especially since they don't have the option of just dropping into the office."*

*"We cover such a large area, and we only have one office so for us footfall has never been the most common way that our tenants have used to communicate with us. So social media is a great way for some tenants to get in touch."*

# 3. Facebook

## CCHAs' Facebook target audience

All the associations who took part in the research indicated that their main reason for having a Facebook page was to reach tenants. And crucially, to give tenants more choices in the way they receive information from the association; and also, how they can communicate with the association.

*"For us, Facebook is our main way of communicating with our tenants. It's all about giving them more choice."*

*"We use Facebook to reach our tenants and our factored owners, to give them that option – since most people use social media anyway."*

*"The target audience for us with Facebook is definitely our tenants, it gives us that instant reach in terms of getting information to them...and lets them get back to us quickly too. If other people see it [in the community] and get to see what we do then that's a bonus."*

## Approach to using Facebook

In terms of how Facebook is managed within associations, all of the participants told us that responsibility for the Facebook page was handled either by a designated member of staff (who usually manage it alongside their other duties) or by a dedicated social media team. Perhaps unsurprisingly, larger associations are more likely to have the resources to support the latter.

*"We are a small association, so it's just me [Director] and one other member of staff who manage our Facebook page."*

*"It's us, myself and my colleague, as the comms team who manage all our social media, including Facebook."*

*"To be honest, although it's just the two of us, and we do it alongside our main roles in the association, it works well. Everyone knows they can just send stuff to us and it will get posted. Maybe that actually makes it easier than having to go through a big corporate comms team."*

Whatever approach is taken to managing social media in different associations in terms of staff resource, 'quality control' is considered to be absolutely critical. And

Some associations had found that for their tenants Facebook was a more popular way of communicating than via the association website.

*"We've found that our tenants prefer to use our Facebook page; they don't use our website as much. And they can communicate with us quickly on Facebook, and see all the information they need on Facebook."*

As well as providing a useful means of communication for tenants some associations also suggested that Facebook had been helpful in other ways, and in reaching other audiences.

*"Aside from reaching tenants our Facebook lets other people, both in the community, and from other communities, other organisations see what we are doing. It helps to raise our profile."*

*"We even got an enquiry about the association from Canada! So that's a great example of the reach we have on Facebook."*

having a dedicated social media person/team helps to achieve this. In all of the associations who took part in the research this person/team is responsible for all aspects of management of their Facebook account. This includes: checking content; posting; monitoring and responding to comments.

*"Our community regeneration team manage all of our social media. Other staff members send through a pro-forma with the content they want posted and they can do this as often as they require."*

*"Other staff teams send info to us to be posted. We check the content, make sure all is fine with the tone, proof-read it and then we post it. It works well this way – it's easy for staff and we know the final content is fine."*

*"I'm the conduit for all Facebook posts – staff send their requests for posts and information to me and then I'm the final checker before content is posted."*

Only one association has active plans to enable other staff members to post relevant information directly onto Facebook, although some others were open to this in the future.

### 3. Facebook (Continued)

*“We do have current plans to allow more staff members, more departments to post. Let them ‘take over’ on social media to highlight key information, let people know what they are doing. But this is a work in progress, will involve training and resource to check all content is consistent.”*

*“Well social media is constantly evolving, and I think that we’ve got to be mindful of that. We’ve got to keep up, so I can see a point where all staff have access to posting on the Facebook page.”*

Fundamentally, this ‘quality control’ means that the associations’ Facebook pages have a clear ‘voice’ or ‘tone’ and that all content is checked before it is posted. Ensuring that their Facebook pages remain ‘on brand’ and fit with the overall communications strategy of the association was a key theme for participants.

*“Essentially, it is about quality control, about protecting our brand, and our reputation.”*

*“We need to be vigilant to ensure that our reputation isn’t compromised. We do this when thinking about all of the association’s work and activities, and obviously this extends to our Facebook page.”*

*“We made the decision early on that we didn’t want our Facebook page to be too corporate. It’s obviously still professional, still ‘our brand’ but it’s also engaging and interesting.”*

In terms of monitoring Facebook all participants indicated that they were vigilant about this.

*“We check it all day for comments and messages. You don’t want someone getting in touch to report something, or with a general comment and then no-one responds. That just looks bad.”*

*“If you take the decision to have a Facebook page, then you’ve got to do it properly. You’ve got to have the resource to check it regularly, and respond quickly.”*

*“We [myself and colleague] monitor it from 9-5. And we make it clear on our Facebook page that if people get in touch outside these hours it will be picked up the following day.”*

### Facebook settings/guidelines

In relation to settings for their Facebook pages all of the participants indicated that anyone could join. In addition, on all of their pages anyone could leave a comment on posts. For all the associations this had caused initial concerns in terms of potential inappropriate content being posted. However, associations had taken the decision to ‘take the chance and see how things develop’, knowing that they could respond quickly to this type of situation.

*“We did have initial concerns but thankfully they’ve really not come to anything.”*

*“Overall, it has been worth it. We kept an open mind about potential pitfalls and made the decision to keep reviewing things with Facebook, as we go along.”*

*“We do have printed guidelines on our Facebook page. Welcoming...asking people to leave comments, and also setting out what we will accept, what is appropriate/inappropriate.”*

In reality, across all the associations there have been very few instances of inappropriate comments or challenging behaviour on Facebook, and for the most part associations’ early fears have remained unfounded. Only two associations reported instances of inappropriate behaviour that resulted in them having to remove unacceptable comments.

*“We have had only one really bad comment and we removed it immediately. It was a really random, sectarian comment that didn’t seem to be aimed at the association but was totally inappropriate.”*

*“We had one very negative comment about staff ... actually naming the staff member. We obviously removed it, but we also followed up on it – it came from a vulnerable tenant and we then dealt with the person sensitively and sympathetically.”*

One participant did bring up the issue of potentially being a 'sitting target' if an individual, or group, decided to pursue the association, via its Facebook page.

*"I mean you could be a hostage to fortune if they decided they were going to have a campaign against you, and hijack your Facebook to do this. I mean it's never happened but in that scenario you would probably need to have a rethink, suspend your Facebook page."*

In relation to more general comments criticising aspects of their associations' work or services, all participants were keen to emphasise that they welcomed receiving this sort of adverse feedback on Facebook, since it gave them the opportunity to publicly respond to the issues raised. In addition, participants stressed that how associations deal with negative comments is vital.

*"We actually welcome it [negative comments] because it allows us to deal with things, and to be seen to be dealing with things. We can also make clear that we are not responsible for everything in the area. And we can let people know that – signpost them to other organisations whose responsibility it is. "It's the way you respond to/handle negative comments that matters most."*

## What do CCHAs use Facebook for?

CCHAs use Facebook for a mixture of things. These include: communicating key information about housing management and social regeneration activities, encouraging tenant engagement, and informing tenants about other issues.

*"We use it for everything that we want to let tenants know about...so the housing management side of things, community regen stuff like publicising our community events, publicising surveys [example – on rent increases], and anything else to be honest!"*

In relation to housing management issues the majority of participants felt that Facebook was a very useful tool for disseminating information to tenants. And this runs the gamut of housing management topics.

*"We use Facebook to post about all housing management stuff – the usual info that you would see on the website, and for example details of our new window replacement programme."*



*"The important thing is not to get into a scenario where you're disputing what people say publicly. It's about trying to de-escalate the situation. So asking them to get in touch – either come into the office or call us to speak about it...whatever they are unhappy about."*

*"Above all you need to respond in a professional manner to all inflammatory or negative comments. So saying 'we really appreciate you getting in touch, we'll look into this...' and then following up with them privately to discuss is usually enough to defuse the situation. But sometimes, some people just want to rant, to complain...they don't want to engage beyond that."*

*"We've got a housing management 'Frequently Asked Questions' presentation on our Facebook page."*

Alongside housing management information associations also use Facebook to publicise their community regeneration activities and to engage with tenants.

*"We want our Facebook to be interesting for tenants – to let them see what's happening, get them along to community events, community groups."*

*"It's about engaging with tenants – getting them to like our posts, getting them involved."*

*"Competitions are always a good way to get tenants engaged. So for example 'name the Teddy-bear', and offering a prize of shopping vouchers."*

Some participants told us that they act as an 'online community anchor' via their Facebook pages which involves them posting information from a range of other local organisations. This is really interesting since it mirrors the community anchor role that many CCHAs perform in the 'real world.'

### 3. Facebook (Continued)

*"There's no online community hub for the whole area. So we really act as this [through our Facebook] we act as that platform and local groups and organisations send us information to post – including local schools, churches, third sector and community groups, and other housing associations. A lot of it is about what's happening in the community – events – but also about things/services that people can access."*

*"We're happy to post information from local businesses, clubs – any organisations in the community, but not from individuals."*

*"I think it's because we're in the centre of the community – physically...literally, our office is here, we've got that profile. So people know us, and that's maybe translated to our online presence. They [other organisations] know that if we post their stuff then*

*it's got a better chance of being seen...and by more people."*

A few participants revealed that their associations also use Facebook for recruitment purposes when the posts in question might be of interest to people living in the local community.

*"So if we've got jobs available that might be of interest to tenants, or their families – say a caretaker job – we'll post that on Facebook. We don't tend to put on more senior positions. People can't apply on Facebook but it takes them through to our website and the application and everything."*

*"We will post about any apprenticeship opportunities we have. We definitely want young people in our community to know about these."*

## Examples:

### Govanhill Housing Association

Govanhill HA has recently used Facebook to advertise its low demand studio-flats, and had good feedback and interest in these as a result. The Association wanted to particularly target younger people who might not even be aware that they are eligible to apply for a property in the social rented sector.



### Hawthorn Housing Co-operative

The day following its Committee Meetings, Hawthorn Housing Co-op posts a user-friendly summary of the minutes on its Facebook page. The summary provides an update on key issues which tenants and other visitors to the site can access easily and very soon after the meeting.



### East Kilbride Housing Association

East Kilbride HA has used Facebook to post time-lapse videos of new kitchens being fitted. These capture the 'before', 'during' and 'after' phases of the work, allowing tenants to view the transformation process.



# 4. Twitter

## CCHAs' Twitter target audience

Most associations who use Facebook indicated that the target audience they want to reach is unquestionably their tenants. And if their Facebook page helps to raise their profile with other individuals or groups then this is an added bonus. However, when it comes to Twitter there are several target audiences that CCHAs find the platform useful for communicating with. These include: other housing associations and indeed the wider housing and third sectors; national and local politicians; and partners and funders.

*"I mean I think some of our tenants follow us on Twitter but it's more of a platform for our corporate brand. It allows us to communicate with other associations, other organisations [beyond the housing sector]."*

*"It's always nice to see what other associations are doing, to get ideas from one another, and to 'like' or 'retweet' stuff."*

*"We use Twitter to improve awareness of, and to raise the profile of, not just our own association but the CCHA sector, and the overall profile of social housing. I think this is important, especially [in terms] of national and local politicians."*



*"It's important for the CCHA voice to be heard, and Twitter gives us an opportunity to feed into relevant policy debates where it's appropriate to do so."*

*"We always like to give a 'shout-out' to our partners and funders – so other groups or organisations that we work with in the community, the council, the Scottish Government. I think people really appreciate that. We do when anyone does the same for us."*

## Attitudes to using Twitter

It is important to reflect the differing attitudes amongst GWSF's membership to Twitter. Some associations who participated in the research and others in our wider membership don't currently use Twitter, and can't see that happening in the future within their organisations. Members provided a variety of reasons for their decisions not to join Twitter.

*"We made an active decision not to be on Twitter. We had to take a sense-check and ask 'is it worth it for the association?'. I think we are in quite a unique situation, in terms of all aspects of the local environment – politically, because of who our elected politicians are, and in terms of negative publicity and potentially racist comments. For us the cons outweigh the pros. We would need to have a dedicated*

*resource just to constantly address this, to get into it on Twitter. We already have very strong relationships with partners, our local politicians, a strong profile in the community and we don't need to cultivate these on Twitter."*

*"We are a small co-operative and we just don't have the capacity to resource both Twitter and Facebook. For us Facebook is more important since it's about connecting with our tenants. And I know that other associations are on Twitter representing the CCHA sector."*

*"We don't use Twitter because I think you're more of a hostage to fortune...if someone wants to attack or criticise the association. And that could be anyone with a grudge, not necessarily a valid criticism."*

## 4. Twitter (Continued)

### Approach to using Twitter

Most of the associations who have both Facebook and Twitter use the same dedicated resource to manage both, as we described in **Section 3**. And this allows the same 'quality control' process to take place for both social media platforms. In general, other staff members send any Twitter content they might have, this is reviewed and amended if necessary, and then Tweeted.

However, several participants explained that as well as the official Twitter account for their association some senior staff members also had their own Twitter accounts.

*"Our Chief Executive also has an account which complements the association's account. This means she can Tweet when she's out and about at events, and also comment on important issues. These [Tweets] can be about day-to-day things in the association or comments about housing policy. It all raises our profile."*

*"We've got the official association account, and then the Senior Staff have got separate accounts too. It gives them a chance to Tweet about aspects of their work, and anything else that's relevant. It's particularly good for them for Tweeting about events they attend – meetings, conferences..."*

### What do CCHAs use Twitter for?

As well as allowing associations to raise their profile and to communicate with a range of audiences, participants are also using Twitter for other specific purposes. These include: promoting their 'community anchor' role; showcasing new developments; and to advertise recruitment opportunities.

*"It's about letting people see how much the association does locally, all the stuff that goes above and beyond our core landlord role, this includes supporting other local organisations and community groups. How much we are involved in...and well... we're really a part of the community."*

*"Yes, of course we are about the 'bricks and mortar' but we also do so much more than that within the local community, working with local people, and with other partners."*

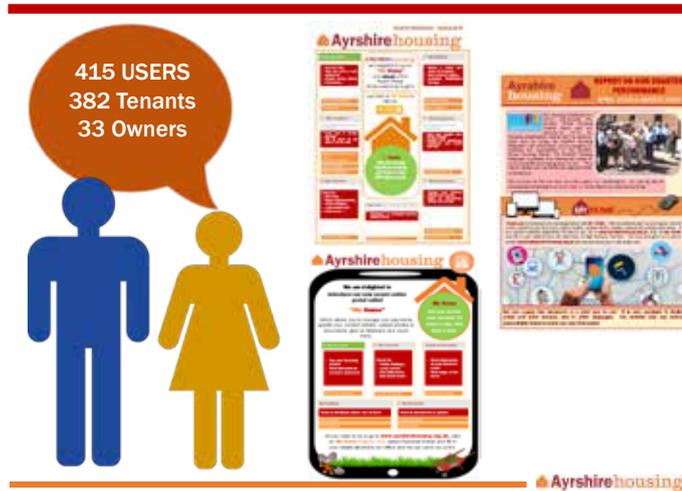
*"We've been putting on photos of our new development, right from the beginning. All of the different stages right through to completion. And that's been really popular."*

*"We use Twitter to advertise some of our job opportunities. Just a brief description of the role and the link to our website with all the relevant material they need to apply."*



# 5. Other forms of communication

## Ayrshire Housing Association's Tenant Portal My Home



At the time of our interview Ayrshire Housing Association's tenant portal had been live for around two months and the staff were keen to point out that it was still being developed. The ongoing development of the system would eventually mean that tenants would be able to do even more via the portal. And as with social media AH were keen to point out that the portal was very much about 'enhancing not replacing' other means of communication for tenants.

*"It's definitely about enhancing things for tenants, giving them more choice about how they communicate, and the opportunity to manage their tenancy, not about replacing current services...ways of communicating."*

At the time of interview, and after only two months of going live, 255 tenants from a total of 1520 had already signed up to the Portal and front-line staff/housing officers were continuing to actively promote the benefits to all tenants, including new tenants.

### Benefits to tenants

- Allows them to manage all aspects of their tenancy
- User friendly
- Pay rent
- Access HA's money advice service – fill out referral form
- Report a repair – 'My Repairs' – list of options to choose from/set up an appointment
- Tenant handbook
- Newsletters
- Make a complaint/leave a compliment
- Make changes to household composition – 'add people on'
- Change their contact details

- Calendar with their important dates (e.g. rent payment due)
- Tenants get an instant acknowledgement so they know their issue is being dealt with

*"If there is any issue with tenant activity on the portal – they're trying to do something and can't – we can see this and will call them – good to talk to someone for reassurance in this instance."*

### Benefits to the association

- All information automatically updates to SDM housing management system as portal is fully integrated with this
- Makes things easier for staff/more efficient/frees up resource for other areas
- Intention is to create portal accounts for all new tenants – 'part of our sign-up process now'
- Developing the portal a relatively easy process

*"We've got more and more ideas about what we want to put on there as we've gone along, from both staff and tenants themselves. So, for instance we want to put forms on there [need to make these more user friendly/shorter versions] and allow tenants to upload information."*

*"We wanted to make it work, we wanted to do it properly – above all to make it as easy as possible for tenants, make it beneficial for them. We didn't want it to be difficult or 'clunky' for them to navigate."*

*"Getting 'buy-in' from staff has definitely helped to make it work, and they've really been promoting it to tenants. And the tenants who use it, like it."*

## 5. Other forms of communication (Continued)

### Thenue Housing Association's Phone App

At the time of our interview 34%/1000 of Thenue's tenants were using the association's phone app (the Association also has a tenant portal), and the association was hoping to increase this to 50% by Jan 2020.

The app allows the Association to send out instant messages to tenants and crucially lets tenants respond in the same way. Thenue has used the app for a variety of different purposes, including:

- Their rent consultation survey;
- Recruitment to their tenant scrutiny panel;
- To link to their service standards;
- To promote their community conference and other events.

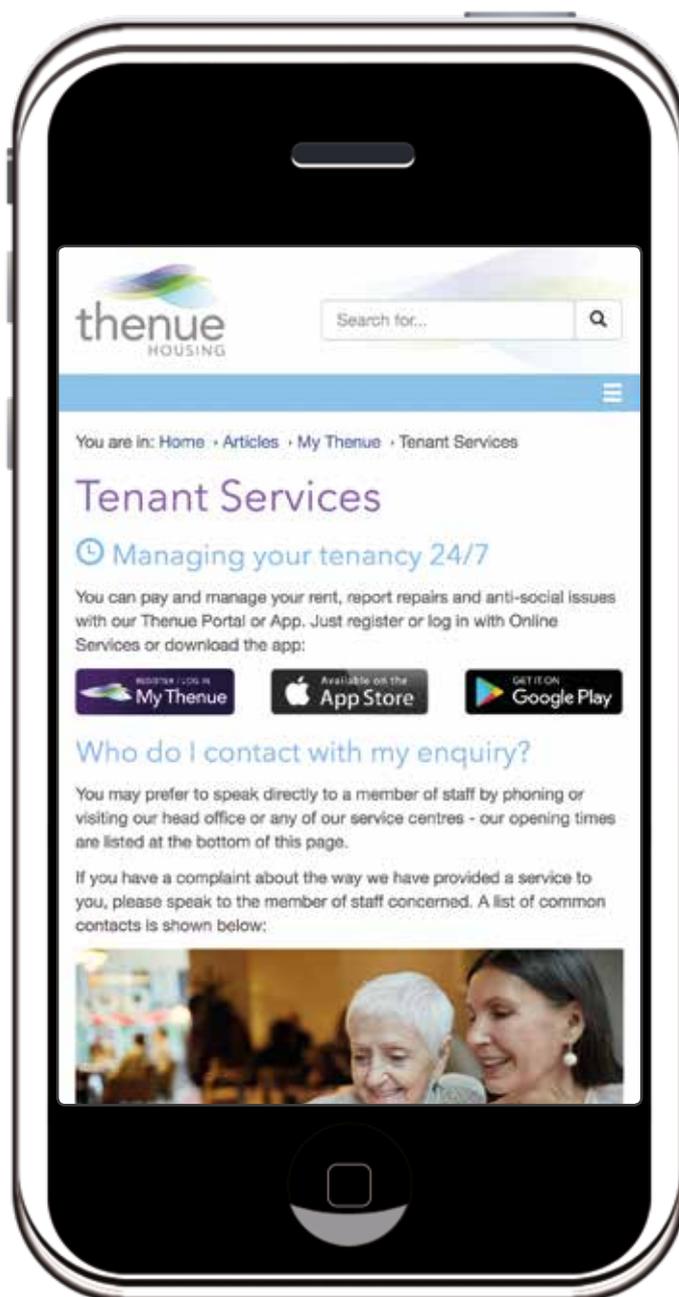
*"As well as allowing us to communicate with tenants, it also allows us to get their views back, gauge their reactions. Through the app we're engaging with customers we never used to."*

*"The main benefits to tenants are it's easy, fast and gives them that quick way to find information and to communicate. It's what a lot of people...a lot of us use in other aspects of our life."*

One function that has proven to be really effective for users is the ability to pay their rent via the app.

*"It's so easy to pay via the app – you get straight through to the AllPay system and you can pay whatever amount you like. Another added advantage is that you can pay whatever you want to, and without having to speak to a housing officer, or anyone. So, if you have arrears you can be reducing them when you have a bit of extra money."*

In order to assess the effectiveness of this aspect of the app Thenue had carried out an exercise where they compared the balances of those tenants with rent arrears who were **using the app** with those who had rent arrears and **were not using** the app. Over the same time period, those tenants who were using the app reduced their rent arrears by an average of **£116**, and this compared with a **£26** reduction for those not using the app.



# 6. CCHAs and social media - into the future

## An appetite for 'doing more'

Given CCHAs' decades long record of embracing innovation it is perhaps unsurprising that they have got on board with a range of social media platforms. The associations who took part in the research regard social media in its various formats as a valuable tool which allows them to communicate quickly and efficiently with tenants and other audiences. And crucially it means that tenants (and others) also have the same option when communicating with them.

Foreseeably then, with some caveats around certain types of social media not being a good fit for their organisation, our participants were open-minded about using more social media in the future.

*"The social media landscape is constantly evolving and I think that we [the housing sector] will need to evolve with it. Whether that's using Instagram to try and reach younger tenants or who knows? Maybe we'll have a WhatsApp group for our committee...the most*

*important thing is to stay open-minded...not to shy away from it all."*

*"There will always be some social media platforms that we won't use. Twitter, as I've already mentioned. But that doesn't mean we won't consider other things in the future. If we're serious about succession planning [for our committee] we need to connect with younger tenants, younger people in the community. So we might look at Instagram for that."*

*"Who knows what other types of social media are around the corner. I think for us it's about keeping relevant, about giving tenants choice in how they communicate with us, about being seen to be open and transparent. So we would look at anything that allows us to do that. Always bearing in mind that it's a good fit for us...adds something to what we do."*

## Opportunities for staff

Some of our respondents were keen to emphasise potential future opportunities for bringing in both new staff with specific social media skills, and for existing staff who also have the relevant skills, and who are keen to utilise them.

*"I think in future housing associations will be looking at a dedicated resource for communications, including social media. And I think there will be opportunities here for younger people, for instance housing officers, already working in the sector to move into these posts*

*and bridge that skills gap. But it could also be a two-way street. So young people who are out-with the sector could come in initially to comms posts and then become interested in housing posts."*

*"I think it's definitely the way we are all going – more focus on all types of communication, on social media. And to do that we'll be looking at bringing in the right people, with the right skills. Or training up staff in the association who are interested in doing it."*

## Social media – 'enhancing not replacing'

A common thread which all our interviewees were keen to stress when discussing their plans for social media in the future was that these would always be used in conjunction with other forms of communication [websites, tenant portals, apps, newsletters] and would never replace them. Associations are acutely aware that not all tenants want to, or indeed are able to, communicate via social media platforms; and crucially some tenants *never* will. The key message was about providing tenants with more choice and enhancing their experience of communicating with the association through social media by making it easier and quicker to do so.

*"It will never be about social media replacing how you can contact...speak to us, but about enhancing what's already available."*

*"It's that option of instant communication that we all use in other areas of our lives. Paying bills, accessing services with no hassle, and I think that having the option of contacting us on social media to say report a repair will totally appeal to some tenants."*

*"And you know some tenants will never use it, they'll still drop into the office or call us, and that's fine, in fact we like that. Nobody is ever going to force it [social media] on tenants. It's all about what works best for the person."*

*"There's also something about if more tenants are contacting us via social media in future, to for instance, report a repair then potentially that frees up more staff resource to focus on more vulnerable tenants."*

# 7. Opportunities for CCHAs to share knowledge



Most participants were interested in hearing more about what other associations were doing in terms of social media, and in learning from one another. They were eager to see more opportunities which would allow them to do so, including joint-working or training sessions for associations.

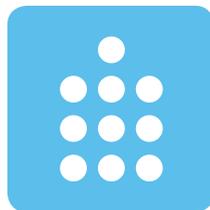
One participant suggested that the establishment of a GWSF network group for media and communications staff would allow staff to meet to discuss key issues and share knowledge. The Forum will take this forward with our own Media and Communications Advisor and to gauge interest for the idea within our membership.

In addition, a social media workshop at the Forum's annual conference highlighted a number of concerns about using social media – for instance, getting started, expanding to other platforms, using it more effectively and dealing with negative responses. The Forum will explore the possibility of organising training or information sessions for association staff who would be keen to learn more about using social media.



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- Queens Cross HA
- Southside HA
- Spireview HA
- Thenue HA
- West of Scotland HA



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GWSF's purpose is to promote and represent local community controlled housing associations and co-operatives in Glasgow and the west of Scotland