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**To: Communities, Housing & Planning Policy Board**

**On: 26 October 2021**

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**Report by: Director of Communities and Housing Services**

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**Heading: Tenant Hardship Grant Fund**

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## **1. Summary**

- 1.1 The Scottish Government have launched a £10m grant fund to support private and social rented tenants who have incurred rent arrears as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic and on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021 it was announced that Renfrewshire Council has been awarded £225,000, made up of £214,000 for use as grants, with £11,000 for administration costs.
  - 1.2 The grant is to help prevent homelessness and sustain tenancies by directly reducing, alleviating or paying off rent arrears altogether, where a tenant is in either the social or private sector, and has faced difficulties due to Coronavirus.
  - 1.3 The period the grant covers is between 23 March 2020 and 9 August 2021. Any arrears accrued before 23 March 2020, and after 9 August 2021, cannot be covered by this grant.
  - 1.4 The Tenant Hardship Grant Fund was officially launched during the week beginning Monday 27 September.
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## **2. Recommendations**

- 2.1 It is recommended that the Communities, Housing & Planning Policy Board
  - (i) accept the award of £225,000 from the Scottish Government in relation to the Tenant Hardship Grant Fund and delegates authority to the Director of Communities and Housing in consultation with the Director of Finance & Resources to administer and distribute the funds for Renfrewshire residents in line with the Scottish Government Guidance and the relevant Financial Regulations; and

- (ii) note that Monitoring Reports on the delivery of the fund will be made to the Scottish Government and that these updates will be reported to the Policy Board;
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### **3. Background**

- 3.1 The Tenant Hardship Grant Fund is a means to mitigate the short to medium term financial challenges being experienced by tenants adversely impacted by restrictions and regulations introduced since March 2020, to control the spread of COVID-19.
- 3.2 This fund seeks to prevent homelessness and sustain tenancies by directly reducing, alleviating or paying off rent arrears altogether where a tenant is in either the social or private rented sectors, and has faced difficulties due to Coronavirus.
- 3.3 Local authorities have discretion, as to payment in individual cases and should consider whether the payment is necessary or a justified action to avoid the tenant becoming homeless. This recognises the experience that local authorities have in supporting people in a housing crisis and will help identify where funding would be most effectively provided.
- 3.4 The main focus of the grant funding is to support those most at risk of homelessness, in circumstances where tenancies can be saved through such intervention. By contributing to the payment of rent arrears, this funding may also assist the landlord and tenant in reaching a repayment agreement as part of the pre-action requirements process.
- 3.5 The following summarises circumstances where the grant can and cannot be paid:
- The grant is available to all Renfrewshire tenants living in the private and social rented sector at risk of homelessness,
  - The grant is targeted at highly vulnerable individuals/households.
  - Landlords must demonstrate that they are complying with the pre-action requirements for rent arrears and agree not to progress a repossession on the basis of rent arrears where a grant is paid and the tenant meets all future agreed rent and repayment obligations.
  - The grant is specifically to help repay rent arrears that have arisen due to the Coronavirus pandemic between 23 March 2020 and 9 August 2021.
  - Arrears before 23 March 2020 would not be covered.
  - Arrears after 9 August 2021 (based on the current strategic framework) can only be covered in exceptional circumstances, where the local authority is satisfied that arrears relate to continued impact of the pandemic restrictions.
- 3.6 The Scottish Government provided Local Authorities with guidance on the application of the fund on 17 September 2021. This guidance is a live document, and updated versions will be provided to Local Authorities as and when required.

#### **4. Renfrewshire – Tenant Hardship Fund**

- 4.1 With regard to the management and administration of the Fund in Renfrewshire it is noted that the grant is discretionary and as such it is anticipated that local authorities will tailor their own processes in line with the Scottish Government Guidance.
- 4.2 In this respect the Guidance suggest there should be no formal application process but instead enquiries should be recorded and information gathered from individuals and landlords who approach the Council to determine if their circumstances meet the eligibility criteria and a decision made in line with the guidance.
- 4.3 It is also expected that existing council and wider support services through their operational and legislative practices will be aware when a tenant in private or social rented sector is at risk of homelessness and as such Officers will be proactive in referring to the fund if they consider that there is a relevant financial and / or housing support need.
- 4.4 An “Appraisal Panel” comprising of Officers from Finance, Advice, Housing and Homeless Services of the Council will be established to assess the individual cases and to make recommendations to the Director of Communities and Housing in consultation with the Director of Finance & Resources on the appropriate allocation of Grant Funds
- 4.5 The Awards will be made to the landlord and must be credited to the rent account, as it is specifically for the purposes of paying rent arrears arising from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, to help prevent homelessness.
- 4.6 Where it is considered that it would not be appropriate, to award a Grant, the landlord and / or tenant can be offered further assistance from the homelessness team, Advice Services or a referral to a relevant third sector support organisation.
- 4.7 Tenants and landlords will be notified of evidence requirement, conditions of offers and outcome of enquiry by letter/email at appropriate stages of their enquiry.

#### **5 Publicity and Monitoring**

- 5.1 Details on the Tenant Hardship Fund will be made available on the Council Web Page and an awareness raising exercise with landlords and relevant staff and organisations will be undertaken to ensure that the benefits from the Fund are maximised and reach those most in need.
- 5.2 Local authorities are asked to provide a brief report to the Scottish Ministers setting out:
  - the number and level of grants issued and how much grant was paid (broken down by tenure e.g. private, local authority or RSL tenant);

- how many of these grants paid off the rent arrears in full or partially; and
- how many tenancies were sustained – at that time - as a direct result of the grant being paid.

5.3 These high level reports should be submitted to the Scottish Ministers on the 31 December 2021 and again on 31 March 2022 and will also be brought to the attention of the Policy Board.

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## Implications of the Report

1. **Financial** – The costs of this will be contained within the £225,000 allocated by the Scottish Government made up of £214,000 for use as grants, with £11,000 for administration costs.
2. **HR & Organisational Development** – none
3. **Community/Council Planning** – none
4. **Legal** – none
5. **Property/Assets** – none
6. **Information Technology** – none.
7. **Equality & Human Rights** - The Recommendations contained within this report have been assessed in relation to their impact on equalities and human rights. No negative impacts on equality groups or potential for infringement of individuals' human rights have been identified arising from the recommendations contained in the report. If required following implementation, the actual impact of the recommendations and the mitigating actions will be reviewed and monitored, and the results of the assessment will be published on the Council's website.
8. **Health & Safety** – none
9. **Procurement** – none.
10. **Risk** – none
11. **Privacy Impact** - none
12. **COSLA Policy Position** – none.
13. **Climate Risk** - none

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**List of Background Papers:**      None

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