

# **Council rent arrears rise sharply**

**Nearly £11 million in rent arrears is owed to The City of Edinburgh Council and the number of tenants in debt rose by 2,000 during the pandemic.**

At the end of March 8,542 tenants – roughly 40 per cent of all registered with the council – had racked up rent debt with the local authority, compared to 6,534 in 2020.

The 30 per cent rise over the least two years, during which time the total value of unpaid rent increased by £4,594,288 to just under £11 million, was revealed in a Freedom of Information request by the Local Democracy Reporting Service.

It also showed residents are increasingly struggling to keep up with council tax payments; 27,611 people living in the capital owed a total £14,635,176 in 2019 – jumping to £21,566,247 attributed to over 37,000 residents by the end of last year.

Added financial pressures as a result of the rising cost of living means debt accumulated by those living in council-owned properties will likely increase further – and with additional protections from eviction introduced by the Scottish Government during the pandemic now lifted, it is feared more could fall into a debt spiral or even face losing their home.

Furthermore, tenants are set to be hit with a minimum 2.5 per cent rent increase next year, possibly rising to as much as

four per cent, following a two-year freeze voted for by councillors.

The council said collection of income “remains challenging with tenants facing increased financial hardship due to the costs of living crisis”.

It said formal debt recovery through the Sheriff Court remains a “last resort measure” for those who fail to engage or make payments.

And it added despite the temporary Government protections that extended the notice period given to tenants before court action would be taken, processes “remain in place” to ensure cases are only progressed to court if there is a “long history of tenant failing to pay rent” or “evidence the household could pay but is choosing not to”.

“The rent service for tenants has been maintained throughout the Covid-19 pandemic with officers continuing to make early contact with tenants where they are not meeting their rent payment responsibilities,” a report to this week’s [housing committee](#) stated.

It continued: “Every advice and support are provided to help tenants stabilise the underlying cause of arrears, to offer affordable repayment arrangements based on the individual household circumstances and to help them avoid getting into high levels of debt they cannot afford.

“Any potential decree cases are also continuing to be referred on to the council’s multidisciplinary team that was established as part of the Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan to provide a final offer of support and assistance with the aim of preventing homelessness.

“The changes to some processes for managing the rent service and to standard rent communication letters during lockdown

have been reset and guidance provided to staff on returning to safe home visits to support rent collection.

“This approach is being extended further to look at options to provide local drop-in sessions to encourage tenants to get advice and assistance available at an early stage and to use events such as Edinburgh Tenant Federation roadshows to promote the services available.”



Jane Meagher, Labour. Photo: © 2022, Martin P. McAdam  
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Councillor Jane Meagher, convener of the council’s Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee, said: “It’s so important that we continue to collect rent but that we do everything we can to support tenants in arrears. We don’t want anyone to fall into a situation where their debt becomes unmanageable and we absolutely want to help people remain in their home.

“I know that our officers are contacting tenants who are in arrears and it’s clear that the pandemic made the problem worse for many. In Edinburgh we will only ever go to court as

a last resort and even at this stage tenants can reach out for help.

“Our process can involve checking if someone may be eligible for assistance through welfare benefits, reasonable repayment plans, referrals for specialist debt management and a way forward. Support is also available to help with household energy bills, through the Council-funded Energy Advice Service (EAS).

“With the cost of living spiralling, it is a scary and daunting time for many. I want tenants and residents’ groups to know that they can come to us if they’re worried about being able to pay their rent or have already missed payments. Managing existing payments now means avoiding getting further into debt.”

The Housing Homelessness and Fair Work Committee meets at 10am on Thursday. Agenda and details of how to watch the webcast either live or archived are [here](#).

## **by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter**

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