

# **Fund established to help council tenants struggling to pay rent**

## **Some council tenants in Edinburgh to be offered more financial help after rent increase.**

Awards of up to £220 will be made available to those struggling to meet housing costs, after the council increased rents by 3 per cent last month, ending a two-year freeze.

Councillors agreed to set up the 'tenant hardship fund' at the housing committee and awards will be made from the beginning of next month.

However there was some disagreement over how the fund should be administered, with SNP Cllr Kate Campbell complaining there would be "too many barriers" to the scheme which will assess tenants' financial circumstances.

Conservative Cllr Iain Whyte argued that payments should not be "a hand out to anyone that turns up at the door".

A report said the rent increase, which represents an extra £12.81 a month for those not in receipt of housing benefits, would be an "additional financial burden" amid the cost-of-living crisis.

It added: "Tenants who have low and/or irregular incomes and little or no savings are at risk of getting into financial difficulties, particularly if there is a sudden change in circumstances or a family emergency."

Housing officers and other support agencies will be able to make referrals for the council to “consider the appropriateness or otherwise of making a payment to a tenant’s rent account”.

The report said: “An award of THF will provide financial relief for a tenant experiencing financial hardship but it is not a long-term solution”.

It added an award may be granted “when it is considered that a council tenant requires further financial assistance towards housing costs”.

“This includes tenants already in receipt of a Housing Benefit (HB) or Universal Credit (UC) housing element which would qualify them for DHP. An award may also be made to tenants experiencing financial hardship but not currently eligible for HB, UC or DHP.”

It was initially proposed that tenants would have to jump through a series of hoops before a payment could be made, including checks they are in receipt of “all the benefits that they may be entitled to” and whether an application has already been made to the Social Welfare Fund.

However Cllr Campbell said “too many barriers” were being put up by the council, adding the scheme should have “kindness and dignity” at its heart.

Calling for no changes to be made to eligibility checks, Cllr Whyte said the council was “once again taking money from the rent of other tenants to do this good thing”.

He added: “I worry we’re pushing up rents at a time that’s really difficult for everyone, and then we’re saying ‘oh well for a few who somehow identify themselves, we’ll give them something back that covers the increase’.

He said the fund should be administered in a “thorough way”

and not be “a hand out to anyone that turns up at the door”.

A motion supported by all members off the committee except the Conservatives agreed the fund should be “easy access” and that initial payments should be “automatic following referral” whilst financial assessments are underway.

*by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter.*

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