

**WELLHOUSE HOUSING ASSOCIATION
MINUTES OF THE COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 25th June 2020
AT 11:00am via ZOOM**

1. Welcome, Sederunt & Apologies.

Present:

Maureen Morris	Vice Chair
Clair Monteith	Committee Member
Michelle Harrow	Committee Member
Jane Heppenstall	Committee Member
Shona McKenna	Co-optee

In Attendance:

Martin Wilkie-McFarlane	Director
Gordon Kerr	Finance & Corporate Services Manager
Bill Black	Assets & Maintenance Manager
Claire Mullen	T.C. Young, Solicitors (item 3 only)
Linda Logan	Minute secretary

Apologies:

Darron Brown	Chair
Sarah Morris	Committee Member
Carol Torrie	Co-optee

The Vice-Chair welcomed Claire Mullen, T.C. Young, who would be in attendance for item 3 only.

2. Declarations of Interest.

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Rent Arrears Update & Approach to Arrears presentation.

The Housing & Customer Services Manager highlighted her concern, that since the last committee meeting in May 2020, gross current tenant rent arrears had increased by £28,303 to £323,671, 9.81% of our annual rental income, with 27 new rent arrears cases recorded. 18 of these cases had been affected by the current Covid -19 situation. Direct payments of £44,647 were included in the gross current arrear and the cut off date for those payments had been 10th May 2020. Arrears attributable to Universal Credit had increased by £13,842 to £154,607 and there were 6 more applications during the month of May. Since lockdown 13 direct debits for rent payment were returned as unpaid or cancelled by tenants. Direct arrears payments had been delayed during this period.

She provided feedback from other EHRA managers who had reported a similar rent arrears increase. She took committee through our current approach to arrears collection which focuses on maximising our income and providing support to all of our tenants. She emphasised the numerous contacts made

to tenants by the housing team and the income advice officer, who had assisted 514 tenants' and achieved £2.4M in financial gains for our tenants over that last two years. She highlighted the various options for payment arrangements, tenant interviews with the Housing Manager and Director and managed payments to landlords for rent and arrears. She took committee through current issues arising from 85 tenants owing more than £1K, which accounts for 56% of arrears, many of whom have not had a clear rent account for several years. She reported recorded actions by housing officers for these cases alone amounting to 20,979.

She discussed community perceptions to rent payments, their personal priorities and that the Association had only had 1 eviction in recent years. She stressed the effects of Covid 19, legal action and emergency legislation, and that evictions would still be a last resort. Support and assistance would always be provided. She considered that an increase in legal action and an increase in the number of evictions for those who had had lengthy periods of arrears was inevitable and that sisted cases would be recalled as a priority.

Claire Mullen, T.C. Young, discussed the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 which applied to notices served on or after 7th April 2020. She highlighted that notices served prior to this date were not affected. She noted the significant changes in relation to the residential housing sector in that it extended our notice period from 28 days to 6 months until 30th September 2020 at present, with provisions for a longer period until 30th September 2021. The length of notice would depend on the type of tenancy and what grounds are used. She highlighted notice changes for SST's where all Grounds required 6 months, except for Ground 2 (Criminal Convictions), Ground 6, Ground 7 (Antisocial Behaviour) and Ground 8 which required 3 months' notice. 4 weeks' notice is required for Ground 5. (e.g. someone is residing in the property, but it is not the tenant)

She highlighted Notice changes for SST's for 6 months or 2 months where SSST was granted due to previous ASB/criminal convictions and that SST's could still convert to SSST due to ASB or criminal convictions.

She considered civil guidance from the courts and sheriff officers was fast moving. She stated that heritable cases were not urgent business at the moment and our current cases would not be picked up by the courts until 30th July at the earliest. She was unsure what the process would be at present or whether the court would automatically recall cases or whether we will need to lodge incidental applications. It had been suggested that heritable cases would be dealt with via video link however she feels this unlikely as these cases require attendance and accessibility, for some people to access a video link may be an issue. She provided an update on notices served prior to lockdown stating that they had had a bit of push back from the courts on these warrants given guidance from the FCA and the issue is being addressed with the court.

She highlighted that Sheriff Officers commenced Phase 1 of returning to business on 3 June 2020 with service of NOPs, dates for Phase 2 are yet to be confirmed for serving notices and to resume service of charges of payment and removal. Phase 3 will resume the evictions process. T.C. Young will keep clients up to date via mail shots etc. as updates are received from the courts.

The Director sought clarification from Claire as to the level of legal activity from the Association and how it compared to RSL's. Claire confirmed that the Association was not particularly active in raising court actions for evictions and rent arrears. She stated that she had not appreciated the high level of rent

arrears for the Association and by comparison to other RSL's our raising of court action was very low. The Director considered that the housing team really need to focus on the 10% of tenants who had been in rent arrears for many years and engage further. He highlighted the financial gains achieved from the income advice officer for our tenants, how this was being utilised and the impact on rent arrears.

Jane Heppenstall sought clarification from Claire on ways in which we could present to court the 10% of long-term rent arrears cases, given the backlog,

Claire Mullen sought confirmation from the Housing Manager that some of these cases had notices that were live. The Housing Manager confirmed this. Claire suggested that we take these cases back to court and get them raised. She explained the process in monitoring the account from the file notes, the efforts made by the Association in payment arrangements and presenting the evidence to the courts. She considered that the negative impact of rent arrears needed to be highlighted to the community and how it impacts on their level of rent and for the Association to operate at a particular level. It was suggested that an article be published in the newsletter to highlight these pestiferous issues and the potential consequences for other tenants in relation to rent levels.

The Director suggested that a policy amendment be brought to the August committee meeting to deal with such issues and to highlight the impact of extensions that have been put in place. He reiterated the difficulties arising from historical rent arrears.

The Vice Chair thanked Claire Mullen for her attendance. Claire left the meeting at this time.

Committee noted the contents of the report.

4. Minutes of the committee meeting of 28 May 2020

The minute of the committee meeting held on 28 May 2020 was proposed as accurate by Jane Heppenstall and seconded by Shona McKenna.

5. Matters arising from the minutes of 27 April 2020.

The Director reported that site investigations have been suspended during the Covid-19 lockdown period.

The Finance Manager updated that at time of writing he was still awaiting an update from the printers with regards the footnote on our Fair Processing Notice and all instances of registration to reflect the correct registration number at time of print.

There were no other matters arising that were not covered in subsequent agenda items.

6. Loan Portfolio.

The Finance Manger provided members with the details of the Annual Loan Portfolio Return as outlined within the report which required submission to the Scottish Housing Regulator.

He highlighted that approximately 17% of all housing stock was granted as security for loans and compliance, which remains unencumbered. Total loan debt at March 2020 was £8.155M and around 86% of loan debt is on a fixed rate basis, which complies with the treasury management policy. There were no issues in terms of covenant compliance. He drew committee's attention to appendix 1 & 2 of the report and invited comments. There were none.

He sought delegated authority to submit the Laon Portfolio Return to the Scottish Housing Regulator.

Resolution:

Committee noted no concerns regarding any aspect of the return and approved submission and delegated authority to the Finance Manager for the return of the Loan Portfolio to the Scottish Housing Regulator.

Shona McKenna proposed and Jane Heppenstall seconded submission of the Loan Portfolio to the SHR.

7. Snap Survey Results

The Housing Manager presented a detailed report to update committee on the snap survey results as conducted by Mi Housing Services. The report provided assurance to the elements of our approach during lockdown to ensure and provide assurance to our tenants and to seek confirmation that our approach was sufficient and supportive. She took committee through the results and was pleased to report a very positive outcome from the survey as outlined at appendix 1 and 2 of the report.

The Vice-Chair asked that committee appreciation be relayed to staff. The results will be reported in the newsletter.

Committee noted the content of the report.

8. Operational Update.

Director:

Covid 19 update.

The Director asked committee note that guidance now indicates that non-essential offices are permitted to return to work with restrictions in phase 3 which is anticipated to be around 23rd July 2020; however, the default position remains that people continue to work from home where possible.

He stated that some staff have been dropping into the office to complete various tasks and to complete preparation of the office for the return to work along with Alex Hogg. He highlighted procedures that will be in place in relation to reduced capacity in the office, limited access to the building for the public, signage, one-way systems, sanitising stations and no meetings with external agencies. PPE equipment has been provided for the estate wardens.

The Director stated that in order to protect the committee as the employer and to protect staff/customers he had asked staff to complete a survey to identify any other actions that we should take and to identify staff who have health conditions and those caring for shielding relatives and child care concerns. The survey results will be reported to committee and updates provided as further guidance is received.

Broadband connection.

He asked committee to note that at time of lockdown the Association had no facility in place for remote working. He expressed his thanks to Hiper, IT provider and the management team for achieving the facility of remote working within 5 days. Other than a few teething problems the process had worked well.

The Director reiterated previous discussions in relation to the need for our broadband connection to be upgraded, cloud backup for our server and a possible move to Office 365 which would allow us to use Office Teams for remote working and interactive meetings. He highlighted that Wellhouse does not have a robust broadband connection at present and he had asked Hiper to provide a breakdown of the benefits and costs related to upgrading our connection as detailed at page 39 of the report.

He provided a breakdown of the quotes received subject to survey to upgrade the broadband and cost of installation. He sought committee approval for Highnet to provide and install an upgraded internet connection at a cost of £345 ex VAT per month based on a 3-year contract.

He recommended that in addition to this, that the Association move forward with purchasing tablets for the committee to allow for a new way of working, secure access and to future proof the organisation. A further report will be brought to committee at a later date.

Resolution:

Committee approved Highnet to provide and install an upgraded internet connection and the costs associated with this.

Clare Monteith proposed and Jane Heppenstall seconded the proposal.

Housing Manager:

The Housing Manager provided a summary of the Housing & Customer Services team activities in relation to completion and delivery of the tenant handbook, updating processes including rechargeable repairs and the resolution category for complaints. In addition, a review of the common housing register had begun. Officers continue to support tenants and monitor rental income by contacting tenants with regards missed payments and assisting with claims for Universal Credit and Housing Benefit.

She highlighted an increase in complaints relating to fly tipping, refuse collection, neighbour disputes and anti-social behaviour.

Jane Heppenstall asked if a pattern was arising from the anti-social racist incident that had been reported. The Housing Manager stated that this had been a one-off serious incident directed at two separate households. The incident has been raised with T.C. Young, Solicitors for further investigation.

Grant Award:

Committee were advised that Laura Reilly, Income Advice Officer had secured funding from the Community Wellbeing Fund and the Supporting Communities Fund to support the community with digital assistance and fuel packages.

Laura has prepared a proposal where 80% of the grant will assist tenants with fuel poverty and 20% for food package. £9750 has been received for much needed digital support for those on low incomes and will enable isolated users to keep in touch with vital services. The process is currently being set up.

Committee noted the housing team update.

Assets & Maintenance Manager:

Gas Servicing:

The Assets & Maintenance Manager reported that at present we have 8 properties out-with their gas servicing date with 7 of these tenants reporting that they are self-isolating. 4 out of the 8 properties have historically went to forced access. Services have been rearranged with Saltire and recorded in accordance from the Regulator, Gas Safe and HSE.

The Vice Chair sought clarification if the new Estates Supervisor would still commence work on the 6th July 2020. The Maintenance Manager confirmed the 6th July start date and that all documentation had been received.

Finance & Corporate Services Manager:

Committee noted the summary of the ongoing day-to-day operational activity of the finance team and additional tasks undertaken as highlighted within the report. He asked committee to note that the External Audit would start remotely on Monday.

9. AOCB

Michelle Harrow asked that given the current Black Lives Matter movement, had the Association given consideration to reviewing our Equalities & Diversity policy to ensure inclusion of all groups of people.

The Director confirmed that our Equalities & Diversity policy was inclusive but will be reviewed to ensure we are doing all we can. He advised the SHR will be assessing compliance with Equalities and Diversity and Human Rights commitment.

The Director asked Michelle if she was suggesting that the Organisation prepare a statement in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement. Michelle confirmed that it would be her own personal preference and would be of value to make our position clear.

Committee agreed to the Director preparing a statement in relation to the above. On completion he will forward to committee for their comments.

There was no other business. Meeting closed 12:45pm. Next meeting: Ad-Hoc 30 July 2020.

I certify that the above minute has been approved as a true and accurate reflection of the proceedings:

Signed (Chair)

Date:.....