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7 July 2020

## **Open letter to Council, Housing Association and Housing Co-operative tenants in Scotland**

In the short space of a few months, none of us could have envisaged the significant impact that Covid-19 would have on Scotland. I know this has been an extremely difficult time for you and your families and it has brought unprecedented challenges for our country.

I am writing to social housing tenants to provide information and advice, following the publication in May of [Scotland's Route Map](#) for moving out of the crisis, which sets out the steps that will help us to return to a more normal life. This is being done on a gradual basis, as quickly and fairly as possible, and is being matched with careful monitoring of the virus.

As we move through the different phases of easing restrictions we are providing clear guidance on what that will mean for individuals and families in Scotland. Individual landlords are also now beginning to plan for resuming services following the guidance available, and taking account of local circumstances.

During this crisis I have been particularly impressed at how people have come together to support each other and I greatly appreciate the inspiring community effort that we've seen up and down the country.

I want to thank every single individual, organisation and volunteer who has responded to the pandemic and helped to keep people safe, connected, and well and every social landlord in Scotland who has been working tirelessly to maintain and provide essential and wider community services in these challenging times.

The safety, security and wellbeing of all social housing tenants is a key priority for both the Scottish Government and social landlords, and we have been working closely together to address the challenges that have emerged in the social housing sector as the weeks and months have progressed.

### **If you're experiencing financial difficulties or are having difficulty paying your rent as a result of coronavirus**

If you are experiencing financial difficulties as a result of coronavirus, there is a variety of financial support available as well as advice on maximising income. You can access this through your local welfare advice agency including [Citizen's Advice Scotland](#) and the [Money Talk Team](#).

The efforts that tenants are making to ensure their rent is paid during this difficult time is much appreciated and you must still continue to do so if you are able.

If you have difficulty paying your rent at any time you should contact your landlord immediately as they will be able to provide or direct you to sources of financial advice and agree a plan with you to pay your rent.

## **Protection from eviction during the pandemic**

In response to the public health crisis, the Scottish Government passed an emergency law to protect tenants from eviction during the pandemic. This requires landlords to give longer notice periods to tenants, of up to six months, where they intend to take legal action in the Sheriff Court to re-possess a property and end a tenancy. To ensure landlords and the courts were able to continue to deal with serious antisocial and criminal behaviour, which cannot be resolved by other measures during the pandemic, shorter notice periods are in place for those cases.

## **Support for victims of domestic abuse**

It is a Scottish Government priority to ensure that anyone who is a victim of domestic abuse gets access to the support services they need. For anyone who is or feels they are at risk of abuse, help and support is available to you, including police response, online support, helplines, refuges and other services. You can find further information here:

<https://safer.scot/da/page-6/>

## **Allocation of properties and mutual exchange requests**

The Scottish Government eased restrictions on house moves on 29<sup>th</sup> June and social landlords are now beginning to plan for resuming allocations safely and for processing mutual exchange requests. For some time to come, most landlords will however be prioritising allocations to those who have become homeless during the pandemic. If you have any questions about moving home, want to apply for housing or have submitted a housing application with a landlord you should contact them directly as they will be able to provide advice on all your housing options.

## **Staff and contractor visits to your home**

I know that some tenants will be anxious about having staff, contractors and gas engineers into their home to carry out repairs and safety checks, however be assured that your landlord will have clear processes in place to ensure this can happen safely, in line with the current public health guidance and including any Personal Protective Equipment required.

If an appointment for a home visit is being made with you, you should let your landlord know if you are vulnerable, shielding, self-isolating, or having symptoms of the virus so that appropriate arrangements or rescheduling of the visit can be agreed with you. Appointments will be made in advance and you will be advised of the process that will be followed, and anything you need to do to prepare for the visit.

## **Repairs, maintenance and planned improvement programmes**

Since the start of the pandemic, social housing landlords have been prioritising repairs and have been focussing on providing emergency repairs and other essential services. As we move forward, landlords are now starting to plan how they can safely resume routine repairs and planned maintenance work. This includes programmes such as window, bathroom and kitchen replacement, adaptations and installation of smoke and carbon monoxide detectors and fire alarms. You should continue to report any repairs to your landlord as normal. As your landlord begins to work through any backlogs, your repair may take a bit longer than normal so please bear with them. Your landlord will get in touch with you if they require to get into your home to carry out any work and will have processes in place to ensure this can happen safely and in line with the current public health guidance.

## **Gas safety checks**

Landlords are continuing to make every effort to meet statutory safety obligations, such as annual gas safety inspections. When you receive your gas inspection letter, please contact your landlord immediately if you are vulnerable, shielding, self-isolating or having symptoms of the virus, so that appropriate arrangements or rescheduling of the visit can be agreed with you. Please do not ignore the letter as your landlord may not know about your situation and will continue to contact you to arrange a visit. These checks are essential to ensure the safety of your household and it is therefore very important that you allow access to your home so they can be carried out.

If you smell gas, or if you have concerns about the safety of your appliances, you should call the gas emergency service provider on 0800 111 999, and switch off appliances until the gas emergency supplier, or a registered gas engineer, has attended and confirmed that the appliances are safe to use.

## **Anti-social behaviour**

Tenants in Scotland have displayed exceptional respect, care and kindness towards their neighbours in these difficult times but regrettably not everyone has done so and instances of antisocial behaviour are still going on. Social landlords take antisocial behaviour very seriously and have a wide range of measures, including legal remedies and liaising with other agencies, to deal with persistent antisocial or criminal behaviour which breaches the terms of their tenancy agreement.

If you experience anti-social behaviour you should contact your landlord in the first instance and if you feel that you are in any danger you should contact Police Scotland. Your landlord will be able to provide you with support and advice on what they can do to help resolve the situation. More information can be found online at <https://www.mygov.scot/antisocial-behaviour/>

## **Wellbeing**

The coronavirus outbreak has had an effect on everyone's daily lives and information on wellbeing and sources of support can be found at the [mygov.scot](https://www.mygov.scot) website.

This covers a wide range of issues including looking after yourself and others, how to look after your mental health, food, medicine and other supplies, work, unemployment and sick leave, domestic abuse and child protection.

## **Further advice on coronavirus**

It is essential that we all continue to follow the current public health guidance, practise good hand hygiene and follow the guidelines on who, where and how we meet others.

The Scottish Government guidance on Coronavirus is reviewed regularly so please check for updates at [www.gov.scot/coronavirus](http://www.gov.scot/coronavirus)

Advice is also available from the Scottish Government's Coronavirus helpline - telephone: 0800 111 4000, Scotland's Citizens Advice helpline - telephone: 0800 028 1456 and Shelter's Housing Advice helpline - telephone: 0808 800 4444.

If you have any specific questions about your home or tenancy that need to be dealt with urgently you should contact your landlord directly.

I would finally like to take this opportunity to thank all social housing tenants and landlords in Scotland for everything you have done, and are continuing to do, to help control the spread of the virus, protect the NHS and save lives.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kevin Stewart', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

**KEVIN STEWART**