

**CRITERIA AND MANAGEMENT OF THE
ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL
PILOT RENT ASSISTANCE FUND
2024/2025**

1. Introduction

The Aberdeen City Council Pilot Rent Assistance Fund aims to assist Council tenants where:

- It has been identified that tenancies may be at risk, through no fault of the tenant, due to financial hardship; or
- The tenant is vulnerable and continuing to pursue rent arrears would cause financial hardship which may impact of their tenancy in the longer term.

This pilot will operate for a period of 12 months. The learning from the pilot will help inform the Council's longer-term approach to supporting tenants facing financial hardship.

Financial hardship can arise because of a range of circumstances, including but not limited to:

- Sudden loss of income (e.g. unemployment, reduction in hours, illness, death of a householder)
- Arrears resulting from Welfare Reform changes including the move to Universal Credit or those experienced as a result of moving to a new tenancy.
- Unexpected/unpredictable increase in expenditure (e.g. costs associated with illness or bereavement)
- The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on a household finance.
- EEA nationals who have had issues with EUSS and accessing assistance.

Research would suggest that some groups are more likely to face financial hardship than others. Those known to be at higher risk include:

- Those who have experienced the care system.
- Prisoners and Prisoners Families.
- Those who have a disability.
- 16- to 25-Year-olds on low income
- Child Poverty Priority Family Groups
 - Minority ethnic families
 - Lone parent families
 - Families with a disabled person
 - Families with three or more children
 - Families with children under one
 - Families with mothers aged 25 or under

Aberdeen City Council will work with Community Planning Partners to promote awareness of the Pilot Rent Assistance Fund, particularly with those groups thought more likely to face financial hardship. Payments made through the Pilot Rent Assistance Fund will be paid directly into the tenants rent account only with no payment made to the tenant or any other party directly.

2. Defining Financial Hardship

Financial hardship is defined as when a tenant is willing but unable to meet their rent and arrears obligations because of unexpected events or unforeseen changes impacting on their ability to pay.

Tenants referred to access the Pilot Rent Assistance Fund will be asked to demonstrate their financial hardship by providing details of:

- Household income and expenditure assessment
- Details of money owed to other parties, demonstrating a level of indebtedness.

A tenant must demonstrate that they are unable to repay anything meaningful towards their rent arrears or do so would cause financial hardship.

The information provided by the tenant will be considered by a multi-disciplinary panel of 4 officers who have relevant experience relating to the needs of the individual/family. This approach will enable coordination of wrap around support for individuals facing financial hardship as part of our model of Family Support.

3. Qualification Criteria and Referral

A digital referral to the Pilot Rent Assistance Fund can be made by any Aberdeen City Council Service or external organisation supporting the tenant.

Each case will be considered by a panel of multi-disciplinary officers on its own merits; however, tenants must meet the following criteria to be eligible for an award:

- Be a current tenant with a Secure or Short Scottish Secure tenancy.
- Be engaging with the Council.
- Where applicable must have agreed and maintained a repayment arrangement.
- Where identified, the tenant/s has agreed to work with the Housing Support Officer/Financial Inclusion Team to apply for all eligible state benefits and seek money advice if not already working with another Advice Agency.
- Income and expenditure assessment showing a deficit.
- The tenancy is affordable to the tenant on an ongoing basis.

4. Decision Making Process

A Panel of multi-disciplinary officers will be convened on a weekly basis with the composition of the panel determined by those thought most appropriate to support the individual/family. Any panel member/Chief Officer with a personal relationship with the tenant must disclose this and not be involved in the decision-making process.

As a result, the panel could comprise a range of professionals including:

- I. Financial Inclusion Team Leader
- II. Senior Housing & Support Officer
- III. Housing Options & Allocations Team Leader
- IV. Corporate Debt Team Leader
- V. Rapid Re-housing Team Leader
- VI. Children or Adults Social Work Officer
- VII. Education and Lifelong Learning Officer

The Panel must consist of 4 members present.

<p>Awards up to £3,000</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A majority of three of the panel recommend approval of the application for financial assistance. 2. This recommendation is then passed to two of the following decision makers (who were not on the panel). (Financial Inclusion Team Leader; Senior Housing & Support Officer; Housing Options & Allocations Team Leader; Corporate Debt Team Leader; Rapid Re-housing Team Leader). 3. Approval by both of the decision makers mentioned above (at step 2)
<p>Awards between £3,000 to £10,000</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A majority of three of the panel recommend approval of the application for financial assistance. 2. This recommendation is then passed to the Chief Officer – Early Intervention and Community Empowerment and Chief Officer - People and Organisation 3. Approval by the Chief Officer Early Intervention and Community Empowerment and Chief Officer People and Organisation
<p>Awards above £10,000</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A majority of three of the panel recommend approval of the application for financial assistance. 2. The recommendation is passed to the Chief Officer – Finance, Chief Officer – People and Organisation and Chief Officer – Early Intervention and Community Empowerment. 3. Approval by the Chief Officer – Finance, Chief Officer – People & Organisation and Chief Officer – Early Intervention and Community Empowerment.

	(A Chief Officer may delegate this when off on annual leave or otherwise unavailable)
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There may be exceptional cases where the tenant is not engaging with the Council, but information held regarding levels of risk and vulnerability are sufficiently concerning to deem it appropriate to make an award. This will only be done with approval of the Chief Officer of Early Intervention and Community Empowerment and the Chief Social Work Officer following the recommendation of the majority of three panel members.

5. Payments from the Rent Assistance Fund

Payments from the Pilot Rent Assistance Fund can be as one-off payments, staged payments, or matched payments to a repayment agreement.

- Staged payments are where it is agreed to make more than one payment, based on agreed criteria such as benefit reviews or tenant's agreement to have Third Party Deductions commence.
- Matched payments are for ongoing payments where a tenant has made and adhered to a repayment agreement. Any award from the fund will be paid following an agreed timescale of repayments, e.g. 3 months, 6 months or where the fund will clear the remaining balance.
- A one-off payment will be made within 7 days of approval being given.

6. Reviews

There is no statutory right of appeal in respect of the Pilot Rent Assistance Fund. The Council can review a hardship decision in the event of a dispute or where the tenant asks for reconsideration.

The following escalation procedure will apply: -

Panel refused to recommend - In such circumstances, the two decision makers would review the original recommendation of the panel.

Two Decision Makers refuse to approve - In such circumstances, Chief Officers would review the decision of the two decision makers.

Chief Officers refused to approve - In such circumstances, two Directors would review the decision of the Chief Officers.

Reviews will not be considered in cases where a referral has been refused or withdrawn due to:

- There being insufficient funds available for the payments to be made,
- A tenant has failed to maintain the agreement to take steps to resolve the debt including attendance at meetings to help resolve their financial difficulties.

7. Reporting

A monthly report on the Pilot Rent Assistance Fund will be provided to the Housing Board, including the following details:

- The total amount spent to date.
- An evaluation of decisions made regarding fund allocation.
- An analysis of priority groups receiving awards to assess the need for adjustments in targeting.
- Recommendations for any modifications to the eligibility criteria.
- A monthly audit of three system reports to verify the accuracy of financial allocations to the appropriate rent accounts and in the correct amounts.

8. Outcomes

The success of Pilot Rent Assistance Fund will be monitored and measured through the outcomes to the Social Housing Charter and will therefore consider if the pilot fund:

- Reduces financial hardship for tenants receiving a Rent Assistance Fund award.
- Positive impact on the health and wellbeing of tenants by helping ease their financial burden.
- Supports tenancy sustainment.
- Helps prevent homelessness and the additional resource and cost pressures that homelessness brings.
- Reduces the numbers of cases escalated to court action.
- Increasing tenant confidence in the council as a supportive landlord.
- Increased numbers of tenants benefitting from debt/money advice.
- Helps mitigate against financial hardship caused by Welfare Reform.
- Increase the level of tenant engagement in the management of the payment of rent and rent arrears (repayment arrangements).

9. Evaluation

A test and learn approach will be taken to the delivery of this pilot. Committee will be informed of any procedural changes through a Service Update. A partial evaluation, based on the impact of the pilot on outcomes contained in the Social Housing Charter, will be reported to Council in December 2024 with a further evaluation covering the full 12 months of the pilot to be presented to the Communities, Housing and Public Protection Committee after one full year of operation.